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Religion, Secularism, and Science at the Spanish Exhumation

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By Rachel Carmen Ceasar

“Every kind of religion produces its own kind of secularism,” (Harding 2014).^[1]

“There were two classes of citizens: those that had won the war, and those who had lost. It was like in India—do you know of the caste system? It was the same here,” explained Cecilia^[2] at an exhumation of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War in San Pedro, Spain. She was in search of her grandfather who had been killed as a civilian at the end of the Civil War for opposing the fascist regime. “Because of your religion!” emphasized her mother, Carmen. After the war, “the losers were segregated [from the victors of the war]—they didn’t even go to the same dances together.” The defeated—both the dead and the living, during the postwar as well as today—became a culture apart from a Spanish society dominated by the principles of Catholicism.

Still today, Catholicism plays a large and important cultural role in Spanish society despite the diminishing number of practicing Catholics. The difference between the percentage of Catholics—over 70%—and the actual number of practicing Catholics—only 13%—is not unique to Spain.^[3] This discrepancy can also be seen in Portugal and Italy which, like Spain, were once ruled by fascist-Catholic dictatorships before becoming democracies. In Spain, however, fascism won out and the dictatorship prevailed for nearly 40 years after the Spanish Civil War. As a result, the regime—and religion—pervaded all sectors of public and private life.



Petition on change.org requesting that “the Church ask for pardon for their collaboration during the francoist repression.”

The relationship between Spain, Catholicism, and politics has been quite turbulent through the ages. The Spanish Civil War was described in postwar history books as a crusade with General Francisco Franco allegorically referred to as Christian heroes El Cid or the Archangel Gabriel. The Civil War began in 1936 when Nationalist army forces led by Franco and backed by fascists, monarchists, the Catholic Church, and right-wing officers overthrew the elected left-wing Popular Front government. The war was not simply a war of “*las dos Españas*” (‘the two Spains’) or the result of “*un país de Cainitos*” (‘a country of little Cains’), a clash between leftist and rightist ideals, but one of changing cultural and religious ideologies alongside agricultural, educational, and political reforms. Against the backdrop of the current European economic crisis, what happened during and after the war still resonates with many Spanish people.



Duelo a garrotazos (Fight with Cudgels) by Francisco Goya

(es.wikipedia.org).

Today, over 114,000 Spaniards are still considered missing persons from the war and postwar period, and while exhumations of the defeated were initiated in 2000, confronting the truth that lies in the graves and the legacy it exposes remains controversial. As one archaeologist at the San Pedro exhumation put it, “We [as a country] still cannot even reach a consensus that what Franco did was wrong.” With minimal state and church support to address the human rights violations committed during the war and postwar, civilians and historical memory associations have taken it upon themselves to care for the past through the highly public and visual exhumations of the defeated.

The current archaeological exhumations of mass graves of the defeated do more than depict a singular moment in recent Spanish history; it provides a composite of Spanish history, religion, and science together. On the one hand, exhumation allies and supporters utilize science to undermine a Spanish Catholicism that fails to take responsibility for crimes committed during the war and postwar period. At the same time, the very act of exhuming—a process that revives bones to personhood through reburial—is a ritualistic one that resonates with the Spanish Catholic faith. Between these two worlds, a kind of purgatory hovers over and beyond the exhumations. It is the central argument of this post that the interplay of religions, secularisms, and sciences guide the dynamics of the exhumation process.

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Seventy years after the war, the exhumation of mass graves in Spain has taken on a particular explanatory and symbolic value for the Spanish people. In this post on religion, secularism, and science, I look at the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War as an example of how people try to make sense of violence through science. The unique role of Catholicism in Spanish culture allows it to emerge even in its absence; given this, I examine whether “scientific” projects like the exhumation in post-war Spain can truly be secular, or whether they too take on an element of religiosity in occupying the space left empty by the Catholic Church.

I draw on ethnographic fieldwork data I have collected and analyzed in order to propose a theory surrounding how people deal with the aftermath of war and repression where the state and institutions have failed to take responsibility for crimes committed against humanity. This larger research project illustrates how feelings of love and care for bones, bombs, and biology produce an intimate knowledge of the conflict period. Subjective feelings such as love and care, I suggest, also produce knowledge.



