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Scenarios of Nostalgia. Public History and the Far-Right in Current Spain

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Abstract: This article analyses the risks faced by practices associated with public history owing to the resurgence of the far-right in Spain. It critically examines the historical narratives embedded in specific historical shows and reenactments, which, instead of encouraging a nuanced understanding of the past, tend to reinforce nationalist and identity-driven discourses that are fundamentally ahistorical and have a clear exclusionary potential. Furthermore, the recent rise of the genre of historical fiction and particular forms of “historiographical populism” act as vehicles to disseminate historical interpretations linked to an exclusionary Spanish nationalism, which is largely rooted in the legacy of Francoism.

Keywords: Public History; Spanish far-right; reenactment; historical novel; imperial nostalgia

1 Introduction

Public History is a relatively new discipline in Spain. In fact, the Spanish Association of Public History was only founded in 2020 with the aim to “involve historians and citizens in the collective discussion of the past,” turning “history into a democratic tool and make it a common good.”¹ However, this does not mean that activities inspired by this approach to history were not already being carried out in Spain. The practice of public history has been gradually developing in Spain for decades, even if its formal embodiment and conceptualization are still recent and weak. These challenges have led the field to develop into diverse, often contradictory, historiographic practices; historical festivals

of questionable authenticity coexist with experimental archaeology; overtly political uses of the past with educational programs launched by museums; and historical reenactments with spectacles merely inspired by the past, many of which are mediated by mass tourism. In addition, there has generally been a lack of quality *haute vulgarisation* (high popularization) which has largely been displaced by the rise of historical fiction.

In this context, the ghostly presence of the Spanish far-right materialized in November 2019, when the Vox party garnered over 3.5 million votes, becoming the third-largest political force in the national parliament. This has fueled the rise of a victimized, exclusionary Spanish nationalism, through which the far-right promotes a mythologized and inaccurate version of history, echoing Franco-era narratives. Notions like the “Reconquista” and “Spanish Empire” have been revived as symbols of Spain’s past glory.² Certain recent re-enactment practices serve merely to reproduce – whether consciously or unconsciously – these extreme and exclusionary historical narratives.

In this article, I analyze the use of national history by the far-right in Spain, and the instrumentalization of various activities associated with public history.³ I firstly considers historical performances (ranging from historical festivals to reenactments), before looking to historical novels. Both genres are susceptible to exclusionary ideologies that, far from facilitating a critical understanding of a complex and diverse past, result in certainties that lack historical rigor and serve obvious political purposes.

² In this respect, see the works included in Jesús María Casquete (ed.), *Vox frente a la historia* (Madrid: Akal, 2023) and Pablo Batalla, *Los nuevos odres del nacionalismo español* (Gijón: Trea, 2021); Edgar Straehle, “La Leyenda Negra y los abusos de la memoria: reflexiones sobre el nacionalismo historiográfico actual en España,” *Con-ciencia social* 7 (2024): 13–32; Gustavo Alares, Eduardo Acerete, “La extrema derecha española y el neorevisionismo imperial: Nostalgia, conceptos y narrativas,” *Historia del presente* 43 (2024): 99–118, <https://doi.org/10.5944/hdp.43.2024>, and José Tébar, “Los populismos historiográficos en el nacionalismo español: usos del pasado y problemas de la historia en el siglo XXI,” *Revista de historiografía* 39 (2024): 421–45.

³ A definition and a repertoire of its practices in Thomas Cauvin, *Public History. A Textbook of Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹ <https://www.historiapublica.es/>.

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2 Historical Performances and Reenactments

