

HISTORY THAT RESCUES AND REDEEMS THE PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

I ask myself if the thinking of experience serves to untie a knot that oppresses and darkens current scientific historiography. The feminist historiography of equality of the sexes or gender has not found a new beginning that gives it its own originality and sense, but rather has adopted as its own that of western masculine historiography, that is the paternal genealogy, which, from the erudite movement of the 17th century, has considered objectivity as its touchstone. Not having found a new beginning has meant that feminist historiography of equality or gender has limited itself to repeating existing interpretations of the past. Because of this, the pain, protest and indignation of the women's political movement in the 1970s at the absence of women in History is still valid thirty years later, with no greater response than the corroboration of the absence, that is the absence of the meta-narratives and the memory, not the documentation or the history. How can we find a new beginning for the history that is written today? How can we find a beginning that rescues and redeems me from the traumas of the past, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, the disappearance of women and men under the dictatorships, the systematic rape of women in many contemporary wars, including those committed by troops from the UN, which my country belongs to? How can we avoid vengeance or political paralysis, while maintaining the historical memory alive?

KEY WORDS

Sexual difference, Philosophy of history, Spanish Civil War, Historical memory, True history.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Sexualis differentia, Historiae philosophia, Hispanicum civile bellum, Memoria historica, Vera historia.

1. The thinking of experience in the writing of history¹

In this paper, I ask myself if the practice setting out from the self—in other words, the thinking of experience—can shed some light on the knot which oppresses and obscures current scientific historiography, including feminist historiography whose horizon of meaning is the principle of sexual equality, that is, gender history. Let us not forgetting that feminist historiography and the history of women are not synonymous.

The knot of which I am speaking lies in the fact—an undeniable fact, after thirty-five years of historiographical studies generated by programmes of *Women's Studies* or *Gender Studies* in hundreds of universities all around the world—that feminist historiography regarding equality or gender has not found a new beginning to express itself in an original way, a voice which could be its source of meaning; rather it has adopted the discourse of Western male historiography, which is patriarchal, and which, since the 17th century, has considered objectivity to be its touchstone, which, with the help of one or several ideologies, has been used to guarantee the veracity of historical accounts. In patriarchal genealogy, historical veracity is established by paternity itself: the legitimacy of the son or daughter depends, not on trust upon their mother, but on methods which are beyond the sentimental relationship of the couple, objective and external methods such as the ordeal by hot iron, which was used in Europe as conclusive legal evidence in charges of female adultery until at least the 11th century, or the DNA test (deoxyribonucleic acid)—that traces the genetic map—of our own time. Perhaps this analogy helps to explain why, in debates about objectivity, female historians have scarcely intervened.

The fact that no new beginning has been found has meant that feminist historiography regarding equality or gender has been forced to repeat existing interpretations of the past. Against these interpretations, they have simply contrasted feminine experience, without opening contradictions that could enrich and sharpen the political vocabulary. In other words, without contributing to putting conflicts between the sexes that can be documented nowadays, into words. That is why the cry of pain, protest and indignation from the women's political movement of the 1970s due to the absence of women from History, thirty years on, is still present in this historical writing, with no answer but the corroboration of this absence, which is the absence of metanarratives and memory, not documentation or history.

Let us look at an example. There is an event in Spanish contemporary history that has aroused, and still generates, a great deal of interest, one that is only exceeded by accounts of the discovery of America or the Inquisition.² That event was the Civil War of 1936-1939. In the last few decades, many feminist historians have published scientifically impeccable research into the participation of women in this

1. I presented a oral of this paper in the *XII Symposium of the Internationale Assoziation von Philosophinnen* (Rome, 31st August — 3rd September 2006), dedicated to *Il pensiero dell'esperienza*, in the section *Storia e memoria*.

