

Lluís Maria Puig I Oliver, president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

“There is no such a thing as a single history of Europe”

Interviewed by Graciela Iglesias Rogers, co-editor JOURNAL OF THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY HISTORY



STRASBOURG. – Now that politicians are increasingly striving to write history books (Boris Johnson’s *Dream of Rome*; William Hague’s *William Pitt*; Dominique de Villepin’s *Le cents jours*, to name just a few), Lluís Maria Puig I Oliver offers the rare example of a historian with a long and prestigious career as a parliamentarian.

Born in BÀSCARA (Girona, Spain) in 1945, he was an active member of the underground opposition to the Francoist regime and took part in Spain’s transition to democracy as leader of the Socialist Party and, from 1979, as member of the *Congreso de Diputados* (Lower House of the Spanish Parliament) and later senator. He was the President of the Western European Union from 1997 to 2000 and has been recently re-elected as president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of

Europe, the 47-nation organization¹ that seeks to develop common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights.

As a historian, he is the author of 18 books, co-author of other 22 and has penned 100 academic articles. His books *Girona francesa 1812-1814 L'anexió de Catalunya a França i el domini napoleònic a Girona*" (Girona, 1975) and *Tomás Puig: Catalanisme i Afrancesament* (Barcelona, 1985) are considered as essential reading for anybody interested in the Peninsular War, the Napoleonic Empire and particularly on the effects of foreign occupation on civilian populations.

- With so many politicians turned historians, what can a historian bring to the political world?

- People tend to forget that history is absolutely transcendental for politics. Wherever ideologies are formed and political arguments developed, there you shall find history – and, of course, the interpretation of history. History is always there: it is what happened and not what we would like to have happened. Yet that which happened can foster a variety of interpretations. All politicians appeal to history to justify their arguments – no matter if it is by invoking Joan of Arc or Lenin. In politics, there is always a historical discourse. This can be more or less attached to what happened or can be manipulated. This often explains why there are no two countries which have the same history text books.
- **You seem to rule out the existence of a “History of Europe”...**
- There is no such a thing as a single “History of Europe”. We have proved unable to produce such a work. Many historians have tried to do it without success. There are many *histories* of Europe. Historical narratives have always played a role in the formation and legitimization of nation-States... “We won this war; they lost that battle...” Of course, when a neighbouring country

¹ The Council of Europe member countries are Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom. More information at www.coe.int

presents a different narrative, this is considered as disturbing. But I think that thanks to the contribution of historians we are able to learn more about the viewpoints of other countries – although not necessarily to produce a common view - and this leaves less room for manipulation.

- **How is it possible to avoid such manipulation?**
- With great difficulty. First, because we cannot tell historians what they can say or not, and we cannot argue with the politicians' interpretation of history either. Yet, I do believe that historians and the institutions that teach history must try to correct and denounce all sort of manipulation. It is essential to attempt to establish the facts and then to accept that there can be different interpretations of these facts. In the same way that we have a "left" and a "right" in politics, confronted with some historical arguments some people might decide that these arguments are very bad, and others that they are very good...
- **If that is so, what can you do, as president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe when confronted with conflicts between member States which are rooted in history, such as the clash between Armenia and Turkey on the issue of the Armenian 'genocide' or between Georgia and Russia's territorial dispute?**
- These are political problems, not matters to be discussed among historians. In the case of Georgia and Russia, I believe that they could arrive at a common view of their historical claims. I recently visited both countries and I asked the officials there how modern Georgia had been created. They told me that it had been the result of a decision taken by Joseph Stalin and Lavrenty Beria, Secretary of the Communist party in Georgia. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia accepted that Georgia would retain the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At the time of her accession to the Council of Europe, in 1996, Russia also accepted the sovereignty of all the rest of the member States of the organization, including Georgia. These are historical facts that some observers may consider a political error, but this is what happened and nobody can deny it. In the Armenian-Turkish dispute there are many things that have nothing to do with history. There are some States and parliaments, such as the French National Assembly, that have condemned the 'genocide' of

Armenians at the end of the Ottoman Empire. But history is in constant movement. Historical knowledge never remains static. All historians know that their research can be overturned by new discoveries. Who knows if new facts might not come to light that will eventually change the positions of the Turkish and Armenian governments.

