

Inventing History: An Iconoclastic Conception of Historical Memory

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When the political needs of governments, political parties, armed groups, etc., demand the making up of a past that justifies their specific present, their respective organs often seek to propagate a discourse that permeates the national social structure and allows the memory of the causes of past violence to be reinvented, through a strong perversion of history. In these situations, a trend known as *historical presentism* tends to emerge, i.e., the malformation of history and historical knowledge in the service of totalitarian projects, such as those of the Nazi and Soviet regimes in twentieth-century Europe, or identity-based nationalisms, sponsored by violent guerrillas, as in the case of the FARC-EP in Colombia. Two scenarios that exemplify singular manifestations of historical presentism in Europe and Latin America are given.

Preliminary Reflections

Just as in political debates, discourses play a major role in the architecture of the social sciences; they are not neutral and are always determined by something and someone. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu wrote that discourses act in markets (Bourdieu 1985) and, consequently, carry with them processes of domination and censorship, but above all they have a social value, a price that is usually adapted to the laws that govern this market.

In short, it is the conjunctures, the socio-historical contexts, that dictate the acceptability or not of discourses and the legitimacy of a given speaker. For this reason, discourses are the strategies that we all use, in the social market, to try to increase their symbolic benefits, although they must adapt to the law of value

formation. The discourse, therefore, carries the social mark: the power, and the value of the situation in which it has been produced.

History and memory are often confused. This is something that historians often denounce because those who dedicate themselves to this discipline know, from experience, that the past tends, ordinarily, to give reason to those who manage it from the experience of power. In this sense, it seems clear that this *past* is the result of a manipulation of memory. Let us remember that, in our days, in the so-called 'nation-state', there is a more or less official, if not unofficial, history, which tends to be weakened or reinforced depending on the greater or lesser sociocultural impact of the political discourse. A political culture of open confrontation leads to the emergence of differentiated, if not divergent, memories. But the fact that the conflictive present manifests different memories does not mean that they, in and of themselves, define a particular history.

The events and political structures of the moment should not be, however great their influence, those that define what can or cannot be the subject of history, because history cannot be the intellectual and moral precipitant that justifies current interests or conflicts. Many of us historians believe that presentism is the cancer of the misnamed 'historical memory', that is, of that 'history' that is written from the perceptions and interests of dominant social groups, political parties or other types or groups or armed or unarmed subversion.

Nor should history be confused with so-called 'collective memory', a concept that is as ambiguous as it is difficult to define, both because of the thematic space it is intended to cover and because of the subject – families, collective bodies, or institutions – that claim to be its protagonists. In this sense, there is talk of 'social memory' or 'memory of a people'; and from these, programmes of a political nature are proposed to 'recover memory' and ensure that a community, called a people, manages to have '[...] accurate awareness of the present or to formulate a project for the future' (Bonfill Batalla 1987: 7). In one case or another, such expressions always hide certain perceptions of the past that serve ideological interests, disguised as what they call the service of a solid awareness of collective identity.

Historical memory has also come to be considered, in an exaggerated way and manner, as the purest representation of the collective spirit and, therefore, understood as a living and daily history in permanent construction. But this is not history, although many political groups, some more violent than others, practise it. And therefore, in this sense, memory is generally random and full of contradictory meanings: there are selective memories and others that are global; there are personal memories and others that claim to be collective. Consequently, let us say that memory is no guarantee of certainty, even if, in its reconstruction, there are precise identification or manifest rejections.

Of all of them, the 'national memories' are those that easily develop a previously disseminated machinery of myths and legends about a supposedly shared past, and of all of them the most vindictive are those that are considered marginal, and do elaborate discourses that 'dream' of recovering a supposedly repressed past. In such discourses, they seek to find signs of identity specific to the claimant group, which

are usually found in variables such as common language, landscape, land, or ethnicity.