2. Dupláa, Christina. *Memoria sí, venganza no en Josefina R. Aldecoa: ensayo sociohistórico de su narrativa*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2000: 57.



terrible event. However, their interpretations repeat the male model of winners/losers, fair war/unfair war, in a female way, and the nostalgia for a world which, in fact, never existed because of that war. In other words, women are included in history without finding a new beginning. There is no substantial difference: being a woman is not a source of meaning. Moreover, women's presence in history books becomes an obstacle, since now we are in history without actually being in history. Teresa de Jesús, a great politician and interpreter of the sexual politics of her time, wrote that: "there's a big difference between being and being".

What led university feminism to accept objectivity and paternal genealogy when it started to write history?

If I narrate my own experience and that of women of my time, I would say that it was because of the hope with which we went to university: the hope of learning to express ourselves. We thought that at university history was made correctly, honestly, without cheating or the bitterness of treachery. And that is why we did not think about the necessity of a new beginning: we did not realise that, without a new beginning, our writing of history would lack originality and origin. However, some of us already sensed this at the time. I remember, at that time, more than twenty-five years ago, the most significant conflict that was discussed in the small feminist historians' groups that were being founded in universities at that time. It was a conflict relating to practice. Some female historians wanted to separate history writing and political practice. "At university," they said "we make history, and outside, we do politics". Others wanted history writing to be a life experience. This conflict ended frequently because the groups split into two, abandoned by a lot of women who were anxious about the double bind.

Hence it was the hope at the university such as it was what deprived feminist historiography of equality or gender of its originality. Many years later, I read a poem by Emily Dickinson about how misplaced hope can do much harm to a woman, which runs:

Had I presumed to hope —
 The loss had been to Me
 A Value — for the Greatness' Sake —
 As Giants — gone away —

Had I presumed to gain
 A Favor so remote —
 The failure but confirm the Grace
 In further Infinite —

'Tis failure — not of Hope —
 But Confident Despair —
 Advancing on Celestial Lists —
 With faint — Terrestrial Power —



'Tis Honor — though I die —
 For That no Man obtain
 Till He be justified by Death —
 This — is the Second Gain —.³

"Giants gone away", "further Infinite", "Confident Despair", "Celestial Lists with faint Terrestrial Power", death as the second gain... The divide between thought and practice has caused the death of history connected with experience at universities. In this way, feminist historiography guided by the principle of equality has become history tamed, with no surprises, without the surprise of the truth. This can be seen, as mentioned previously, in the way their interpretations follow the model of confrontation, of the fair and the unfair war and, therefore, of the winners and the losers, female or male. And it is particularly noticeable in the fact that the present persists in demanding explanations from history which are free from the model of confrontation, explanations which "do not reopen wounds", as we read occasionally in the press, almost always voiced by a woman. Because the significant events of the past, especially the traumatic ones, interpreted only within this model, often become recurring ghosts, if by ghosts we understand "a piece of detached reality..., a nucleus of it".⁴

Even though history does not consist mainly of traumatic events, it is these that the present, at the end of the patriarchy, insists most vehemently on interpreting from a new beginning, other than that based on objectivity and paternal genealogy.

Returning to the example of the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, when the dictatorship finished at the end of 1975, the ghost of the Civil War and fear of its repetition continued to darken the political life of my country. In order to avoid this and make a peaceful transition to democracy, the political parties of the time signed what was known as "the pact of forgetting".⁵ This pact restrained the ghost of the Civil War but created another one: that of the lack of historical memory of this traumatic event which, without the memory of their experience, people cannot redeem nor rescue in order to obtain the "no to revenge, yes to memory", which novelist Josefina Aldecoa —a "girl of the War"— was still asking for in 1997.⁶

In 2006, on the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War, many ceremonies were held and a large number of texts were published demanding historical documentation to rectify the consequences of the pact of forgetting. However, these repeated the model of confrontation without finding a new beginning. Examples are the texts by Carmen Zulueta, daughter of a civil servant of the Republic in Rome, who wrote in "El País" on 19th July 2006:

3. Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin. Cambridge (Mass.): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998: n° 669, Johnson 522.

