

(For the catalog of polyptychs by Hernán Cortés: The fathers of the Constitution and the most distinguished senators of the democratic era)

THE LONG MARCH TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

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This year marks the bicentennial of the Constitution ratified in 1812 by the Spanish Parliament who gathered in Cádiz. And in Cádiz two polyptychs are on display: one depicting the fathers of the 1978 Constitution and the other the most distinguished senators of that democratic movement governed by this most recent Magna Carta. The author of these polyptychs is, indeed, a native of Cádiz—the painter and portrait artist, Hernán Cortés. What connection is there between all these coincidences?

Between 1812 and 1978, Spain underwent a long process fraught with tremors. Its unexpected beginning was due to the exceptional circumstances created four years before by a French invasion and the absence of the Royal Family. Since 1810 a group of self-proclaimed representatives of the nation had been holding assemblies in the Isla de Leon. They carried out an enormous and generous, albeit also polemic, task which roused as much hope as it did fear, and which ended in the absolutist restoration of 1814. The very king they had christened the “longed-for” betrayed them and sent them to jail, into exile and even to the gallows. The king was then acclaimed by the very nation which they had elevated to the category of sovereign. A category the nation neither understood nor seemed to deserve.

Until 1978, one-hundred and seventy very eventful years went by in which everything imaginable occurred. There were drastic shifts in the political landscape, military uprisings (hundreds, some successful, some failed), dictatorial situations of one feather or another, civil wars under the pretext of a dynastic dispute, half a dozen Constitutions, etc. Spain went from periods of liberalism to absolutism, from “moderate” control (which was hardly moderate) to progressive or “extremist”. The Bourbon family was overthrown and replaced by Saboya, but he did not last long and instead established a republic which in less than a few years morphed from

unitarian to federal and had four presidents. Restored in 1875, the Bourdon family was thrown out again in 1931 with the proclamation of yet another republic which culminated in a civil war bloodier than its three Carlist predecessors. To top it off, a dictatorship was established which far exceeded that of the 1920s in both duration and violence. All of this was accompanied by the loss of Spain's colonial empire and a drastic loss of influence as a world power.

In short, it was a whirlwind of successive changes, difficult to retain for someone who is not a professional historian and which inevitably gave way to the more cultured Spaniards taking such a dim view of themselves, i.e.: the Spanish were a savage, uncivil people, unable to live together, bound to an unending fraternal annihilation. Beset with existential angst, the intellectual elites wondered if it was that the Spanish did not belong to the "superior races", if indeed the nation itself was in the throes of death. Such was the parlance of the times.

There were sensible people who left the country never to return. Others who hid themselves away and refused to take part in public life. Others still who devoted themselves to literature and wrote inspired and morose *esperpentos*. All were, in the very least, tired. They asked for nothing more than to be what they considered "normal", equal to what they understood for "modern" or "European"—as though the political tragedies were not European. This desire to forsake exceptionalism was unanimous and far stronger than political divisions. Which is not to say that those divisions disappeared: they have reared up again in recent years, after it was believed that this complex had been overcome, but with less force than before.

Upon the death of the last dictator in 1975, democracy was instituted with greater ease than was expected. The fear-mongers who spouted prophecies of yet another bloodbath were wrong. A deal was struck and the institutional framework was modified, leaving room for distinct political choices. And, in the elections, the moderate proposals won out. Neither the various branches of the Falangist Movement, descendants of "*partido único*", nor the small myriad groupings of Maoists and Trotskyites, who pushed for revolutionary measures, won any seat worthy of mention. For as moderate as they were, not even the communists—in the vein of French or Italian communism—, who stood as the chief group of opposition, took as many seats as they had

hoped. And this, despite their uncanny ability to adapt to a clandestine life as well as to shrug off all the mud slung at them by the propaganda of the regime who had made them its enemy *par excellence*.

The Spanish parliament convened in a climate of peace, save for that lingering abscess known as ETA, and penned a Constitution that was also moderate, agreed to, even in its most difficult aspects, such as the territorial distribution of power. The institutional system and the framework of rights there established concurred with the spirit of the times in this part of the world which we call “occidental”, as well as with the evolution of Spanish society during those decades.