Soldiers from the Civil War not belonging to either side for geographical reasons. ABC Libros "Soldiers of the third Spain in the Civil War" October 6, 2013.

This post reflects observations and interviews I conducted in the town of San Pedro with archaeologists, clergymen, descendants of the dead, and exhumation volunteers to give a sense of the connections between Catholicism and the exhumations. As an assistant to an investigative archaeology team and resident sociocultural anthropologist, I closely followed conversations and discussions within and between institutional and intimate domains in San Pedro, including the plaza, church, home, cemetery, bar, and a former concentration camp site. These sites, I suggest, are ones of continual suffering and atonement, challenged by the current exhumations of the defeated.

From Catholicism to Modernity...via Catholicism

In many post-conflict countries, religion serves as a catalyst for reconciliation. But in Spain, this cannot be the case because religion was the dictatorship. What does it mean to be Catholic in post-war Spain? Catholics, in contrast to other Christians, are noted for their emphasis on tradition, the authority of the pope, and ritual. Despite its conventional stance on many issues, the work of Catholicism in Spain has actually been instrumental in "modernizing" projects that attempt to advance the Spanish empire, such as colonialism and the Franco dictatorship.

August 21st, 2012, San Pedro church rectory: "One time when I was in Mexico, a Mexican said to me, '*Hombre*, you guys took the gold, the silver, destroyed...' etcetera. And I said, 'Yes, yes but look: We gave you a

culture. We gave you a language, eh? And we gave you a faith, with which you know that you have become what you are today thanks to the Spanish discovery of America. If the English had discovered it!? It would've been totally different. Or the Dutch?! Well, it would've been what happened in South Africa—apartheid forms a part of the Protestant mentality, Jansenism. We were there...but thanks to all this we founded a culture, we were not racist, hm?'...You all did not even exist, *Californiana*," the parish priest says, referring to me.

Under the direction of the Spanish Catholic monarch, the Americas were conceptualized as a nascent space to carve out and spread Catholic religion and culture and the Castilian language. More recently, the application of Catholic knowledge during the Franco regime justified the dictatorship as a necessary power to modernize Spain. Catholicism—by which I mean the institution, its supporters, and ideology—has been an effective human technology (Foucault 1997[1982]) in modernizing Spain. As the San Pedro priest explained it, Spain went from a society of “*alpargatas a 600*.” That is, Spain went from being the wearers of simple Spanish sandals to the drivers of the Spanish-made SEAT 600 that became the first car for many Spaniards (Eslava Galán 2010).



“Alpargatas a 600” (en.wikipedia.org)

From the Catholic-political mindset (Ferrándiz 2011), it is easy to understand, for example, how the Americas were seen as backwards and threatening to the progress of Spanish modernity. During the conflict period, mind and body again became a legitimate space for Catholic innovation and intervention (for example, see Vinyes 2009). This was one tactic used during the Franco period: “People say that the Civil War was a

war between brothers, of land conflicts, that this one stole the girlfriend of the other...but the real reason they killed people was because *this person thinks differently than me*. This is why they killed so many teachers,” explained Elisa, an archaeologist, during a cigarette break in the San Pedro cemetery where we would end up exhuming 17 bodies. This was 2012, 73 years since the end of the war. Through the “re-education” of minds and the elimination of bodies, resurrection becomes a violent, modernizing project obtainable in life.

Relics Made, Relics Found

Like discussions of the Americas and anti-Francoist ideology, the exhumations are also a contested site. They question what it means to be Catholic and Spanish today by forcing the government, the Church, and everyday people to confront past and present technologies of terror and silence. The body and blood of the ideological tensions of the war and post-war period resurrect and take form at the exhumation. Gloria, a vocal member of the San Pedro historical memory association, noted: “The exhumations are primordial,” and as such, they run against a Spanish modernity set up by Franco and supported by the Catholic Church.