4. Zambrano, María. *Algunos lugares de la pintura*, ed. Amalia Iglesias. Madrid: Acanto and Espasa Calpe, 1991: 65.

5. Dupláa, Christina. *Memoria sí, venganza no...: 9*.

6. Aldecoa, Josefina R. *La fuerza del destino*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997; quote in Dupláa, Christina. *Memoria sí, venganza no...: 68*.



The Republic did not create a state of disorder or crime. This was created by the military and the completely politicised church which favoured the fascists" (p. 14), or the text by Gregorio Marañón and Beltrán de Lis and Antonio López Vega in the same newspaper, that said,

The drama of the Civil War could only be brought to a close forty years later, when those who made the transition achieved national reconciliation and recovered freedom. Those men did not sign a pact of forgetting, on the contrary, they could remember very well and that is why they were convinced that a past when, as Azaña wrote, 'all Spanish people were sick with hatred', was not a good foundation for a peaceful future for all concerned.⁷

Forgetting and remembering are, however, the same thing: there is no free interpretation, free from the given model mechanically repeated over and over again, repeated because, although it is not useful, it helps to remind us of the need for research. It is repeated because nobody has found a new beginning, a beginning that generates reality today, which signifies the political strength of experience in the place where experience finds itself today. A reality that does not follow the winners/losers model nor looks for synthesis in reconciliation —"national reconciliation", as they say in Spain (although we do not know how many nations there are) and, in Argentina, "Full Stop Law",⁸ because today this model seems abstract and ideological, distant from experience. People, myself included, feel that this is an interpretation which does not rescue or redeem the burden left by the traumatic historical event: because we are not seeking forgiveness, but meaning and internal change which can open me to a different order of relationships.

2. A new beginning that redeems the traumas of the past while keeping the memory alive

How can we find a new beginning for the history that is written today? How can we find a beginning for history which rescues and redeems me from the traumas of the past, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, the disappearance of women and men under dictatorships, the systematic rape of women in the many current wars, including those committed by UN soldiers,⁹ an organisation of which my country is a member? How can we avoid revenge or political paralysis while keeping historical memory alive?

7. Marañón y Beltrán de Lis, Gregorio; López Vega, Antonio. "Cartas de la memoria: julio 1936". *El País*, 19th July 2006: 13-14, 14.

8. Padoan, Daniela. *Le pазze. Un incontro con le Madri di Plaza de Mayo*. Milan: Bompiani, 2005: 261-262.

9. See, for example, "Cascos azules y agresiones sexuales". Boletín de AFESIP. June 2006: 2-3. Asociación Somaly Mam-AFESIP España. 8 February 2007 <<http://www.somalyman.org/pdfboletines/boletinjunio06.pdf>>.



Without trying to deny, in any way, that there are winners and losers in traumatic historical events, and having established this, I propose to look for a personal movement which allows the historical memory to be rescued from the dichotomous destiny which has weighed it down from generation to generation, like a recurring ghost, and prevents us from discovering the sense of the conflicts which ended in tragedy when it was no longer possible to use words, relations and the relational conflict.

I think that this movement, which is an internal change, can be born out of the experiences of today's female historians, as an unexpected but necessary movement which does not distance itself from the reality of historical events, which does not result in metanarrative.

Thirty years ago, in the political movement of women, many female historians focussed on a sentence by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, which said: "All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded, I said".¹⁰ We understood then that the infinitely dark lives were those of common women, especially from the southern hemisphere, lives that nobody had bothered to document, reconstruct and narrate. So we set to work and recovered the history of many female figures and feminine relationship contexts; but we did so through social history and left-wing thinking in general, without finding a beginning that would be a source of meaning and originality for our works.

