

HISTORICAL MEMORY AND ITS DISTORTIONS

Hidden interests and bourgeoisie substitution in Barcelona's Barrio Chino

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When the left-wing PSC-PSOE -Socialist- and PSUC -Communist- coalition won Barcelona's municipal elections in 1979 (the first elections since 1939), the electoral slogan of Narcís Serra, who went on to become the mayor of Barcelona, was: “come with us into the City Council”. Because of a series of factors, the majority of the population in the city, mainly among the lower classes, trusted almost blindly in the vision for the transformation of the city promoted at the time by the City Council.

To understand the reasons for this situation, we must go back to the heavy repression experienced by the lower classes of Barcelona after Franco won the Civil War, i.e., from January 26 1939 onwards. For Franco and the classes supporting his regime, Barcelona was not just a city like any other, but rather a city which deserved special and exemplary punishment. For three years, Barcelona had been run by the people in the context of a revolutionary process. During these three years, many radical experiments took place: public schools worked with incredible pedagogical success, the factories were collectivized in a rational and optimal manner, daily life was reformed in the direction of greater freedom, while at the same time, the bourgeoisie was silenced by the power and the self-organizing potential of the people. Having once been a city in which the army had been defeated by the people in the streets, it would always remain historically, a city in which the same thing might happen again.

That is why this city deserved, for Francoists, an exemplary and brutal punishment, in a variety of forms. Obviously, fascist brutality manifested itself in all Spanish cities, but nowhere did this take place with the same same bitterness, obsession and desire for vengeance which was visited upon the proletarians of Barcelona and the classes which had supported the revolutionary process.

From 1939 to 1952, executions in Campo de la Bota took place almost daily: this produced not just fear but terror, and the frustration of all the desires that working class people (by now almost all exiled or arrested) had nurtured in their revolutionary dreams, fought for and sometimes even achieved.

On January 26 1939, the very day that General Yagüe's troops entered Barcelona, an attack took place on the *Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular*, the symbol of the emerging effort of the working classes to gain culture and knowledge. In the attack, they took all the books from the *Ateneu*'s library and burned them at a symbolic stake in the middle of the Ramblas, to destroy even the last trace of what had happened in the city over more than 50 years. In his memoirs, Count Ciano, the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Mussolini's son-in-law, tells that the repression he saw in Barcelona was far greater than in any other city in that period.

All of this is essential for understanding how, forty years later, the great majority of Barcelona's working class trusted so absolutely in their left-wing politicians, thinking in a noble but naive way (as will become clearer later) that the interests of the City's rulers and those of the working classes coincided.

The savage repression of Barcelona's social movements had the objective not only of physically exterminating all who had participated in them, and deleting as much as possible any sign of the identity of these movements, but also of remaking such persons in a more adaptable and compliant form.

These processes became particularly noticeable during the 60s, when in the context of cruel repression in so-called “deep Spain” (*España profunda*), an extraordinary number of immigrants arrived in Barcelona. This is the key to understanding what happened in the following years. In the 60s, government representatives were marginalised from all the worker movements. That is, rebellion became a priority, and the aim of pushing the new society towards a social revolution had already been replaced by a vision of so called “National Reconciliation”. Although all of the political struggles that took place in that decade were inspired by a desire to overthrow the dictatorship, they lacked the transformative energy that the proletariat as a whole had maintained until the end of the Civil War.

It is important to state frankly that when today we hear such frequent references to a “historical memory”, this refers basically to the repression suffered by the working class, not to the interests of the classes that made possible the victory of fascism and the repression itself. It is also important to remember, even though it is hard to admit it, that many of the interests that fascism protected with its brutality were the same power interests that supported Franco in its beginnings, but then later repented of it. This is why many of the children of the bourgeoisie ended up in the vanguard of the struggle for democracy and for a “National Reconciliation”; but without challenging the interests of local, national and international capitalism, but instead simply asking for adjustments so that the price that the working classes had to pay would not be as disproportionate as during fascism.

The immigrants that arrived in Barcelona in the 60s had to cope with very hard living conditions: they lived in shanty towns in the beginning, then in overcrowded high rise buildings: without schools, medical care, cultural and recreational centers (only bars fulfilled this role). In many of the neighborhoods where they lived, the pavement of the streets was still missing. In this context, some parties, and especially the PSUC (the Catalan Communist Party) established a base among these people, in an attempt to achieve political democracy, with the promise of solving the problems from which they were suffering, within the framework of democracy.

These immigrants showed significant abilities in the struggles for minimum housing rights and dignity, but they lacked the sense of identity and historical memory necessary to understand where they had come from. These people suffered and fought very hard in many important struggles, but did not realise (and the parties who organized them did not bother to let them know) how the Catalan workers' movement for example had for 80 years showed a strong tendency toward collective management in the struggle for social and cultural emancipation. Nobody told any of these workers and neighborhood activists (and we have to ask ourselves why) that in 1935 the *Ateneo Enciclopédico Popular* counted more than 30.000 members, and was developing all kinds of educational and cultural activities, with the aim of forming individually conscious proletarians. This vocation for collective management developed by the workers' movement (with the help of the lower bourgeoisie and a few professors and teachers) was completely erased in the new collective struggle against the dictatorship. They fought for “schools”, without asking themselves “what kind of schools?”; they fought for good clothes and for commodities, but forgot the yearning towards human freedom as a priority.