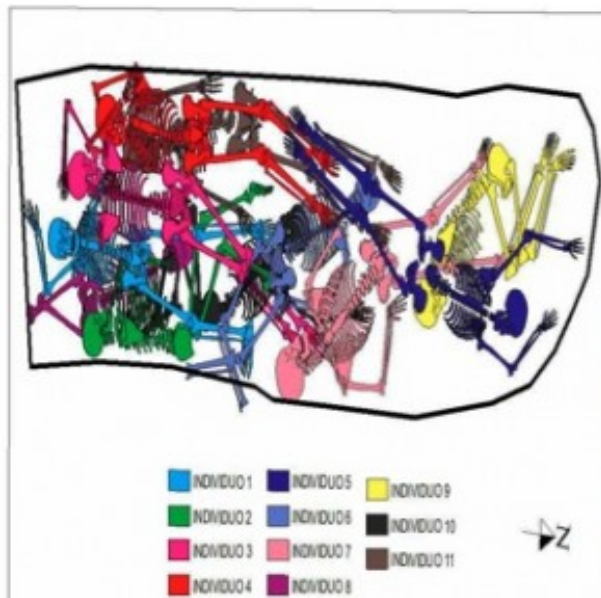
The parish priest at San Pedro, where we were exhuming that summer, believed that “the exhumation of cadavers to give them an appropriate sepulture is great. Of course, it is important to respect the cadavers and also respect the pain of the families. Now, when this is politicized, when this is done for revenge, I find it exquisitely distasteful, to utilize the dead to throw them in the face of one another of what the other has done, I think we’re going [in the wrong direction]... They killed Franco’s people, they killed the others as well, no? They killed five priests and a lot [of people] who are in this photo,” he says, motioning to a black and white photo on the wall of a large group of Catholic youths posing in front of the church in 1934. “...But *caramba!* They [referring to the local historical memory association who organized the exhumation and contracted the archaeology team] only do it to make revenge; it’s an elite thing, to throw this in the face of the rest [that is, supporters of Franco’s regime].”

The photo of the Catholic youth group on the rectory wall, the space on the bookcase where the town archives should be but are not because they were burned, a small plaque on a pillar near the main entrance asking for donations to replace the bells that were stolen during the war are small, everyday reminders to the San Pedro churchgoers what others have sacrificed to be modern.

In contrast, the exhumations act as a kind of suspended confessional

space for multiple ideologies to try to “get past the past,” in a sense. After the Republicans lost the war in 1939 and the Franco dictatorship began, the defeated were not allowed to reburial their dead, until now, 70 some years later. In fact, I would argue that the exhumation of mass graves is one of the *only* possible spaces to address the past in Spain today. Unlike other forms of creating meaning of the past (e.g., art, memorials, dance, novels), the exhumation process differs in that the meaning-making material already exists (e.g., bones, bodies, DNA), waiting for people to create their own meanings out of the exhumation site.^[4] In this way, I see the exhumations as a fusion between the sacred, secular, and scientific, a practice of knowledge and faith that creates meaning out of relics and a material culture of violence. Through exhumed relics, the defeated begin to tell a different story of Spain and of a different kind of victim—one that is tangible and produced at the exhumations.

The exhumation resurrects what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a “not yet” history for the present (2008) that, although skewed, challenges both Catholic and non-Catholic sectors of Spanish society. The deaths of the defeated are symbolic of a triumphant Catholic modernity, and now through the exhumation, their resurrection is a symbolic move against Catholicism. “Bones stop being bones at the moment you open the grave and start to speak about this. The bones become a person that had a life, a family, children...” said Gloria, a member of the local historical memory association and volunteer at the San Pedro exhumation. Julio, another historical memory member and volunteer, added, “For the representatives of the Church, bones are just bones, it has no significance for them.” In this way, bones only became more than bones depending on one’s politics. And in Spain, politics includes the Catholic Church.



San Pedro exhumation. (Photo by author).

Another priest, Tomás, who also blogs for the National Francisco Franco Foundation website, argued that the emotions tied to the exhumation process were, “a thing that was artificially promoted. Yes, yes, people are concerned about this, but realize that we’re talking about something that happened 75 years ago. I speak of my own beliefs—I am Christian, I believe in reincarnation, I am concerned about where my grandfather [who was killed in the war] is buried. But I don’t find it dramatic to *not* know where he is. The ultimate state for me is quite secondary.” This was a commonly expressed sentiment of people who were against the exhumation movement: why all the emotions and exhumations if this—the killing of people for their beliefs and ideologies—happened 75 years ago? Bones for many supporters of the Franco regime (as well as those who were against the regime) ceased being persons long ago; today, they were just bones.