The aim is to construct an ‘institutionalized collective memory’ or a ‘historical memory’ that seeks to become ‘official history’, i.e., the discipline that determines what should be remembered because it is more flattering to the socio-political faction in power. Naturally, this is a biased history in which two main strategies are worth highlighting: first, the emphasis is placed on a group-based identity history in which the individual entity is diminished; second, this ‘history’ is intended to have a particular commemorative character, always pending evocations of centenaries, temporary memories of myths and other legend (García Cárcel 2011).

Recovering the past, even if it is recent, is not a specific matter of memory but an attribute or condition of historical knowledge. In fact, as mentioned above, it is a matter of knowing or not knowing; that is, knowing with some knowledge, that of the historian, of scientific knowledge. In this sense, history cannot be manipulated by memory, neither official nor private, neither ‘true’ nor ‘heterodox’. When memory is superimposed on history, then the past is not recognized, but is reconstructed in terms of the present, in such cases the historian acts as a pawn in the service of the dominant political game. In these situations, a trend known as *historical presentism* tends to emerge, i.e. the malformation of history and historical knowledge in the service or totalitarian projects, such as those of the Nazi and Soviet regimes in twentieth-century Europe, or identity-based nationalisms, sponsored by violent guerrillas, as in the case of the Colombian FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces–People’s Army), in the use and abuse of the presentism discourse as a singular weapon of their insurgent action. Two scenarios that exemplify singular manifestations of historical presentism in Europe and Latin America are given.

The Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe

These preliminary reflections serve to understand the deep implications of the Resolution, *The Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe* (European Parliament Resolution 2019), approved over two years ago by the European Parliament and, in my opinion, insufficiently known.

For many decades, numerous Europeans from the central and eastern part of the continent sacrificed their lives striving for freedom, as millions were deprived of their rights and fundamental freedoms, subjected to torture, and forced displacement. Such damning characterization represents a direct challenge to Moscow’s present-day version of twentieth-century history. Russian President Vladimir Putin described the 2019 European parliament document as part of what he cast as: ‘Western efforts to downplay a decisive role that the Soviet Union played in defeating the Nazis’ (Isachenkov 2019).

As a matter of fact, the European Parliament passed such a resolution to call for remembrance of totalitarian crimes and condemn propaganda that denies or glorifies totalitarian crimes and linked such propaganda to Russian information warfare

against ‘democratic Europe’ (Radchenko 2020). The resolution emphasizes the importance of keeping Europe’s historical memory for its people’s unity and building European resilience:

whereas remembering the victims of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes and recognizing and raising awareness of the shared European legacy of crimes committed by Stalinist, Nazi and other dictatorships is of vital importance for the unity of Europe and its people and for building European resilience to modern external threats. (European Parliament Resolution 2019: L)

In section 7 of the resolution, the Parliament equally condemns:

historical revisionism and the glorification of Nazi collaborators in some EU Member States is deeply concerned about the increasing acceptance of radical ideologies and the reversion to fascism, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance in the European Union and is troubled by reports in some Member States of collusion between political leaders, political parties and law enforcement bodies and the radical, racist, and xenophobic movements of different political denominations. (European Parliament Resolution 2019: 7)

In his understanding of the Second World War, Vladimir Putin lashed out against what he saw as a coordinated Western effort to belittle Russia’s contribution to Europe’s liberation from Nazism. Such historical revisionism made the European Parliament counteract:

the current Russian leadership to distort historical facts and whitewash crimes committed by the Soviet totalitarian regime and considers them a dangerous component of the information war waged against democratic Europe that aims to divide Europe, and therefore calls on the Commission to decisively counteract these efforts. (European Parliament Resolution 2019: 16)

No doubt the importance of the European remembrance resolution carried weight because it was sponsored by a great majority of Parliamentary groups: the European People’s Party group, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group, the Liberal Renew Europe group, the European Conservatives and Reformists group, and it was passed with 535 votes for, 66 against and 52 abstaining. Previous resolutions, declarations and programs had paved the way during the last 15 years to help close the gap between different treatments of history in Eastern and Western Europe.^a