Since the early 21st century, historical shows in Spain have greatly increased in number, leading to a varied landscape in which it can be hard to distinguish historical festivals and historical performances – such as the Puy du Fou in Toledo – from reenactment activities.⁴ Regarding historical festivals and reenactments, many have an important local dimension, which may stimulate and reinforce certain identities, on the one hand, or exploit touristic interest on the other. In fact, in many instances, these historical spectacles have contributed to the revitalization of economically disadvantaged rural communities. Similarly, these events can help to create new collective traditions. For instance, the *medieval* “Bodas de Isabel de Segura” in Teruel – which is more of a historical festival than a reenactment – has become a landmark event in the city since its inauguration in 1997, becoming one of the most important festivities in the local holiday calendar.⁵ It is important, however, to highlight the dual tension surrounding historical festivals and reenactments which arises from their role as elements of cultural identity while also playing an economic role. With regards to the first, by commemorating significant moments from local or regional history, reenactments and historical festivals can serve as important tools for reinforcing identities, fostering a sense of pride, and reconnecting communities with their past. With regards to the second, the economic impact of these events through tourism is evident. While tourism can provide economic benefits and even revitalize struggling rural areas, it is also true that it can lead to the commodification and spectacularization of history. In some instances, it is clear that historical authenticity is sacrificed in favor of entertainment, and the narratives presented may tend toward simplification, avoiding deeper reflection on the complexities of the past. Finally, historical festivals and reenactments – as sophisticated representations of the past – inherently contain an important political dimension.

In any case, it is legitimate to ask questions. What is being reenacted or commemorated? What events from the

past are condemned to oblivion? How can they affect contemporary Spanish historical culture? Although there is a certain heterogeneity of events inspired by the past that are on offer in today's Spain, major themes and historical periods can be identified.

There is a strong focus on Iberia and Roman Hispania. Antiquity has inspired numerous reenactments and activities that represent the best traditions of public history, for example, in valorizing the archaeological heritage of particular places, often in collaboration with institutions such as museums or universities. These include *Tarraco Viva*, the didactic project in the *Segeda* site, the *Complutum Renacida* in Alcalá de Henares, *Lucentum reviviscit* in Alicante, or *Sedeisken* in the Iberic archaeological site of Azaila (Teruel), to name just a few. These types of events stand out for their educational vocation, promoting the knowledge, appreciation, and preservation of historical and cultural heritage. At the same time, they represent a ‘closed’ past that is largely detached from identity-related controversies.

Many of these spectacles focus on local events from the Middle Ages. These include the *Festa da Istoria* of Ribadavia or the *Crónica Najarense* (Nájera), or on battles of the Christian conquest of Al-Andalus, such as *Astures. Pelayo, Nuestro Rey* in Cangas de Onís, *La Alfonsada* in Calatayud, or *De Espinosa, los Monteros*. The proliferation of local festivals that ‘dress up in the past’ stems from two main narratives: one idealizes – and even romanticizes – the coexistence of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, while the other focuses on the *Reconquista* (Reconquest), often portraying it as the Christian triumph over the Muslims and thus implying a historical continuity between the conquerors and modern Spaniards. Often, these reenactments and festivals uncritically follow the traditional *Reconquista* narrative; a key myth of Spanish nationalism which frames these events as an eighth-century Christian struggle against Islam, an existential fight between the Christian ‘us,’ portrayed as racially white and presentist Spanish, against the Muslim ‘other.’ This historical narrative was rejected by professional historians long ago, but it remains influential among certain social groups. The truth is that the concept of *Reconquista* has been easily adopted as a vehicle for exclusionary sentiments against the foreign-born population.⁶ An example is the *Taking of Granada*. Although not, strictly speaking, historical reenactment, the annual celebration of the Catholic Kings’ conquest of Granada in

4 An interactive map of historical reenactments and events in Spain can be found on the website of the Spanish Association of Festivals and Historical Reenactments <https://www.fiestahistoricas.es/>. See also Portal Historia Reenactments, <https://portalhistoriareenactment.com/asociaciones-y-grupos-de-recreacion-historica/>.

5 For the economic impact see María-Yolanda Fernández, María del Pilar Cabezas, and Carlos Belloso, “Estimación de los impactos económicos y sociales de las recreaciones históricas: ‘Las Bodas de Isabel de Segura’ en Teruel (España),” *Pasos* 20 (2022): 481–501.

6 Alejandro García Sanjuán, “Weaponizing historical knowledge: the notion of Reconquista in Spanish nationalism,” *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum* 14 (2020): 133–62; Gustavo Alares, Eduardo Acerete, “Negar la historiografía, mitificar el pasado: La Reconquista, Vox y la radicalización excluyente del nacionalismo español,” *Nuestra Historia* 15 (2023): 115–32.