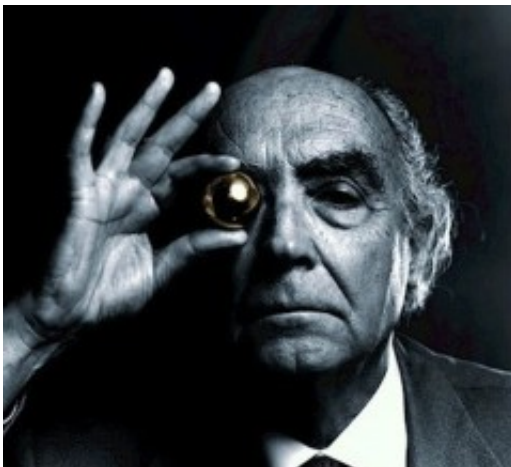
The exhumations, however, are reversing this, which worries many people who perhaps had relatives implicated in the violence, or who simply do not want to recall the past. The exhumations (and what they dig up) disturb people precisely because the bones *were* a person, *are* a person. Bones are relics of the war and dictatorship—a point of departure into historical

and current politics and violence. The emotional as well as technical transformation of bones to persons to politics to religion via the exhumation is an intense science for all parties and ideologies involved.

Should the Exhumations Necessarily be Secular?

“First came God, then history, and then archaeology and that is what killed religion.” Sebastian, a student archaeologist at San Pedro, paused for a moment, rethinking my question: “If I had to define religion, it would be my mother,” he finally said. “Being Catholic is part of our culture, it’s not something we can escape. Just like one can’t escape being capitalist!” He tells me to brush up on my José Saramago, a Portuguese writer and recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Literature who had said “*Nosotros somos ateos-catolicos*,” we are Atheist-Catholics. “This is the same in Spain,” Sebastian explains.

To say that the exhumations specifically, and science in general, are purely secular here in Spain, or anywhere else for that matter, is what I wanted to explore in this post.



José Saramago, a Portuguese writer and recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Literature (es.wikipedia.org)

Should the exhumations in Spain aim to be secular? Are they really a secular scientific undoing of the war, a completely non-religious, non-political move to reveal truth and bring a new kind of victim to justice? This blog post is not a rant against what the Church or the defeated have to say about the exhumations. But what they have to say about the exhumations makes me rethink what is considered secular and what is considered religion. The fusion of secularism and religion present in Spain before the conflict period and now during the response to that period is

inescapable. To say that the exhumation is devoid of religious and political influences is to deny this history, this sacred-secular union that is the Spanish exhumation. With the recent UN investigation of forced disappearance during the Spanish Civil War and dictatorship and the international detention and extradition of four Francoist officials for torture in September 2013, I wonder what “official” and “scientific” others will import into the existing religious-secular reconciliation process in Spain. What role does religion-secularism play in reconciliation? Can you regulate this—can you take religion out of the truth and reconciliation process? Are these questions of human rights and justice? Or are they questions of science?

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[1] This blog posting draws from a conference paper presented on the panel “Religion/Secularism and Science” at the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) in San Diego on October 2013. The panel organizer, Sandra Harding, and the other panel presenters, Amit Prasad and Banu Subramaniam, and I are currently preparing our papers for publication in a science studies journal.

[2] All names and places have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[3] According to the Center for Sociological Studies in Spain ([Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas](#)), a “practicing Catholic” in 2012 is defined as someone who practices their faith and attends services on Sunday and holy days. Among young people ages 15-29 years of age, only 10.3% consider themselves practicing Catholics in 2010 from an Institute of Spanish Youth study ([El Mundo](#)).

[4] Thank you to discussant Ian Whitmarsh’s insight on this point on the panel “Radical Materiality: Rethinking the Status of the Subjectivity through the Material,” organized by Michael D’Arcy at the biennial meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology in Los Angeles on April 2, 2011.

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