However, on this occasion the European deputies were more concrete and stronger and addressed a topic on which the West had remained mostly passive. Practical politics, including future EU politics, is still hampered by different treatments of the past. People in the West still know very little about how most of Eastern Europe fell under a different dictatorship, after the Nazis were defeated, that

was no better than the previous one. As a matter of fact, May 1945 brought the end of the Second World War in Europe, but it did not bring freedom to all of Europe. The central and eastern part of the continent remained under the rule of communist regimes for almost 50 years. The Baltic States were illegally occupied and annexed and the iron grip over the other captive nations was enforced by the Soviet Union using overwhelming military force, repression, and ideological control.

Today's Russia has sought to portray the Red Army advance into Central and Eastern Europe of 1944–1945 as a liberation from Hitler, and bristles at any attempts to equate post-war Soviet rule with the wartime Nazi occupation. This has led to frequent clashes since the end of the Cold War between Russia and the former Soviet satellites of the region, as these newly independent countries have sought to remove vestiges of the Communist era and reclaim their own histories. Histories that highlight the importance of keeping the memories of the past alive and reconfirm their united stand against any totalitarian rule, from whatever ideological background.

Reliving History: The FARC-EP in Colombia

Insurgent movements of a markedly violent nature frequently resort to a presentism discourse in their historical justification. This is the case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the longest active guerrilla movement in Spanish America, which exemplifies in its discourse, throughout the last decades of the twentieth century, a historical teleology of high ideological consumption (Torrijos 2015).

For more than 50 years, the FARC's discourses have found a wide market, not only in Colombian political and cultural society, but also in Latin America and even in Europe. Its symbolic power has had a not inconsiderable influence, because there have been many demanders and consumers of it. Aware of such an effect, the FARC discourse propagandists have known how to contextualize their messages and have managed to formalize their codes within the cultural horizon of broad social sectors. In this sense, the FARC guerrillas seem to have been able to maximize the symbolic effects of their discourse to a much greater extent than their own weapons and their 'military' structure. Their texts reveal a conceptualization of Colombian history based on an invented memory (Contreras 2018).

In effect, this organization, in its ideological armour, understood that its objectives and structures obeyed a 'historical necessity' the nature of which is subsumed and inserted – as one of its leaders, Jacobo Arenas, stated – at the very heart of Colombia society, giving it its specific identity. It is a 'heart' that is identified in the axiological idea of the people. 'We are – the FARC calls itself – the people in arms'; 'the main instrument, the unique and historic axis of mobilization and mass opinion' (Arenas 1985: 52).

In this sense, during the so-called 'Democratic Opening' of the Belisario Betancur Government (1983–1984), the FARC leaders opted for a 'fake peace', because they

understood that the talks held were only a stage on the historic road towards the final revolutionary triumph:

We are integral revolutionaries, irreducible Marxists, Leninists without blemish and anti-capitalists of uncommon stature; we do not see what the masses see, nor do we see how the masses see it; and that is why we do not use a change of style to make our revolutionary politics. (Own translation of Arenas 1985: 58).

The FARC's own operational strategy, guerrilla warfare, is not a random phenomenon developed by 'Che' Guevara: its structure and entity are found in the very historical genes of the Colombian people. This is how the Colombian people have always fought, a form of struggle that maintains their faith in the future and which is not read in the books of official history, that of the government, a memory constructed by the powerful, oblivious to the feelings of the popular strata.

Consequently, so they claim, it is up to a guerrilla movement to write the true history of Colombia. And, in this line, the FARC writes a historical account that emphasizes the action of the courageous indigenous leaders opposed to the conquerors, '*Calarcá, Tendama*' or '*la Gaitana*', the first to use the strategy of the guerrilla ambush against the 'violent and bloodthirsty methods that permeated the Spanish conquest' (FARC-EP 2005: 33). These guerrilla heroes passed on to the Creoles who led the first attempts at independence: 'the guerrilla struggle which is the armed struggle of the people' (FARC-EP 2005: 39).

