

The Teaching of the “Dirty Past” in the United States and Spain: A Comparative Analysis Carmen Moreno-Nuño

Abstract

Despite their many differences, Spain and the United States share the burden of a traumatic past. Both countries owe their current reality to the sacrifice of a good part of the population, Black and brown people in the United States, and those defeated in the civil war in Spain. In this article, I draw a comparison between the two countries to contrast memory laws that bring more equity and inclusion to historical narratives, such as Spain’s, with memory laws that explicitly minimize or deny historical events and exclude voices from historical narratives, as those passed recently in many US states. I focus on how Spain’s educational and legislative systems have tackled the teaching of the past in the twenty-first century and the lessons that can be learned from this.

In the last few decades, many countries with histories of colonial violence, state-sponsored terrorism, or totalitarian regimes have confronted a traumatic national past that threatens to destabilize their democratic life. Some of these countries have developed intellectually rich debates and progressive legislation about the role of the state in recovering the truth about the past, but these advances have not been without controversy. Spain is a salient example of the complexity of the issues surrounding the memory of a contested past, as it is only in recent years that Spaniards have come to terms with the traumatic memory of their civil war (1936–39) and the fascist dictatorship that followed (1939–75). One of these complex issues, the teaching of history, stands out as a useful framework to compare how different countries tackle the national past—the legacy of oppression, the memory of victims and freedom fighters, and the historical trajectory of traumatic memory, among other important topics. In this sense, the comparison between the United States and Spain may be illuminating because both countries owe their current reality to the sacrifice of a good part of the population, Black and brown people in the United States, and those who did not fit into the fascist ideological foundation of General Francisco Franco’s regime (democrats, leftists, the Romani population, Jews, the LGBTQ community) in Spain. Despite their many differences, the two countries share the burden of a traumatic past, but in the last few years, the United States has clearly gone backward on memory policies, while Spain seems to be moving (finally) forward.

The comparison between various international landscapes of power may give us clues about a variety of possible futures for academic freedom in general and, in particular, the teaching of history. Thus, in this article, I briefly compare two very different countries, the United States and Spain, with the aim of answering, albeit partially, the following questions: How can we contrast memory laws that bring more equity and inclusion to historical narratives, such as Spain's, with memory laws that explicitly minimize or deny events and exclude voices from accounts, as those passed recently in many US states? How has the legislative system in these two countries addressed curricular design and development for the teaching of the truth of the past? What lessons about the teaching of history can we draw from this comparison?

Moving Backward in the United States

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, author of the first modern novel, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615), offers a poignant reflection on the suppression of knowledge. In the novel's sixth episode, when Don Quixote returns home wounded from his first outing, his mistress and niece, who live with him, ask the barber and the priest to burn the books in Don Quixote's library because they consider their pages to be responsible for their master's madness. The bonfire that consumes the chivalry books dear to Don Quixote is emblematic of the burning, figurative and real, that for centuries has been employed to devour the free thinking that springs from the acquisition of knowledge. With this allegory, Cervantes forcefully criticized the censorship of the Catholic Inquisition and, by extension, the ideological fanaticism so frequently promoted by political and religious authorities. It is, therefore, a very relevant text for today's world.

The massive burning of books is, unfortunately, an undeniable historical truth. We may remember the infamous book burning by the Chinese emperor Shi Huang in 212 BC, the flames that consumed the Library of Alexandria in 391 CE, the Granada auto-da-fé in 1500, the destruction of the Mayan and Aztec codices in 1530 and 1562, the Nazi Bibliocaust in 1933, and the burning of the National Library of Baghdad in 2003, to name just a few. Although today book burning is associated with massive censorship of a publication due to the impossibility, in the digital age, of eliminating all traces of a given set of information, the effects of such censorship are no less devastating. If we focus on the United States, the burning of books is more reality than metaphor—in February 2022 the ultraconservative pastor Greg Locke organized a bonfire in Mount Juliet, Tennessee, to burn copies of the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* sagas. Locke intended his ceremony, broadcast on Facebook, to combat the “demonic influence” of this literature.

