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Pai on Faber, 'Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War: History, Fiction, Photography'

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Sebastiaan Faber. *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War: History, Fiction, Photography*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018. 256 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8265-2178-1; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8265-2179-8.

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Remembering the Spanish Civil War

In 2018, when the Spanish government, then run by a coalition of left-wing parties, ordered the exhumation of the remains of General Franco from a state-funded monument, it was not only digging up his bones, but also the country's still unsettled past. The right-leaning parties claim that this is hardly an urgent issue and there is nothing to be gained by opening past wounds. The Left, however, argues that it is only by transferring the dictator's remains to a different location that people who were persecuted or perished during Spain's civil war (1936-39) can receive justice. The pursuit of justice for victims and survivors of the Civil War has been an issue that has divided politicians, jurists, intellectuals, and members of the civil society ever since Franco's dictatorship ended in 1975. But it has once again gained strength in recent years with the passing of the Law of Historical Memory in 2007 that sought both symbolic and material reparations for the victims of the Francoist repression. As the name of the law suggests, the path to

justice was supposed to be paved through a recovery of both “history” and “memory” of the nation’s past. This articulation opens its own can of worms. What is the relation of history to memory? Who gets to do the work of history and who can do the work of memory? Can one do history and memory work at the same time? Is truth to be found only in academic exploration of archives or can artistic representations take us closer to the reality of the tragedy that the country had to go through? Sebastiaan Faber’s latest book comes in a wave of recent scholarship that seeks to probe these difficult questions.[1] As a cultural critic of modern Spain, Faber offers multiple perspectives through literary, film, and photo criticism as well as interviews and discussions with historians, literary scholars, and other intellectuals. In the process, he blurs the boundaries between memory and history, between objectivity and subjectivity, and indeed between the politics of the Right and the Left.

At the core of *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War: History, Fiction, Photography* is the problem posed by Santos Juliá, a prominent Spanish historian in the run-up to the passing of the Historical Memory law. Juliá distinguishes “History” from “Memory,” describing the former as “the objective knowledge about the past produced by academic historians within a scholarly context,” while “memory covers all other representations of the past, ranging from individual witness testimony to state-sponsored monuments and commemorations” (p. 63). History, for Juliá, “seeks to know, understand, interpret, or explain; and operates under the requirement of totality and objectivity.” Memory, on the other hand, is interested in “legitimizing, rehabilitating, honoring, or condemning” the past and “always works selectively and subjectively” (p. 63). Juliá’s comments come in the wake several other leading international academics like Pierre Nora, Tony Judt, David Rieff, Margaret Macmillan, and Richard Evans questioning the “victim-centered, self-serving, institution or state-sponsored forms of memorialization,” the book explains (p. 69). In chapter 3, Faber puts this discourse in conversation with writings by Spanish philosopher Manuel Reyes Mate and the Argentine cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo. For instance, he writes that Mate theorizes the relationship between history and collective memory as one of “complementarity, mutual dependency, and cross-fertilization” p. 70), with memory providing a necessary counterweight to history’s tendency to privilege “the authority of the factual” (p. 73). Faber counters the history versus memory binary as anachronistic by stressing the importance of mediation in any knowledge of reality. All memory work in the form of films, photographs, and novels is mediated representation of history while history, at best, can only be a mediated representation of reality, he argues.

This idea of mediation—its nature, cost, and encumbrance—is one of central concerns in *Memory Battles*. Faber is at his inspired best as a literary critic in chapters 10-13 (part 5) when he spots a specific trend in a few twenty-first-century novels, calling them “affiliative” texts. These include: *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) by Javier Cercas, the *Tu rostro mañana* trilogy (2002-07) by Javier Marías, *La voz dormida* (2002) by Dulce Chacón, *Enterrar a los muertos* (2006) by Ignacio Martínez de Pisón, and *El corazón helado* (2007) by Almudena Grandes. He borrows this term from Edward Said, who in the 1980s described affiliation as a new relationship between characters and society in high modernist Western literature. This was based on “institutions, associations, and communities whose social existence was not ... guaranteed by biology, but by affiliation,” relations based not on biological loyalty, but on social commitment (p. 166). The health and safety of post-Franco democracy demanded that it avoid contamination by the legacy of past violence, but Faber contends the younger generations have abandoned this caution, which they reject as rooted in fear. “We are the first generation of Spaniards, in a long time, who are not afraid,” Faber cites Almudena Grandes, “and for that reason we have also been the first who have dared to look back without feeling the fear of turning into pillars of salt” (quoted, p. 168). As a consequence of the memory movement that began in the late 1990s and the debates over the value of history and memory, Faber concludes that writers have a “hyper affective” relation to the past, based on solidarity, compassion, and identification (p. 168). As against Juliá’s privileging of history over memory,

“for the younger generations, the truth is in the first place a lived experience, which may be subjective but is no less legitimate or authentic.... It can be found in the archive, to be sure, but also in witness testimony ... the truth is thought to serve justice and to satisfy an ethical urge,” Faber theorizes (p. 170). In other words, the structures of mediation between the writer and her conception of history along with that of the writer and her reader have changed dramatically in the new millennium.

