

FEATURES

Paul Preston on referendums, reburials, and the far-right in modern Spain

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There are few people who can rightfully claim to have devoted their life to one country. Sir Paul Preston (Liverpool, 1946) is one of them. He sat down with The Beaver for generous 1,5-hour conversation about Spain, past and present. His sophisticated understanding of Spanish history seems to inform his unwittingly millennial 'it's complicated...' as an introduction to many of his answers.

The Beaver (TB): Why did the illegal Catalan referendum happen?

It's complicated. In the immediate aftermath of the transition to democracy in 1977, regional autonomy was recognised for the two 'biggies', the ones with notably different linguistic and cultural traditions – the Basque Country and Catalonia. Conservative governments have always been very centralist and hated this idea. So, they came up with a way to dilute regional autonomy: dividing Spain into several autonomous regions. Now, there are the ones that 'make sense', the 'great historic regions'. That's probably going to offend your readers... Anyway, the equivalence of, in British terms, Scotland, Ireland, Wales are Catalonia, Galicia, the Basque Country, and coming behind, Valencia, and Andalusia.

But the Spanish government managed to come up with seventeen! That was a sneaky way of, if you like, diminishing the importance of the 'great historic regions'. So that's always been an issue in Spain. In 2006/2007, the Catalans attempt to amend the autonomy statute. In response to this, the conservative party (Partido Popular, henceforth PP) claims the changes are unconstitutional, and the whole thing is paralysed. While the Constitutional Courts are assessing the statute, nothing happens. Except that Catalans get very, very frustrated and annoyed. That's why the percentage of pro-independence Catalans begins to rise massively. In 2010, it is only about 12%. By 2015, it has risen to over 40%. As you see, it was a gradual process in which mistakes were made and compounded.

TB: The referendum dominated the European news. Did this impact your work as head of LSE's research programmes about Spain?

Since 2013, my work has been mentioned 7000 times in the Spanish media. I get asked all the time what's going to happen in Catalonia, it drives me bonkers. The surest answer is: I have enough trouble interpreting the past without trying to interpret the future!

TB: Has it been difficult to maintain your academic independence when everyone wants your opinion on the Catalan crisis?

Insofar as I have been pushed into making comments, and it's very difficult not to. If the media constantly ask, it's difficult to say: sorry, no comment. I have to keep stressing: I'm a historian. Having said that, my position was always: I think that the Catalans should be allowed to vote on it. What should the outcome be? That's got nothing to do with me, but with the Catalans. If you say this, you're perceived as a separatist by some. I'm not, I just think people should have the right to express their views. You have to bear in mind: I love Spain. However, there's a thing I have learned: that the tendency of Spanish life, especially intellectual life, is to be Manichean. It's easy to make enemies in Spain. There's a 'those who aren't with us, are against us' kind of mentality.

TB: That sounds difficult. So, what can be done to improve the Catalan-Spanish relationship?

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez visited the LSE and spoke about Catalonia when he was still in the opposition. I'd describe the position he defended as 'Rajoy-light'. It was more emollient, more reasonable, but not significantly different. If he is given a chance, there are things that could be done. While he says the judiciary is totally independent, there's no reason why people are held without trial for so long and face possible sentences of thirty years. It is, to say the least, somewhat unreasonable. The idea that the only solution to separatist sentiment is sending in the Civil Guard...see what I mean?

TB: Yes, but the Spanish Constitution doesn't allow for referendums about independence. What could have been done differently?

I'd say: okay, the Constitution doesn't allow for a referendum, but you can have a consultative process about what people want. And if, as the central government says, there's no majority for independence, then they are fine. Let them vote, that'll prove you're right. If, on the other hand, you're wrong, then you have to reach a deal. It may well be that the Constitution says you can't offer independence, but you can negotiate a different autonomy settlement. Having said this, I do think it would be very difficult to get constitutional change. It would need a long process of education on the part of Spanish politicians. I don't see that happening. Moreover, there's no way the rest of Spain would vote in favour of Catalan secession because regional hatred has been carefully built up and has become electorally valuable for the PP.