It is noteworthy that in FARC history neither the subjects nor the groups have a specific meaning; it was only the guerrillas throughout the convulsive nineteenth century, the century of violence in the times of the 'Patria Boba' and of the '19 civil wars', who 'were present in the various armed conflicts of that century'. The new edition of the book *Esbozo histórico de las FARC-EP* in 2005, describes the founding myth of Colombia's true rendezvous with its history: the heroic moment at Marquetalia (in 1964) when the FARC is said to have been born. As in all mythologized heroic narratives, the heroism of the 40 guerrillas who rebelled against the legitimate government and managed to resist more than 16,000 army soldiers is emphasized. The heroes of Marquetalia, led by Manuel Marulanda, applied what they had learned by nature from Colombia's history: popular guerrilla warfare.

Naturally, if the communist gene is embedded in the Colombian identity, as the FARC-EP argues, it is obvious to explain that Colombia's history, from their perspective, has been nothing but a gross manipulation. And this has always been the case, they insist, even from the moment of its initial independence from Spain. The FARC interpretation of the figure of Bolívar is proof of this assertion. In 1987, the FARC organized and led the well-known *Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Group*, and Pablo Catatumbo, currently Senator of the Republic of Colombia, was entrusted with the task of drafting a document on the historical figure of the 'Liberator' (Catatumbo 1997). In it, Bolívar was studied and understood as a guerrilla leader whose popular and revolutionary programme was aborted by reactionary groups which, since then, have been perpetuating themselves in the

institutions of political and economic power in Colombia. Such, the author concludes, is the true Colombian history, a history of ‘irrefutable facts’:

Hence the importance of rescuing our history, because it is there, in its knowledge, study and dissemination, that the most precious values of our nationality are contained. And because it is up to us, the Bolivarians of today, to complete this task that the liberators, for the historical reasons mentioned above, left undone. For our people to feel our case as their own, we must know how to rescue the legacy of the true fathers of the homeland, of the best sons of Colombia, and remain faithful to the ideal of the Liberator Simon Bolivar. (Own translation from Catatumbo 1997)

The FARC, like all totalitarian movements and identity-based nationalisms, unfailingly makes history a precise political purpose and filters the past through the symbolic sieve of an identity that could never admit rigorous and dispassionate historical knowledge.

Conclusion

Therefore, let us agree that memory is not history, nor can it be hijacked from the political spheres by any ‘faction’ or group with aspirations to achieve the same. Such kidnapping is based on the need to impose ideological and doctrinal references during political debate or confrontation. Such presentism is dangerous when it is expressed from quasi-providentialist positions that turn its protagonists into the prophets of future history. History is always under construction, regardless of the vicissitudes of memory, in line with the present.

As a final reflection, it is worth recalling the ‘Manifesto’ that European historians of singular importance – such as Carlo Ginzburg, Eric Hobsbawn, Pierre Nora or Jaques le Goff, among others – signed, a little over 13 years ago, in relation to the political pressures of those who claim to oversee memory management. This ‘Manifesto’ called *L’Appel de Blois: Liberté pour l’histoire*, remains today a call to build a Europe where intellectual freedom and historical research are part of its foundations.

History must not be a slave to contemporary politics, nor can it be written on the command of competing memories. In a free state, no political authority has the right to define historical truth and to restrain the freedom of the historian with the threat of penal sanctions [...] In a democracy, liberty for history is liberty for all. (Appel de Blois 2008)

Note

- a. Council of Europe resolution 1481 (2006), European Public Hearing on Crimes Committed by Totalitarian Regimes (2008), Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism (2008), European Parliament declaration of 23 August 2008, European Public Hearing on European

Conscience and Crimes of Totalitarian Communism: 20 Years After (2009), European Parliament resolution of 2 April 2009, Vilnius Declaration of the OSCE (2009), Declaration on Crimes of Communism (2010), Warsaw Declaration of the EU (2011), Stockholm Programme of the EU (2010–2015).

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