This is not a mere anecdotal event. As is well known, current legislation in many US states seeks to propagate an ultraconservative political agenda with respect to education, limiting what K–12 teachers and even college professors can instruct on race, gender identity, and the country's history. Following the signing of Florida's “Parental Rights in Education” law, called “Don't Say Gay” by its opponents, state lawmakers have introduced forty-two bills in twenty-two states

prohibiting the mention of homosexuality, the use of gender-neutral language, and conversations about gay marriage and LGBTQ+ rights. Educators who violate the laws could be disciplined or fired (Pendharkar 2023). Most of the bills also require teachers to report to parents if their children ask questions about gender and sexual orientation. These bills are intent on making any discussion of gender identity, but also race, uncomfortable, and they use that sense of discomfort as a reason not to teach it. In fact, these bills prohibit the teaching of any “theory” that may promote a “negative” version of US history, including the notion that the country was founded on racism. The false debate about critical race theory is part of this controversy. In May 2023, as I was writing these pages, Florida governor Ron DeSantis signed a law banning the state’s public colleges and universities from spending money on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. Thousands of books have been banned in the last two years in classrooms and school libraries. A report by the American Library Association finds that book censorship has increased to unprecedented levels (Italie 2022). The report notes that much of the censorship is directed toward books featuring LGBTQ+ and racial minority perspectives and denounces the increasing harassment and intimidation of librarians.

These restrictive bills originated in 2020 when a researcher named Christopher Rufo wrote a series of articles for the *City Journal*, a digital publication of the conservative Manhattan Institute. They attracted the attention of controversial Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who invited Rufo on his show. Within days, the White House started conversations with Rufo, and weeks later Trump signed an executive order barring any federal government agency from discussing certain ideas as part of the training for its employees. Trump’s successor, Joe Biden, reversed the order upon taking office, but the seed had already germinated in Republican-dominated states, where many laws based on Trump’s executive order were quickly adopted (Monge 2022). Given the current political polarization in the country, the situation does not seem likely to change soon. It is therefore not hyperbolic to say that the United States is suffering a true Cervantine book burning that seeks to censor what is taught in the classrooms in order to control which aspects of reality may be transmitted. This is especially worrisome in a country where one-third of all fourth graders read below the basic level of proficiency, and where ignorance of national history is widespread, as denounced by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2023). Many graduating seniors think that the United States fought with the Germans against the Russians in the Second World War, among other misconceptions of crucial historical facts. This makes a large segment of the population especially susceptible to manipulation in our current, rapidly changing landscapes of viral information and artificial intelligence.

Moving (Finally) Forward in Spain

Curricular censorship is also part of Spain’s recent history due to the controversial legacy of the memory of the civil war and the dictatorship. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the past has been the subject of acute controversy, as decades of silence and oblivion regarding the

brutal Francoist repression gave way to knowledge of what happened and recognition for the victims. This memorialist movement, with its extensive social, political, and cultural ramifications, began in 2000 with the exhumation of mass graves throughout the country thanks to the efforts of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, as well as dozens of other new associations. The groundbreaking Law of Historical Memory was passed in 2007. The dismantling of the statues of dictator Francisco Franco, in compliance with the law, together with thousands of other Francoist public symbols soon became the subject of a heated debate. After a pause in the application of the law ordered by conservative prime minister Mariano Rajoy (2011–18), Pedro Sánchez's socialist government exhumed Franco's remains from the Valley of the Fallen monumental complex in 2019, which gave rise to more disputes. The public visibility granted to memory culminated in the approval of the Law of Democratic Memory in 2022, which promotes knowledge of the past and the incorporation of the study of Francoist repression in schools.