TB: The Catalan referendum and Brexit-vote are both perceived as threats to the EU. Do you see any other similarities?

Again: I'm a historian. But yes, I see some alarming parallels between the Brexit-vote and the Catalan process. It's a phenomenon the Spanish call 'the dialogue of the deaf'. Each side doesn't want to listen to what the other says. Arguing what to me seem perfectly reasonable points end in insults. One of the concepts of British cultural interchange was the notion to agree to disagree. That doesn't exist in Spain, you can't even translate it. It's ceasing to exist in this country, thanks to the extremeBrexiters. In my view, the Brexit-debate has ruined that important aspect of British culture. You may disagree, you may be Brexiteers. Another similarity with Brexit is that things should have been explained better. In the Catalan situation, both sides have made appalling mistakes.

TB: Some argue that the aftermath of the Catalan referendum evoked the dark days of the Franco-regime. The socialist government intends to remove Franco's grave from the basilica he had built for himself by his war prisoners. What do you think this gesture means?

You'll be sorry to ask this question, because I have studied this in depth (laughs)! I don't think it necessarily has anything to do with the Catalan situation. I think it's all about the fact that there is still a hell of a lot of people in Spain who think Franco is wonderful. The reactions to this proposal have shown just that. Removing Franco is a gesture in the direction of historical memory, in the direction of the victims' families. The removal is problematic, because in a Manichean society there's not a lot of room for dialogue. During the decades of Franco's rule, his regime used its control of the media and the education system to carry out a national brainwashing. The message of the brainwashing was that Franco is a providential figure sent by God to save Spain from bolshevism, freemasonry, and the Jews. Obviously, the generations brought up thinking Franco was great didn't stop thinking that when democracy was installed.

TB: What do you think about the plan?

The complications of this proposal are mind-boggling. The basilica is a monastery under the jurisdiction of the Benedict order, so you first have to deal with that legal constraint. Say you can get Franco out. There he is, parked in front of you. What do you do? Given his obsession with everything naval, I proposed giving him a seaman's grave, but that idea didn't float. The family have said that he's got to go to the cathedral of Madrid, which is absolute lunacy! If you want to stop his grave being a pilgrimage site for Francoists, why the hell would you want to make it easy by having him in the centre of Madrid? I have to say, it seemed a great idea at the beginning, but as the consequences unfold, you think: oh, God. This is turning into an almighty mess.

TB: In a Manichaeian society like Spain with so many competing interests, how do you maintain objectivity in your historical writings?

One of my books is about civilian victims during the Civil War, it's called The Spanish Holocaust. It looks at both sides and it tries to get it right quantitatively, but it also examines the qualitative differences of why people were killed on both sides. People might say: Are you objective? I'd say: What do you mean by objective? Am I to say that gang rape, which was an instrument used by the Francoists, is a morally indifferent act? Do I have to adopt a 'BBC-balance' between the rapists and the raped? No, I'm sorry, I don't. All my work is filtered through my own sense of morality. Honesty is the key. You may disagree with what I say, but you can flick through any of my books and see exactly why I think what I think. Everything is copiously footnoted. And yes, I happen to think that Franco was as bad as Hitler, so in that sense I've taken sides.

TB: Time for the last question. What are you currently working on?

I'm engaged in a history of corruption in 19th and 20th century Spain and currently writing about the part of the Franco-myth that he was honest and never made any money. You wouldn't believe the scale of the fortune the Franco family acquired! Most was spent on building up a considerable property empire, but a colossal amount was also spent on building the Valle de los Caídos. The Cañada Blanch Centre and the Catalan Observatory continue to organise events about everything Spain-related. Hopefully, among our next events will be ones about the political and judicial future of the Catalan independence movement and about the role of the monarchy.

By Fleur Damen & Emmanuel Molding Nielsen