A close analysis of a handful of well-known Civil War era photographs helps Faber demonstrate that the mediation of reality into knowledge can take place at various levels. Chapter 1 examines “*What Are You Doing to Prevent This?*” a famous Civil War poster aimed at mass mobilization that was captioned as based in Madrid. This was a three-part photomontage that included a bombed-out apartment building, six German military aircrafts silhouetted against the sky, and the desperate face of a mother clutching a baby boy in the foreground. While all the three parts had appeared separately and repeatedly at different forums, it is the image of the mother and the boy that strikes Faber. In his personal investigation about the origins of the picture, he finds that it was actually taken during the public funeral of a famous Anarchist leader, Buenaventura Durruti in Barcelona—not wartime Madrid—and had been rigorously altered to generate heightened affect in the viewer. While we usually associate such artifice with digital media, Faber shows that manipulation of the image was common in the analog era too. We can then glean multiple layers of mediation operating in the visual culture of the Civil War period. First is the photographer, who decided what stayed in the frame and what was left out. Second was the photomontage editor, who cropped, modified, and juxtaposed different images to suit her publication’s agenda. The political leadership on both sides, who created dedicated units charged with producing, selecting, and distributing photography and film formed the third layer. Chapter 2 takes this formulation further and explores issues about who controls the archive as the adjudicator and administrator of historical memory. Faber does this in relation to the negatives of certain iconic Spanish Civil War pictures that were recently discovered in Mexico, which subsequently were moved to the International Center of Photography in New York City. As Faber puts it: “the notions of value and circulation also allow us to map much more clearly and precisely the circuitous, forking, or parallel paths through which these images have come to us; the multiple ways in which, circulating through particular economies, they have become invested with particular meanings, served as objects of projection, and accrued values of a political, documentary, ethical, national, institutional, or affective nature” (p. 56). What he means is that the descendant of a victim, novelist, professional historian, jurist, or politician who uses any archival material to construct the past is additionally mediating the multiple mediations through which she has received the archive. Consequently, any quest to separate history and memory work in the pursuit of justice is fraught with peril.

Memory Battles—written in a very clear, accessible prose—is more a collection of assorted essays rather than a typical academic monograph. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 (part 4) are dedicated to analysis of three works of nonfiction. Andrés Trapiello’s assessment of the literature of the Civil War period (*Las Armas Y Las Letras: Literatura Y Guerra Civil*, 2010) is limited, according to Faber, by its narrow “moral and aesthetic focus” and its elective disassociation from the realm of politics (p. 129). Faber calls Gregorio Morán’s *El cura y los mandarines* (2014) rash and irrationally ruthless, which comes by way of a sound academic critique. *Memory Battles* finds virtue in parts of Antonio Muñoz Molina’s *Todo lo que era sólido* (2013), but ultimately reads it as a defense of the status quo. Chapter 5 consists of interviews with leading voices in the debates over the legacies of the Civil War, historians Gabriel Jackson, Ángel Viñas, Paul Preston, Helen Graham, and Pablo Sánchez León. Along with chapter 6 interviews with social anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz, citizen activist Emilio Silva, war photographer Gervasio Sánchez, and documentary filmmaker Montse Armengou, this section serves as an excellent entry point for nonspecialists interested in the burning issues inside the fields of contemporary Iberian humanities and social sciences. As Faber makes it very

clear in the general introduction, this collection of essays was compiled with both a scholarly and popular audience in mind.

A focus on a broad audience works both as the book's greatest strength and also as one of its weaknesses. While the differences in studying the historical memory of civil war in Spain as against that of the Holocaust are skillfully outlined, they are never taken to their rightful consummation. In the chapter that follows his description of the contemporary Spanish novel as an "affiliative act" (p. 165), Faber evokes Marianne Hirsch and James Young's conception of postmemory as an emotional intergenerational relationship powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony. He compares his articulation of "affiliative" texts with that of Hirsch's coinage of "affiliative postmemory," which she defines as the connection and transmission of memory capable of skipping generations (p. 174). The chapter could have made a substantial contribution to the field of memory studies in exploring this idea further, especially by touching upon other related ideas like prosthetic memory. However, it ends abruptly, after laying out some cursory differences between the Spanish and Holocaust situations. At other times, Faber leaves the last word to other writers and theorists, rather than grabbing his narrative himself. These minor deficiencies apart, in *Memory Battles* Faber adroitly confronts and tackles some of the key issues in the field of memory studies of the Spanish Civil War. He has a remarkable track record of doing so in his previous books, and one is certain that he will revisit these issues in the future, as much as one is certain that the ghost of General Franco will continue to haunt Spain till the end of time.

Note

[1]. Ruth Sanz Sabido, *Memories of the Spanish Civil War: Conflict and Community in Rural Spain* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016); Michael Richards, *After the Civil War: Making Memory and Re-Making Spain since 1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Aurora G. Morcillo, *Memory and Cultural History of the Spanish Civil War: Realms of Oblivion* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Carlos Jerez Farrán and Samuel Amago, *Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves and the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); and Chris Ealham and Michael Richards, *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), among others.

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