That is what the political leaders here portrayed symbolize: moderation, balance, modernity, normalcy. Fraga and Carrillo (represented, in this case, by Solé Tura) were the leaders of that political right and left which for the first time in Spanish history dutifully accepted constitutional procedure, peaceful coexistence and a healthy rivalry among the political parties; something for which, however harsh their past may have been, history will be forever grateful. The others represent the rest of the political spectrum, from the center-right (Herrero de Miñón, Cisneros, Pérez Llorca) to the center-left (Peces-Barba), with the Catalan nationalist (Roca Junyent) among them. These men, those of the first polyptych, are those who devised the Constitution. The men of the second polyptych, the senators, are the principal members of parliament who made it viable.

Classically, pictorial representation has meant the collective recognition of historic figures who have made a significant contribution to society. And here, it means no different. These portraits, therefore, have been placed within the tradition of the gallery of dignitaries, what in ancient times would have been called the gallery of heroes. But they are no longer heroes of lineage, of blood, of high birth, of laurels won on the field of battle. It was their lot, as, fortunately, it is ours, to live in an era neither rigidly stratified nor martial. We are living an era of democracy, of equal opportunities and, therefore, of meritocracy. If someone is paid homage of this kind it is not because they inherited it, nor has it been bestowed upon them by some high authority who has an in with the divine; rather, it is because they have earned it by way of their abilities and hard work. As such, these portraits do not carry on the Spanish tradition of kings, princes, princesses,

courtiers, military leaders and high royal functionaries. Upon these canvasses there is not the slightest vestige of the Old Regime's pomp, of the sundry ornaments and trinkets that surrounded the figures portrayed so as to underscore their "importance". They pay no tribute to vanity, individual, stripe or color. They fit better within the Dutch tradition of the 1700s, the American tradition of the 1800 or 1900s: the tradition of "honorable citizens". What we have here are examples of citizens. To pay homage to them is to pay homage to ourselves, to the whole of our society, to our shared values.

Those represented here reflect the change within Spanish society, and the makeover of the country's international image, which took hold during those year of the Transition. They are democratic leaders and they breathe democracy through their very pores. They are common people; they represent the majority of Spaniards from that era. Not traditional Spain, deep Spain, the "*España negra*" of Zuloaga, a stagnant, bullfighting, smoking, sexist, machista, loud-mouthed, liquor-swigging lot; but rather, the professional Spaniards, the urbane, hard-working, wide-travelling, respectful, conversive and open. They represent that Spain which proclaimed itself "European", in the best sense of the word.

Their painter is no less modern than they are. His mode of expression, of course, is not photography—the modern technique *par excellence*—but rather painting. But it is a painting that resembles photography in its clarity, its lack of ornamentation, its realism. And yet he adds to all that a personal touch of closeness, of intimacy. What matters most to Hernán Cortés about the portrait is its psychology. He treats his model as a human being; in this case, as thinking, concerned, sensible human beings.

Let us go back to the beginning: Cádiz. The constitutional fathers of Cádiz were rarely, if ever, depicted. We do have a few portraits of Argüellas, Gallego, Calatrava, Canga, Toreno, Mejía Lequerica, Muñoz Torrero, Martínez de la Rosa. But the little we know of their images hardly tells us anything about them as people. At best, what they carry is distinctive marks, typical of that era, indicating membership in certain groups: priests, generals and magistrates. Though, none appear as a redeemer, as a messianic leader. They did not want that. Later, things would change: the

process was so complex that eventually this sort did arrive on the scene. Yet that attitude had no place among the fathers of 1812, nor in the first liberal generation. Like those of 1978, the ones here wanted to present themselves as normal individuals.

For as many problems as it now has, for as many recriminations are hurled at it, for as much scrutiny and improvement it needs, the Constitution of 1978 and the democracy we have enjoyed since then boasts the high merit of having brought the convulsive process begun in 1808 to an end. More than anything, the Constitution knew how to overcome a civil war and a dictatorship of exceptional harshness. Here remain, for the annals of history, its protagonists, the men who made that achievement possible. And when, after three and a half decades, Spanish society demonstrates this unanimity when it comes to dedicating the time, the space and the resources to this homage, it is a sign that the democratic process has taken hold. Congratulations for all are, indeed, in order.

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW MORROW