This struggle bore fruit, and in fact when Franco died, elections took place in 1979. “Come with us into the City Council”; with the benefit of historical hindsight, we should ask ourselves who this “us” actually was, and what interests it represented. What we know for sure is that a big part of the population supported this “us” in the City Council, except for the youngest, the rebels, the radicals or those who were already suspicious.

As stated earlier, the class interests of some of the bourgeoisie, including some of the Catalan bourgeoisie, overlapped with the interests of the Francoists, although the methods of the Francoists were rejected. This is the nub of the question, or one of the bourgeoisie's most significant interests was in the so-called *esponjamiento*, i.e. urban renewal of Barcelona's historic center, especially of the Raval neighborhood (those who remember it still call it the “Barrio Chino”).

“Come with us into the City Council”: but the very day after the Council's investiture, the mayor Narcís Serra, together with his right-hand man and successor Pasqual Maragall, called to his office the eminent Juan Antonio Samaranch (who, by the way, received a sumptuous funeral in 2009, almost as if he had been an ex head of state). Until that momento, Samaranch had been a fascist, and had held many public offices during the dictatorship, mainly in the field of sports, but he had also been the chief of Barcelona's provincial council during the Transition. What did the first democratic and socialist mayor of the Transition call him to his office for? The official explanation was that they then began to talk about holding the Olympic Games in Barcelona, which were actually held 13 years later. But this was not the main topic, though they surely must have discussed it. The main point was – and this became perfectly apparent in the following years – to recombine the forces of a bourgeoisie that had been divided until then between the Francoists and the democrats, but whose speculative interests as a class were exactly the same. This was especially evident in the *esponjamiento* of the Raval neighborhood.

Let us speak even more clearly: this bourgeoisie had historical interests in the urban design of the whole city, but especially in the center, where the proletarian and also subproletarian movements were stronger, and where there lived a population that they clearly wanted to remove, so that it could be replaced with another population more suited to their class interests.

A few years before this conversation between Serra and Samaranch, the post-Francoist bourgeoisie made an attempt at the urban transformation of the city, through the so-called *Plan de la Ribera*: a large scale urban renewal plan that would have demolished some neighborhoods of the center of Barcelona (Santa Caterina, barrio de Sant Pere, Trafalgar, up to the beginning of Barceloneta and parts of Poblenou). This proposal never turned into reality, mainly because the times were not favorable; at the end of Francoist era, a growing network of neighbors' associations, rooted in the different parts of the city, and supported by the left-wing parties struggling against the dictatorship, were opposed to the *Plan* and fanned the flames of popular dissent.

A part of the bourgeoisie, the more cultured and social democratic-oriented, realized that it was impossible to promote all the future urban transformations they were planning in a right wing manner, still less under the guise of Francoist authoritarianism. That is why they waited for the right moment to come, that is, when the democratic municipal elections were won by the left wing socialists, communists, *Esquerra Republicana* independentists, and other extraparliamentary groups that supported the “left-wing concepts” that were emerging.

The Raval

The transformation of the Raval neighborhood was the first context in which the new strategy was tested, similarly to Hausmann's remodelling of central Paris in the 19th century. We should not be surprised at the hundred years that divide these two events. The reasons for this change, and for all the interests that it entailed for the bourgeoisie, had been since at least the beginning of the 20th century closet o the heart of the Catalan ruling class (i.e., the Catalan-speaking ruling class; the Spanish-speaking bourgeoisie had divergent economic interests). As early as 1905, Barcelona City Council was studying an urban renewal plan to “improve” life in the Barrio Chino, meaning, as usual, demolition and rebuilding. It was at a time when this project was difficult to implement, because the workers and their neighborhoods were organized and united around the different

varieties of anarchism which were spreading, and thus responded firmly to any bourgeois attempt to dominate the city, and especially the Raval neighborhood.

As stated previously, the immigrants that arrived in Barcelona in the 60s accidentally ended up favouring the interests of the ruling classes; by contrast, the immigrants that had arrived year after year in the beginning of the 20th century had played a very different political role. They filled the neighborhood of the historic center of the city, and quickly became involved in the social struggles that were going on at the time. This provoked a mass reaction, and facilitated the spreading of the ideas of anarchosyndicalism, which grew stronger year by year. For Barcelona's and Catalonia's bourgeoisie, it was impossible to achieve the urbanistic changes they intended to apply. And so we come to 1936, and to the whole process of repression we talked about at the beginning. The bourgeoisie that emerged after the victory of fascism did not consider those urban changes to be a priority, because they required a series of management and diplomatic skills that did not fit at all with the crude and vindictive fascist behaviour of the time.