1492 has increasingly attracted xenophobic and anti-Muslim demonstrations, supported by the far-right Vox party.⁷

In relation to the early modern period, several historical reenactment events are linked to the exaltation of the Spanish Empire, reflecting an imperial nostalgia that regards the so-called Golden Age as the pinnacle of the Spanish nation. In this context, one must understand what historian Pablo Batalla refers to as “terciomanía”: that is, the exaltation of the *tercios*, the renowned military units that spearheaded the victories of the Hispanic Monarchy.⁸ As a significant expression of this sentiment, in 2017 a reenactment of the *Tercios de Flandes* marched for the first time during the Armed Forces parade on Spain’s national holiday, 12 October, in Madrid.

As such, numerous historical reenactments inspired by the *tercios* are held, the most important in Jaca, Yecla, and Lerma, with the support of a significant associative network. Notably, several organizations, which are more overtly political than others, have been created, including the *Asociación Tercio de Olivares* (which runs a School of Cadets and a Military Camp for children), the *Asociación Imperial Service*, and the *Asociación 31 Enero*, which has pushed for the construction of a monument to the *Tercios* in Madrid.⁹

Another historical event that has greatly attracted the attention of the reenactment community is the Peninsular War against Napoleon, one of the foundational myths of Spanish nationalism since the 19th century.¹⁰ Significant examples include the reenactment of the Sieges of Zaragoza, the Reconquest of Vigo, the 2 May celebrations in Madrid, and the reenactment of the Battle of Bailén. The recreations of events of the Peninsula War reuse long-standing historical symbols and narratives created by 19th-century Spanish nationalism. In any case, these narratives appeal to a ‘we’ that at least implies a banal nationalism based on a

simplification of the past and the presentation of a traditional gallery of local and national heroes.

Finally, modern history has also inspired the Spanish reenactment community, featuring recreations of both World Wars and various episodes of the Spanish Civil War, such as the Battle of Jarama and the Battle of the Ebro. These reenactments often involve substantial resources and, paradoxically, tend to be less controversial than others.¹¹

Generally, the historical narratives deployed in these reenactments adopt a neopositivist perspective, oversimplifying the complexity of the past and primarily framing history as a military conflict. This leads to a binary view of history (‘us’ versus ‘them’) and often reinforces an exclusionary national paradigm. Overall, despite the diversity of approaches, these activities tend to discourage critical historical thinking and instead encourage binary, nationalistic, and presentist narratives. This is quite clear, for example, in the already mentioned use of the concept of “Reconquista,” or the emotional identification with an idealized “Spanish Empire.”

3 Historical Novels and Historiographical Populism

The literary genre of the historical novel has seen significant growth in recent decades. However, this genre – whose boundaries are often unclear – is prone to historical misconceptions. History and historical fiction have distinct features and objectives; while history aims to provide an accurate and meaningful account of the past, the historical novel focuses on entertaining the reader with fictional narratives. In general, historical novels are primarily framed around individual stories, often featuring sentimental and war-centered plots set against an allegedly genuine historical backdrop. While they may initially appear as mediocre literary exercises that rely on their historical setting to offer unsuspecting readers a semblance of the “real” – which is valuable cultural capital – they can easily veer into less innocent territory. Certain historical novels have, for example, facilitated a shift from a vague and

7 For the historical origin of the commemoration see Bernard Vincent, “La toma de Granada,” in *La fiesta, la ceremonia, el rito: Coloquio Internacional* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1990): 43–50, and for its current political use by the far-right: https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/granada/polemica-toma-granada-vuelve-celebrarse-pp-gobernando-solitario-primera-vez-nueve-anos_1_10805224.html.

8 Pablo Batalla, *Los nuevos odres del nacionalismo español* (Gijón: Trea, 2021).

9 Luis de la Cruz, “La moda de los Tercios y su relación con el nacionalismo español: contexto de la nueva estatua de Madrid,” *Eldiario.es*, January 25, 2022, https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/somos/noticias/moda-tercios-relacion-nacionalismo-espanol-contexto-nueva-estatua-madrid_1_8667312.html.

10 José Álvarez Junco, “La invención de la Guerra de la Independencia,” *Studia Historica. Historia Contemporánea* 12 (1994): 75–99.