The memory boom has generated an important cultural production that attempts to break with the decades of neglect of this past by historiography, political discourse, and the mass media. Bringing the memory of the civil war and the dictatorship out of oblivion has been fiercely opposed by conservative forces, especially the Partido Popular and the far-right Vox party, generating culture wars that have deepened social divisions, erupting in such controversies as those over the Salamanca papers, the "obituary wars," the dispute among historians in *Hispania Nova*, and entries in the *Spanish Biographical Dictionary*, just to name a few.¹ Vox's rise in Spanish politics is in part a consequence of the social unrest caused by these controversies. One of Vox's programmatic goals is book burning, more specifically parents' right to refuse that their children participate in school activities that the parents deem contrary to their moral or political ideology. In 2021, this right was implemented in Murcia, one of Spain's autonomous regions.

The teaching of history is one of the battlefields of the different political projects that are currently contending not only in Spain but also in the rest of Europe, a continent suffering from the aftermath of the second great depression and the COVID-19 crisis, identity retreat, isolationist impulses, and the advance of authoritarianism. In countries where conservative parties have recently governed, or still govern, the teaching of history has become the object of clear restrictions. However, the lack of objective and accurate knowledge of the past risks repeating its most restrictive episodes, as the Franco-German author Géraldine Schwarz has shown in *Los amnésicos: Historia de una familia europea* (2017). Schwarz compares the collective memory of

¹ The "Salamanca papers [*Papeles de Salamanca*]" case arose when the Catalan Government requested that some documents on the civil war be transferred from the Salamanca archives to Catalonia. The "obituary war [*guerra de esquelas*]" refers to obituaries of a marked political nature. The journal *Hispania Nova* published a special issue on the study of the Francoist repression that led to a confrontation between historians Francisco Espinosa and Santos Juliá in 2006–7. The *Diccionario biográfico español*, promoted by the Royal Academy of History, was frequently criticized for its entry on Franco in 2010.

Nazism in Germany with the collective memory of collaborationism in France. Germany undertook the assumption of personal and collective responsibilities for having tolerated and even applauded the brutality of the Hitler regime; although this came twenty years late, the intense subsequent effort to acknowledge German society's collaboration with Nazism has hindered attempts by far-right forces to assume governmental power. In France, on the contrary, the mythification of the Resistance concealed the complicity of many institutions and citizens with totalitarianism. Although the *Épuration* (meaning *purification*) led to denunciations of collaborators and leading figures who were imprisoned and even executed, the often hurried process ended up being used to justify the suppression of historical memory, which facilitated the growing expansion of new authoritarian proposals. This is not a unique case. Similar phenomena can be observed in Italy and Austria, countries that settled into historical oblivion and where political parties with more than dubious democratic credentials have joined, and even led, governing coalitions. The lesson that emerges from Schwarz's book is that acknowledging "el peso de un pasado sucio" (the burden of a dirty past)—an expression that historian José Álvarez Junco uses in the epilogue—is essential to avoiding authoritarian drift: knowing our history helps keep at bay the temptation to return to a past where rights and freedoms were subjugated to the arbitrariness of power.

Ignorance of history is a breeding ground for disinformation, populism, and political radicalism. As Fernando Hernández Sánchez (2020, 52) has shown, there is a clear deficit in the teaching of the civil war and its aftermath in Spain's classrooms. His study reveals that most Spanish students receive barely superficial or inexplicably reduced information on fundamental episodes such as the Second Republic or the civil war. And practically none about the Franco dictatorship or the Transition. Surveys carried out in recent years by different public agencies, including the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Center for Sociological Research), illustrate Spaniards' worrisome ignorance about key historical facts of the twentieth century: including who was Franco, what caused the war, who was to blame, how much violence each side exerted, and the true fascist nature of the dictatorship. These surveys have discouraging findings, among them that the percentage of students who had an acceptable knowledge of the civil war and Francoism did not exceed 10 percent. Responses also included a high number of disturbing political opinions, including that 9 percent said they preferred a dictatorship (Hernández Sánchez 2020, 55).