The emerging fascist bourgeoisie focused instead on other types of business; they developed their economic power in the beginning through smuggling (cotton, oil, wheat, bread, penicillin), later through controlling the mainly Catalan textile factories. They also needed to do this in order to gain some recognition in local political circles (especially the *Círculo del Liceo*), traditionally the places for negotiating and defining new strategies, where although they had won the war, they were not very welcome guests. The bourgeoisie that – linguistically and geographically – had lost the war, despite supporting Franco, was far more interested in urban planning. The 200 top families that had been holding power for 150 years invested in purchasing blocks of flats in central Barcelona, in order to make lots of money when these neighborhoods were demolished and rebuilt.

In the 90s, I was surprised when I realized that although the Raval was deteriorating more and more, and even though its living conditions were becoming almost unbearable, a large part of the buildings in the darkest backstreets of the neighborhood were still the property of the same families of the old bourgeoisie whose political allegiances cut across the fascist/democratic divide.

This explains why an urban transformation which was a heavy burden for the residents of the neighborhood was not only passed over in silence by the public opinion of the rest of the city, but even appeared to be a positive and necessary urban change for Barcelona. The paradoxes arrived to the extreme level of, for example, a middle-aged woman with three young children, living in a flat in which all the partition walls had been torn down. When she was visited by neighborhood activists who were seeking to mitigate the effects of the brutal transformation suffered by local people, they advised her to call a welfare officer, but she answered that if she called the welfare officer, the Council would throw her out of the flat within 24 hours, and she would probably not get another flat, since she did not own the house¹. In order to arrive at this point of degradation, the owners of the flats had abandoned the buildings and refused to take care of them.

One prominent Barcelona lawyer defended people affected by the urban transformation, but only accepted cases where he knew there were legally recognisable rights which could be claimed (since the law only protects a small portion of the people evicted²). He claimed that the City Council paid less than a third of the money it was legally obliged to pay in compensation for the expropriations. Additionally, many residents lacked even basic knowledge of the bureaucracy, so that most of them did not even know which office they needed to go to to make complaints.

¹ Legally, if a building is declared technically in ruins, the rent contracts are automatically cancelled. In the case of “mobbing” (i.e., pressure on tenants to make them leave their flats) often the owners stop renovations or maintenance of buildings which they are obliged to carry out. After leaving the buildings abandoned for years, they can then declare them ruined in order to evict the tenants more easily.

² The only cases that actually reached the courts were only after the owners claimed compensation for being expropriated for public projects, or when the tenants were suffering pressures to cancel their rent-controlled contracts (before the LAU, the Law for Urban Rents of 1994). But this is only the tip of the iceberg of the evictions in Raval: for example all the real estate speculation that tripled or quadrupled rents in a few years was perfectly legal.

All of this only came to light when the great film-maker Joaquim Jordà, now deceased, depicted in his documentary “De nens” the repeated abuses of power towards the residents of the neighborhood. For the first time, the whole urban question was being approached from a new angle, instead of from the point of view of ‘the greatest urban transformation of the century in Barcelona’, as it was presented for many years by politicians, beginning with the City Council.

Epilogue

The core of all of the problem, in my opinion, is the distortion of the concepts of “memory”, and “historical memory”, to use the term deployed by some people who are not in the least bit interested in the problems that affected the residents of Raval and of the central neighborhoods we have described. Such people talk about the abuses of the dictatorship, when the real question is to understand the reason why a class (or a political side: the right wing) decided to wage a war, and what interests lay behind this: what kind of schools were they fighting for? What kind of factories did they seek to impose? What way of life were they defending? It is only by answering these questions that we can be aware of the distance that separated, as if between two different worlds, those who were on one side of the civil war, from those on the other. There have been too many misleading concepts like “a fight amongst brothers”, “a fratricidal war”, and so on. It is about time that these concepts are reexamined, to try and understand what would happen today if the working classes had the same power and supremacy which they enjoyed in those times.

Today there is no need for fascism any more. There are even political departments like the one in the Catalan *Generalitat* dealing with “Historical Memory”, which talks about repairing the harm done to those who suffered on both sides. There is no problem with looking at what both sides needed to know; but with a condition: that nothing should be said about what really matters.

We could mention many more details of the Raval case, but this is beyond the scope of this article. Our objective here is to show how the same interests that 80 years ago were considered purely speculative and capitalist, and which were opposed by the working class, are today 80 years later considered to be a collective achievement for Barcelona and an example of progressive European urban planning policy. The heart of this painful paradox is that the authors of this distortion are left-wing governments who call themselves ‘progressive’ and who in the 1970s were able to invite the people to “come with us into the City Council”.

The people are still paying a high price for losing the Civil War. But at that great moment of loss, people were still able to recognise themselves in the words of the great poet León Felipe, who wrote: “you have the farm, the house, the horse and the gun, but I keep the song”. The worst thing is that now we have lost the song as well, confused among misleading concepts, acronyms and distortions for the future. If one were to ask “do they still need fascism?”, the painful answer now would be: no, they don't need it anymore.