11 For the spectacular 2024 reenactment of the Battle of the Ebro, which featured an aircraft and nearly 300 reenactors see María Bosque, “Un caza de acrobacias y 300 recreacionistas para recordar la Batalla del Ebro,” *Eldiario.es*, 25 July 2024, https://www.eldiario.es/aragon/cultura/caza-acrobacias-300-recreacionistas-rememorar-batalla-ebro_1_11549503.html.

implicit form of banal nationalism to a more sophisticated articulation of historical discourses associated with far-right takes on nationalism.¹² This look at the past through historical fiction – and also through certain “patriotic” essays – is inspired Edgar Straehle who coined the concept of “historiographical populism.”¹³ Motivated by an intention to “rectify” the past, it is not accidental nor coincidental that most historical fiction is based on themes and periods imbued with significant nationalist connotations: from the medieval period and the *Reconquista*, to the loss of the last colonies (Cuba, Filipinas), and the end of the Spanish Empire. Current imperial nostalgia is significantly shaped by María Elvira Roca Barea’s 2016 essay *Imperiofobia y Leyenda Negra* which popularizes a fanciful dichotomy between “predatory empires” and “generative empires”, classifying the Spanish Empire as the latter.¹⁴ This conceptualization reproduces the theories developed by philosopher Gustavo Bueno in the 1990s, which were themselves directly inspired by the “imperial thought” of post-war Spanish fascism elaborated by Falangist intellectuals and academics such as Santiago Montero Díaz, Antonio Tovar, and Juan Beneyto.¹⁵ It would be worth noting that Gustavo Bueno was a disciple of Santiago Montero. By portraying it as a “benevolent empire,” Roca Barea and others have facilitated the unabashed vindication of the Spanish Empire from presentist and profoundly ahistorical perspectives. This new iteration of imperial nostalgia is expressed through a type of fictional heroes – conquerors, warriors, and clerics – who confront the challenges of the conquest of the Americas and the war in Flanders. It also involves the fictionalization of the lives of ‘great national heroes,’ ranging from Pelayo to Hernán

Cortés, including figures like Blas de Lezo and Bernardo de Gálvez.¹⁶ In all these instances, the often-explicit goal is to reclaim a history that would otherwise have been forgotten or deliberately obscured.

These authors seek to champion a patriotic fight for the ‘true history of Spain,’ which was first obscured by the Black Legend and is now overshadowed by what they term national ‘wokism’.¹⁷ This literature has emerged outside of academia – often in direct opposition to it – and generally accuses professional historians of lacking patriotism. In this context, the works of Javier Pérez-Foncela – a prolific author of historical novels with an “imperial” theme – are a prime example.¹⁸ In one of the many digital newspapers aligned with the far-right media landscape, Pérez-Foncela remarked:

We must be proud of our Hispanic roots because Spanish feats, driven by this deep Christian idealism cultivated over centuries, have reached unparalleled shores in the history of humanity: the Reconquista of the entire Iberian Peninsula, the first circumnavigation of the world, the discovery of America, the Conquest of Mexico and Peru with just a handful of men in both cases, the evangelization and civilization of America (...), the founding of dozens of universities and World Heritage cities...¹⁹

In any case, this literary genre, like all forms of historical revisionism, has a therapeutic nature. As noted by philosopher Avizier Tucker, these therapeutic values applied to the past can foster psychological and emotional well-being

12 Historical fiction and “patriotic” essays in Spain are predominantly written by conservative, if not downright reactionary, authors. Notable examples include Isabel San Sebastián, José Javier Esparza, Antonio Pérez Henares, Javier Santamarta, Pedro Fernández Barbadillo, Luis Mollá, Pedro Insúa, Marcelo Gullo, and Santiago Armesilla.

13 Edgar Straehle, “El populismo historiográfico como problema y síntoma del presente,” *Ctxt*, October 6, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4d5ma62h>. According to Straehle, historiographical populism “is characterized by promoting biased interpretations of the past, whose success largely depends on the use of populist strategies that clash with academic research, which they often oppose, disdain, or even publicly discredit.”