Another revealing report is "Las barreras entre los jóvenes para acceder al conocimiento de la memoria democrática [Barriers to Youth Access to Knowledge of Democratic Memory]," which counted with the participation of youth between the ages of sixteen and thirty and was carried out by Comunicaciones, Imagen y Opinión Pública (CIMOP). Some of the respondents said that the civil war broke out because the people rebelled against Franco's dictatorship, that it occurred between the fifties and sixties, that exiles were Franco's followers who had to be thrown out of the country, and that if there had not been a civil war, we would now be worse off, bankrupt

(Junquera 2022). That is, the respondents' understanding of history is exactly backward. The study's director explains that in some young people Vox's discourse has permeated them, sometimes consciously and sometimes not. Although most of those interviewed manifested mistrust and weariness toward the political elite, for some Vox is less a political party than an antisystem organization and thus perceived as more attractive (Hernández Sánchez 2020, 55).

Numerous causes help explain the poor knowledge of contemporary history in Spain. The legislation on education has constantly fluctuated as different parties have governed since the beginning of democracy. History has remained a compulsory subject for the last year of secondary education, ESO, but, due to the pressure to score highly on the standardized university admissions test, *Selectividad*, history is now taught as a section of this exam, rather than as a subject critical to their education. Contemporary history is thus reduced to a conglomerate of data instead of being laid out as a space for reflection on its origins. The *Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa* (Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality), adopted in 2013, excessively stresses the idea that different interpretations must be weighed and that all must be equally taught. The obsolete curricular design absurdly reiterates the same themes of world history. According to students' evaluations, only 21.5 percent of teachers address the subject of history in depth, and only 19 percent use the internet, videos, testimonials, or teaching aids other than the textbook (Hernández Sánchez 2020, 58–59). Instruction on historical memory, which is easily within reach thanks to online compilations of oral accounts, is nonexistent. Also, teachers' training is not comprehensive because college degrees have become hyperspecialized in various subfields (ancient history, archaeology, and so on).

Recent historical events are often placed at the end of course schedules and textbooks and thus rarely taught by faculty overwhelmed by the density of the materials and the lack of time. Teachers claim that the civil war is a very controversial episode and that not enough time has elapsed (almost ninety years!), a reluctance that reveals the fear of provoking conflict with families and with the authorities. Regarding the latter, Sebastiaan Faber (2022) has shown that, despite explicit constitutional protection of academic freedom, scholars who work on contemporary Spanish history and culture have faced different forms of censorship imposed by universities and the courts. Faber recounts numerous examples, from citizens suing to block public knowledge of their relatives' involvement in the fascist repression to historical research that continues to be curbed in the courts. The hierarchies and clientelism of Spanish academic culture also result in self-censorship by scholars too aware of the risks of researching controversial issues.

The publishing business plays an important role as well. Institutions often choose not to use textbooks that include controversial topics. This is especially the case for public Catholic schools, which are very popular in Spain. The capitalist market demands sanitized versions of the past, creating invisible censorship. Pablo de Greiff, special rapporteur to the United Nations, devoted a section of his 2014 report about Spain to the field of education, denouncing textbooks'

continuing explanation of the civil war in generic terms, perpetuating the idea of a symmetrical responsibility between Republican loyalists and the rebels. Graphic resources and timelines (teleological sequential lines) are repeated in books, perpetuating popular and noncontroversial (notwithstanding false) ideas about the armed conflict, like the myths of the moral tie between the two sides, the collective madness, and the fratricidal (nonpolitical) nature of the war. It is also important to notice what books censor: exile, concentration camps, Francoist trials and prisons, forced labor, Spanish Republicans in the Second World War and Nazi camps, anti-Francoist guerrillas, internal resistance, grassroots labor movements, and, ultimately, the brutal nature of the Franco regime.