Today I understand that the infinitely dark lives are those of us female historians ourselves: my life when I write history. I discovered this whilst reflecting on a recent book by Marià Martinengo, a short book that has taken her whole life to write, entitled *La voce del silenzio. Memoria e storia di Maria Massone, donna 'sottratta'*.¹¹ The title "The voice of silence" is not new (I would say that most languages have at least one book about the history of women with this title) but the meaning suggested by the title is new. Until now, a title like this meant that the female historian gave a voice to other women who had not had one. Now, however, it means that it is the female historian who is no longer silent, talking about her own history and, thereby and from her own experience, she questions and interprets history. "There is a living *history* inside every one of us, writes Marià Martinengo, comprised of memories, emotions and unconscious signals; I do not think that only those things on the outside have historical value, that which someone else has certified, the famous *objective history*. I narrate a *living history* which does not reject imagination, an imagination which has its roots in personal experience, a *truer history* because it does not remove the *reasons for love*, it does not dismiss the relationships of its cognitive process."¹²

I believe that it is the living history inside every female historian that is still infinitely dark when a university woman writes history. Bringing out that history and putting it into words, like demons were released from the body in exorcisms and cathartic therapy, is a very interesting way of writing history setting out from the self.

10. Woolf, Virginia. "A Room of One's Own". *ebooks@Adelaide*. 15 March 2006: ch. 5. The University of Adelaide Library. 8 February 2007 <<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91r/chapter5.html>>.

11. Martinengo, Marià. *La voce del silenzio. Memoria e storia di Maria Massone, donna "sottratta"*. *Ricordi, immagini, documenti*. Genova: ECIG, 2005.

12. Martinengo, Marià. *La voce del silenzio...*: 21 (her italics).

This opens up some old wounds in me and creates an explicit and fearsome conflict with my closest genealogy, my origins, my mother and father. If politics is born of contradiction and conflict, I think that history is also born there, true history and the symbolic in history writing. This is because I think that the conflict arises from my idealisation of my mother, from not wanting to remember anything else other than the happiness of childhood, without confronting the negative aspect of my relationship with her,¹³ without facing up to what led me to contribute in the end to the patriarchy, separating myself from her for years. At the same time, I recognise that creation and creativity are born from a link to the sources of childhood—from the adult's connection with one's origin.

The question about true history is a very female question. It contrasts with the question about objectivity, which, as I have said, is of little interest to us. María Zambrano said about true history, "... apochyphal history—which is no less accurate— [...] hides true history. In this way, apochyphal history almost constantly suffocates true history, that which philosophical reason tries to reveal and establish, and poetic reason tries to rescue".¹⁴ Mariri's book constantly talks about rescue: rescue not to add to or to fill an existing vacuum in existing history, nor to judge—as she says she was tempted to do at first—but rather to redeem, thinking with love, to dedicate oneself to loving conversation, to bring love into the vocabulary of history, and hence into the vocabulary of politics.

I think that in each human life there is a thread which connects us to our first love—the love of a mother giving me body and word—and that this thread can be felt in the gut call. "She has called me ever since; as the dead call, of course", is how the book *La voce del silenzio* begins.

How can we put into words and narrate the living history hidden inside each of us? Mariri Martinengo proposes that we start from the shortages, negligences and gaps in the interpretation of what already exists (p. 88), without ignoring the silence of her character and the silence around her, amalgamating it all with the mercury of her own relationship with *Her*, with the gut call that *She* left. She writes:

I base my work on specific and controllable documents: the images which I have, of her and the family, the photography of the places where she lived, the objects she held in her hands, the information from the civil register; in my narration memories and memories of memories converge, both mine and those of others, I assert psychological characteristics hidden in the creases of the portraits, without disdaining the use occasional of imagination anchored in practical knowledge; I collect all the elements, make them come alive with interpretations and reinterpretations, and I melt them in the fire of my relationship with *Her* (p. 90).

Rescuing and redeeming the history that lies in me is not an attempt to revalue a woman or a common past experience, rather it is, or could be, a mediation which

13. On negativity: Diótima. *La magica forza del negativo*. Naples: Liguori, 2005.

14. Zambrano, María. "La tumba de Antígona", *Senderos. Los intelectuales en el drama de España. La tumba de Antígona*. Barcelona: Anthropos, 1986: 199-265; 201.



redeems me and some of my contemporaries from a recurring ghost, from a past crime which still burdens us in the present, from a historical event captive of ideological interpretations. In other words, it is an attempt to absolve myself—to absolve my time—from ghosts and crimes of the past. Or to be absolved from them by the grace of a political relationship.