14 An academic response is José Luis Villacañas, *Imperiofobia y el populismo nacional-católico*, (Madrid: Lengua de Trapo, 2019); Edgar Straehle, “Melancolía imperial y Leyenda Negra en el paisaje español actual,” *Jerónimo Zurita* 99 (2021): 35–77.

15 Gustavo Alares, Eduardo Acerete, “La extrema derecha española y el neorevisionismo imperial: Nostalgia, conceptos y narrativas,” *Historia del presente* 43 (2024): 99–118.

16 This roster of figures, recovered through historical novels and works of popular history, brings together some with a long-established presence in conservative national narratives – such as the legendary Don Pelayo, the first king of Asturias who is traditionally credited with defeating the Muslims at the Battle of Covadonga in 718, and Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico – as well as more recently incorporated figures, including Blas de Lezo, the military commander who repelled the British attempt to seize Cartagena de Indias in 1741, and Bernardo de Gálvez, the governor of Louisiana who supported the North American rebels during the War of Independence and captured Mobile (1780) and Pensacola (1781) from the British.

17 The “Black Legend” refers to the body of negative, often exaggerated narratives and stereotypes that, from the sixteenth century onward, portrayed Spain as intolerant, backward, and violent. Promoted largely by rival powers, this view emphasized the Inquisition, the conquest of the Americas, and authoritarianism, shaping both international propaganda and Spain’s own self-perception.

18 Javier Pérez-Foncela is the prolific author of many historical novels published by Almuzara, such as *Los Tercios no se rinden* (2019); *El héroe del Caribe. La última batalla de Blas de Lezo* (2019); *Venced al corsario inglés* (2021); *Invencibles* (2022), and *Los primeros de Filipinas* (2022).

19 Raul González, “Juan Pérez-Foncela: ‘España no es flor de un día. Siglos de historia no pueden borrarse de un plumazo,’” *La Tribuna del País Vasco*, December 25, 2020, <https://latribunadelpaisvasco.com/archive/14317/juan-perez-foncela-espana-no-es-flor-de-un-dia-siglos-de-historia-no-pueden-borrarse-de-un-plumazo>. Author’s translation.

in the public.²⁰ This is evident in the denial or minimization of the negative aspects of Spanish imperial dominance, the patriotic glorification of major military victories (such as Covadonga, Las Navas de Tolosa, Tenochtitlan, Flanders, and Cartagena de Indias), and the recurring emphasis on internal enemies (the perpetual “Anti-Spain”) and external threats (“perfidious Albion,” Muslims, and other conspirators against the glory of the nation).²¹

Regardless, the growth of this literary genre reveals the historical prejudices and fantasies of the Spanish far-right, while also helping to normalize ahistorical interpretations of the past that have exclusionary and anti-democratic implications among broader audiences. This risk is made more acute by the public’s perception of historical fiction as a substitute for rigorous academic scholarship. As renowned medievalist Eduardo Manzano has noted, “the shadow that the ‘true history of Spain’ casts over Muslims, Jews, Romani people, pre-Columbian societies, heretics, political dissidents, and rival nationalist people and ideas is very long.”²² Ultimately, the past has become a battleground in the culture wars of the Spanish far-right.

4 Conclusion: Looking to the Future

Public history in Spain is increasingly becoming a platform to advance far-right policies regarding the past, largely fueled by the revival of exclusionary historical discourses from the Francoist dictatorship. The dissemination of exclusionary narratives is both implicit – in what can be termed banal nationalism – and explicit, particularly in certain works of historical fiction and ‘patriotic essays.’ Moreover, some historical shows and reenactments tend to either deliberately or inadvertently reproduce these narratives.

As professional historians, we bear the responsibility to analyze these representations of the past as contemporary cultural practices, while also intervening in the public sphere to expose falsehoods, presentist discourses, and the self-serving manipulation of history.

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²⁰ Avizier Tucker, “Historiographic Revision and Revisionism. The Evidential Difference” in *Past in the Making. Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008): 1–15.

²¹ “Perfidious Albion” is a term that was popularized from the late eighteenth century onward and employed pejoratively by Anglophobic circles to refer to Great Britain.

²² Eduardo Manzano, *España diversa. Claves de una historia plural*, (Barcelona: Crítica, 2024), 15. Author’s translation.