This serious lack of knowledge of the past is likely to change thanks to the Democratic Memory Law, promoted by Pedro Sánchez’s government and passed by Congress in October 2022. The incorporation of the study of Francoist repression in schools is one of the main novelties of this legislation, which updates the Law of Historical Memory of 2007. The new law is an important step in the right direction, although its critics note that it does not revoke the Amnesty Law of 1977. The Democratic Memory Law seeks comprehensive reparations for the victims of the civil war and the dictatorship and calls for the advancement of democratic values. Among its provisions, it makes the state responsible for promoting knowledge of the past by disseminating the stories of victims, especially women. To protect the right to information on history, the law includes pedagogical measures related to teacher training, academic research, dissemination of information, and various forms of awareness of the past in the classroom and beyond. It also establishes new educational content for middle and high school that must reflect the repression that occurred during the war and the dictatorship. Leaders of PP and Vox have described the law as “indoctrination” and have pledged to repeal it. The Democratic Memory Law significantly adds to grassroots initiatives led by local governments, unions, memory associations, and interdisciplinary groups of teachers that, in recent years, have tried to counter the educational deficit. The question that remains to be answered is to what extent these legal measures are going to be implemented and to what degree they are going to be successful.

Conclusion

Teaching the violent past in the classroom is fundamental to achieving a more inclusive and democratic society. Spain’s case proves that countries can slowly but surely evolve from throwing free knowledge into the bonfire to passing laws that promote critical teaching and active learning of the nation’s traumatic history. To achieve that goal, governments must invest thoroughly in instruction, support educators on all fronts, and train teachers in how to transmit the most controversial aspects of the past. Legislators need to develop curricular reforms that underscore silenced and diminished episodes of history, which are complex and multicausal, as well as the victims who lived through them. The difficulties in teaching history include long-term challenges for which there is no easy solution, but the classroom cannot become the space where books are

figuratively burned. On the contrary, schools must help rebuild an understanding of the present from an unequivocally democratic perspective by rejecting materials and teaching aids that contain falsehoods and by confronting a reticence to teach controversial events that is rooted in contempt, discrimination, bigotry, and a failure to question. Legislators must promote course programs that make use of all possible didactic resources available in the twenty-first century (for example, digital libraries, audiovisuals, and oral history) to give voice to those who historically have been defeated. The analysis of educational initiatives developed in countries that have suffered discrimination, oppression, and war can contribute illuminating insights, as this comparative article on the United States and Spain has tried to demonstrate.

Promoting the teaching of the traumatic historical past should be part of a much broader movement that forces us to rethink the legacy of the past at cultural, social, and political levels. This is the only way to generate a deep and lasting change in society that would reduce the racism and contempt that the victims of history still suffer today. We must engage in this comprehensive movement even if it generates new culture wars, which we must learn to prevent or limit to the extent possible. It is also necessary to imagine, finance, create, and distribute cultural artifacts (in cinema, literature, the plastic arts, and so on) that may offer a morally nuanced and subtle understanding of the past through a popular culture that, following the best examples of other national cultural production, may go deeper in the art of combining entertainment with political pedagogy. The cultural memory boom in twenty-first-century Spain is a good model, and it has proved instrumental for the unlearning of Francoism.

For a good part of the population, knowledge of their national past is made up of a heterogeneous mixture of family stories, anecdotes, prejudices, unverified information, and disinformation, in an interpretive hodgepodge that does not contribute to enhancing the values of a pluralistic society or to preventing democratic disaffection. Mystifying accounts of the past are an intrinsic part of every culture. Consequently, a broadly agreed legislative framework is urgently needed to help combat the effects of historical ignorance, misinformation, and disinformation. According to chilling data from Freedom House, while one-half of people lived in free countries in 2005, only one-fifth live in free countries now (Repucci and Slipowitz 2023). In this context, the teaching of the “dirty” national past is not only a civic imperative but also an urgent challenge in the face of the rapid and dangerous collapse of democracies in the world today.

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