- **History's dynamic nature should be always considered as progress?**
- Somebody once asked Ramón Carande y Thovar² to sum up in two words the history of Spain. He replied: 'Excessive retrogression'. In my vision of history, we cannot talk of constant progress. There is no doubt that as members of the human race we have advanced from the time of the man of Cromagnon to our present day development. But this progress has often been at the expense of complete generations, populations and fratricidal wars. This issue is linked to that of interpretation. Some people in the West might be prepared to tell Africans, for example, "look we are already developed and your turn will arrive soon". But this is not serious at all. The truth is that for some people, progress has already arrived, while for others, who knows when it will reach them? The vast majority of the people on this planet are still waiting for progress to arrive. To see history as a phenomenon of unstoppable progress is a falsehood. It is a lie.
- **Is the history of Spain still one of 'excessive retrogression'?**
- No. After 40 years of dictatorship, cut off from the rest of Europe, we have taken considerable steps ahead. But, as everything that happens both in history and in politics, we are far from perfection.
- **Does the Historical Memory Law³ bring Spain closer that goal?**
- I believe so. People have the right to their past, just as they have a right to disown it. Historians are often troubled by the speed with which people forget the past. We tend to be forgetful. It is said that human beings are the only animals that stumble on the same spot. History does not repeat itself, but we do repeat the same mistakes in history. We have failed to ask ourselves where

² Ramón Carande y Thovar (1887-1986) was an illustrious Spanish historian, economist, teacher and writer. His monumental work *Carlos V y sus banqueros : La vida económica en Castilla (1516-1556)* (Madrid, 1965) is a vital reference work for scholars of Spain and Latin America.

³ The Spanish Act 52/2007, known as the Historical Memory Law (in Spanish, *Ley de Memoria Histórica*) was passed by the Spanish Parliament on 31st October 2007. It recognises the right of those who suffered persecution and violence during the 20th century Civil War and Franco's dictatorship to moral restitution and recovery of their personal and family memory.

we have been led by all kind of excesses, fundamentalisms and radicalisms. Winston Churchill, one of the fathers of the Council of Europe, said in 1946 “Never again”. Yet, we are still seeing wars in this continent. Europe has to learn from its past.

- **There are those who say that the Historical Memory Law does nothing but open healed wounds...**
- It is possible that for some people this law may reopen wounds. But we cannot forget or cover up the past. We cannot stop revealing what Nazism and Francoism did because somebody might discover that a relative was involved with those regimes. I accept that when we deal with recent history, the exercise of memory becomes more difficult. Time helps towards objectivity. But citizens need a historical discourse. We have to make a gesture of respect towards those who have suffered under totalitarian regimes. This is not to reopen wounds, but to achieve moral justice.
- **Would you apply the same principle to the Iberoamerican history and particularly to the role Spain played in the American continent?**
- I think we have to look seriously at issues such as the Spanish Conquest and slavery. We need to remember these subjects. I am against an exclusively positive view of the role of Spain in America. I am completely against the ethics of the Spanish Conquest. I vindicate Bartolomé de las Casas ⁴ who as soon as he arrived in America in 1502 denounced the genocide and tortures and proclaimed that it was only barbarous to ask – as some did in Spain – if Indians could be considered as persons. We have to accept that all these crimes happened as well as the elimination of many native cultures. The Spanish language was often inflicted upon these people. But it is also true that the transmission of the language brought a valuable cultural contribution. Nowadays, the literature in Spanish keeps itself vibrant thanks to the contribution made by Latin American authors. We should not forget that reality either.
- **The Spanish legacy is often questioned in Latin America by way of promoting national figures who were clearly anti-Spanish, as in the case**

⁴ Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), was a Spanish Dominican priest and the first resident Bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, who as a settler in the New World opposed the torture and genocide of the Native Americans by the Spanish colonists.

of Simon Bolivar. Do you support the government of Venezuela's decision to change the name of their country to be the 'Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela'?

- I must confess I feel unease in this area. It has been argued that these are 'socialists' measures. For me, as a Socialist, this is something I do not like at all. To call Venezuela 'Bolivarian Republic' sounds to me like an exaggerated historicism. This has little to do with history. It is pure politics. If democratically the people have accepted the change, as a politician and a citizen of the world, I have to accept it as well. But as a historian, that is different. We cannot erase four centuries of history to make people forget a period that we might not like. I recently wrote an academic article about a Catalan, Narciso Coll y Prat, who was archbishop of Caracas in 1811 and who supported the liberation movement. We have to remember that there were many Spaniards who backed the Latin American emancipation as well.
- **Do you think that the bicentenaries of the Peninsular War (1808-14) and those of the Latin American emancipations (1810-1824) will play a positive or a negative role in fostering serious historical research?**
- They are a great opportunity. Personally, with these commemorations in mind, I'm going back to read about the *Cortes* in Cadiz and I have discovered a few things; for example, that Spanish historiography has paid very little attention to the representations made by the Latin Americans. That was a terrible historical error. Nobody wanted to listen to the Americans in Cadiz, even when it was clear that such deafness was to lead directly towards independence. There is scarcely a bibliography on this subject. Yet I feel that if we study and discuss this important episode of our common history, the exercise will contribute to improve the understanding between Spaniards and Latin Americans.

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