



## Exhuming Franco: Spain's second transition

by Sebastiaan Faber, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2021, 276 pp., \$14.95 (paperback), ISBN13 978-0826501738

**Carsten Humlebæk**

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## BOOK REVIEW

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In Spain, a memory war has been fought for the last few decades between two sides of Spanish society, which, roughly speaking, are the inheritors of the opposing sides of the Spanish Civil War. The conflicts over so-called historical memory in present-day Spanish society are part of this memory war and linked to the basic ideals on which the post-Francoist democracy was founded after Franco was laid to rest in the gigantic mausoleum of his own invention, the Valley of the Fallen, outside Madrid.

*Exhuming Franco* by Sebastiaan Faber, a Dutch Hispanist working within the United States, takes as its point of departure the exhumation of Franco's remains from the Basilica of the Valley of the Fallen in the autumn of 2019 at the request of the Spanish left-wing government. The fact that it took the Government more than a year to overcome resistance from the Franco family, Church authorities and the judiciary gives an idea of the entrenchment of this conflict even now, more than forty-seven years after the death of the dictator and more than eighty-three years after the end of the Civil War. Faber has published quite extensively on various aspects of memory politics in Spain, both in academic publications and the press. Thanks to its plurality of voices and the absence of any single, overarching hypothesis, this book places itself more in line with the latter, which the author defends as the fourth estate.

One of the principal contributions of the book to the public memory debate is its defense of the role of intellectuals. Faber highlights their capacity to influence conflicts in society such as the memory war and the underlying disagreement regarding the relationship with the past and to question dominant discourses regarding memory issues and their interpretation. *Exhuming Franco* clearly benefits from Faber's vast knowledge of the subject and his extensive network of people with a stake in the conflict interviewed for the book. The interviews constitute the book's backbone and are interwoven with argumentative essays by Faber himself that set the scene, organize the text by dividing it into thematic blocks and explain his intention to "integrate all these views and voices into the text". Being published first in English – and only later translated into Spanish – the book is also a contribution to the international dissemination of these counterhegemonic versions of historical memory, allowing them to compete with the dominant narrative of the transition to democracy as an almost universally positive change with only irrelevant costs.

Faber interviews journalists, historians and others who have a stake in the conflict over historical memory but occupy different positions, from literary critics, columnists and journalists to historians and memory scholars. Faber gives prominence to eleven interviews by dedicating individual chapters to each. However, a total of thirty-five people were interviewed for the book. Faber conducted the interviews during the months immediately following the actual exhumation of the former dictator, asking the same questions to all his interviewees regarding the extent to which they considered the legacy of Francoism to be present in Spanish politics, the economy and the judiciary. By letting different people talk about the same topics, Faber reveals the complicated debate about the use of the past in Spain in a respectful, well-informed and informative way. Hovering above it all, as also indicated by the subtitle of the book, are questions related to a second Transition, a recurrent theme within Spanish politics


since the 1990s. This concept traces back to Conservative José María Aznar's argument, in his aspiration to lead the country, that Spain needed a second Transition. The concept is featured in the title of Aznar's 1994 book *España. La segunda transición*. The question of a second Transition returned with the Socialist governments of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2011), which were seen by many as a sort of second Transition. The concept also gained centrality as a demand that was linked to the social upheavals of the *indignados*, caused by the effects of the 2008 economic crisis in Spain, and which, in turn, led to the creation of the political party Podemos. To launch the party into national politics, the founder and now ex-chairman of the party, Pablo Iglesias, in 2015, published a book with the telling title *Una nueva Transición. Materiales del año del cambio*. To ask for a second Transition is, of course, to criticize the former, and with Podemos, this criticism of the post-Franco democratic political system was radicalized in referring to the established political parties as *la casta*. More specifically, Iglesias was referring to the Socialist Party and the Conservative Popular Party, which, alternating in power with the help of the electoral law, had become so self-sufficient that their ties to the Spanish people had been weakened, allowing different forms of corruption to spread from within.

Whether the profound changes of the political landscape in Spain over the last decade actually amount to a second Transition is doubtful, but it is to some extent beside the point of the book. Faber's aim is very clearly not to claim a result or the end of any process; almost on the contrary, the book aims to contribute to opening up discussion. The liberal democratic system that was established between 1976 and 1978 was completely dependent on the politics of memory of that period as exemplified in the 1977 Amnesty Law, which meant that no legal prosecution of prior acts would be possible. In Spanish society this was interpreted as a prohibition to talk about the recent past, which has later become known as *el pacto del silencio*. If the purpose of that pact was to consolidate a democratic regime, it worked well, since democracy has effectively consolidated itself in Spain. But the so-called pact of silence was unstable in the long run because of the uneven distribution of the concessions it entailed. It only functioned well for as long as democracy was experienced as threatened, since it left unsolved a sense of injustice that would resurface sooner or later. Eventually, the informal pact blew up around 2000 and the reconciliation that Spanish society had believed in, turned out to be more like a truce. Since then, the politics of memory have become part of a political agenda pushed forward by left-wing governments or used by left-wing parties when in opposition to put pressure on right-wing governments. Precisely for these reasons, it would be vain to hope for this discussion to come to a conclusion any time soon, rather, one could say that it is only just beginning.

The criticism of the democracy that the Transition established in Spain was thus intimately linked to the fundamental critique of the politics of memory upon which it had depended. For these reasons, the removal of statues of Franco, the exhumation of Franco's body from the Valley of the Fallen and, more recently, the passing of the new Law on Democratic Memory in October 2022, are by no means banal measures of opportunistic political promotion. They touch the very heart of the post-Francoist Spanish society and political system and remain very divisive. Faber's book is a venture directly into these troubled waters of contested positions with its plurality of voices. For some, this polyphony reflects a productive disagreement, whereas others view it as a negative development that threatens the social fabric of Spain. Most recently, the rise of extreme right-wing populism has revived the question of polarization and destructive debates, not only in Spain but in many countries, as Faber also points out in his conclusions. In the Spanish case, it is a question of whether or not we can have faith in the democratic culture of the Spanish people and the potential of this culture. Looming behind this is the issue of exceptionalism derived from the Francoist slogan and

self-conception of Spain as different. The doubt about being exceptional or not is an existential one that is typical of countries with a totalitarian and violent past. For many years, German historians discussed whether German history was following a particular path in their “Sonderweg” debate. In the Spanish case, Faber’s answer is clear: No, Spain is not that different after all. “Spain may well need a second transition ..., but so do many other countries” (230). Democracy is under pressure in many places these years.

To the international audience, Faber’s book is an informative account that takes the reader beyond the conventional depiction of an old conflict and adds complexity to the account, which is necessary to get a grasp of the dynamics at play in Spain. If one sides with Faber in his assertion that Spain is not so different after all, there might be lessons to be learned from the Spanish experience. For Spanish readers, the book is a bold contribution in its relatively neutral role as microphone stand for a plethora of voices; dialogue about these issues is still a rare and rather revolutionary act in the Spanish context. Many Spanish readers might thus learn things about the views of those who do not share their thinking. Given the richness of the investigation undertaken by Faber, it is clear that *Exhuming Franco* will contribute to furthering this vital conversation not only in Spain but in democratic nation-states across the globe.

Carsten Humlebæk  
Copenhagen Business School  
 [cjh.msc@cbs.dk](mailto:cjh.msc@cbs.dk)

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