I have learned this from the countess of Barcelona, Dhuoda, a 9th-century writer who wrote in the *Liber manualis* dedicated to her two sons, who her husband had taken from her:

Although I am unworthy and fragile, exiled,
sunk in mud and always tending towards the lowest,
a trust worthy and friendly female consort is always with me
to absolve the sins of your people. (*Epigram*)¹⁵

The crime to be absolved in this fragment is that of her husband and his friends, who were using Dhuoda's sons as hostages in power struggles between Charlemagne's grandchildren. But not in order to absolve or forgive them (the offenders), but in order to free herself, to absolve herself, to liberate herself—Dhuoda—from this crime, which would not let her live in peace. And to be able to create.

Bringing the history that lies in each of us to light, and doing so with a method which combines critical erudition with thought that can decipher feelings (María Zambrano), can, in my opinion, be a symbolic revolution moment which does not perpetuate hatred and revenge, which draws the attention of male and female readers, lovers of history, back to historical writing. These readers who, since the end of the 80s, have preferred to look to the historical novel for accounts of traumatic events that historical writing based on objectivity and the winners/losers model has been unable to rescue or redeem.

If I look at my experience, I find that the history that lies inside me is the necessity to bring to the world a peace, which has as a reference neither war nor the absence of war. Therefore, my irreducible is not "No War", but rather how to make war unthinkable. I can say that I have been involved in this my whole life, and the origins for this are the stories about the Spanish Civil War heard at home during my childhood, stories of a war which cut off the life plans of my mother and father—who were twenty-three and twenty-two when it broke out—and which cut them off not because they lost the war, but despite the fact that they won it. This history manifested itself in me, firstly, in my incapacity to learn and explain the history of wars in class. Later, this appeared as a symptom of distress and frustration when trying to explain the history of the Shoah or the Holocaust.

For several years, I taught the *Current Historiographical Trends* in my university department. When I came to the historiography of the Holocaust, the participation

15. "Licet sim indignans, fragilis et exul, limo revoluta, trahens ad imma, / est tamen michi consors amica fidaque, de tuis relaxandi crimina", in Dhuoda. *Handbook for her Warrior Son. Liber Manualis*, Latin text and trans. Marcelle Thiébaux. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 44, letters L and E; (I differ from her translation).

of the students was extremely intense. They read and commented on all kinds of works, made audiovisual reports, recovered testimony from survivors, etc. But, in the end, I was not satisfied. The degree of interest worried me. I was not satisfied because, behind the scenes, hatred of the German people for the crime committed was always present. That is to say, there was no rescue, no redemption from guilt or from memory, because that is not possible while hatred prevails. And, if there is no redemption, history can repeat itself.

There was no rescue or redemption from memory because I did not know how to find the narrow door that would allow love into the interpretation of history. I did not dare —they were large and very politicised classes— to put my personal experience into play, the experience which I had closer at hand and which was that of another crime inherited from history, and inherited specifically from the history of my father and mother: the Spanish Civil War.

Bringing out the history inside each one of us, and going beyond —not against— the victim/tyrant model, changes the history of traumatic events because it changes the female historian and, with her, it changes the history which she will write and explain, freeing both from the control of the dominant thought, whose horizon is war or the absence of it. In my opinion, becoming independent from this horizon frees the ghosts of the past, not by forgetting or demanding memory, but by rescuing and redeeming it through an opening of my conscience the other, to another conscience, which, in turn, will allow me to move towards another order of relationships in my present,¹⁶ one which has room, however small, for love among the guilty feelings and desire for revenge that are consequences of traumatic events in history. This is a movement of internal change that helps to make thinkable a world without war.

I think that to invent mediations in order to be able to say out loud that peace —unmitigated peace without so many rights, peace which goes further than (not against) history itself— is the condition of human life, is the most urgent political problem of our time.

16. The idea (of Cristina Campo) of the move to another order of relationships, in Muraro, Luisa. *Il Dio delle donne*. Milan: Mondadori, 2003: 63-64.

