

Nostalgia for Empire?

José Ortega y Gasset, Memory, and “The Spanish Problem”

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Introduction

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) was the chief influence on Spanish and Latin American political thought in the twentieth century. While his academic work concentrated heavily on metaphysics and the philosophy of history, Ortega was active as a liberal in Spanish politics amid the ruins of the Spanish Empire and, after the rise of Franco’s Spain, the ruins of the Second Spanish Republic.¹ His concern for Spanish politics followed him into Latin America.

During his three-year asylum in Argentina as an exile from Franco’s Spain, Ortega reflected on the ongoing crisis of fascism in Spain.² Experiencing immense loneliness despite his freedom, he was dismissed by his fellows at the University of Buenos Aires and was suffering from the trauma of exile from his home country.³ Despite distance from Spain and the resultant feeling of statelessness from which he would never fully recover, he reflected heavily on the topic of individual identity, usually in a metaphysical rather than national context, and was even known as “the Spanish Ambassador” to Argentina.⁴ He was, in essence, a Spanish man thrown into foreign circumstances. It was this setting where he

* An early version of this paper was presented at the Traditions of Latin American Political Thought and Constitutionalism at the 2024 SPSA Conference in New Orleans. My thanks extends, first and foremost, to Richard Avramenko and Luke Foster for their combined efforts in setting up this conference within a conference. I am grateful to Brendon Westler, Luke Foster, Pedro Blas Gonzalez, Eduardo Schmidt Passos, and other panelists for their gracious feedback.

would finalize his most mature take of his theory of historical reason as part of his philosophy of history. Ortega's stay in Argentina permitted him time to elaborate on various themes from his previous works, including ideas of metaphysical identity in his lecture series posthumously published as *Historical Reason* (*Razón histórica*) and his most advanced sociological work *Man and People* (*El hombre y la gente*), published in 1957. Paradoxically, however, his period of reflection did not yield a comprehensive examination of a distinctively Spanish identity. For that, it is necessary to return to Ortega's early works, where the theme of Spanish identity dominated his thinking.

A crisis of identity dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spanish political thought. While Spain had risen to prominence as a world empire between 1480 and 1600, its status as an empire completely faded away after Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War. The so-called Disaster of 1898 (*Desastre del '98*) marked the end of Spain's identity as a world empire and launched an identity crisis that would dominate the Spanish consciousness and the writings of Spanish intellectuals for the first half of the twentieth century. Based on concerns about finding new routes for Spain's identity drawn from the Generation of 1898 (*Generación de '98*), especially his predecessor Miguel de Unamuno, in his early thought Ortega was deeply concerned that Spain's historical trajectory had been lost. His mission, then, was to situate Spain within the broader European project while recognizing the impossibility of a return to Spain's brief Golden Age.⁵ As this article will demonstrate, his solution provides an interesting treatment of memory within his early thought that translates into his more mature, post-civil war works.

In short, this article will assess how Ortega responded to Spain's loss of identity between 1914 and 1922. There is a consistent thread in this period of Ortega's thought that ties his early works with his mature thought in *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La rebelión de las masas*), published in 1930, and his post-civil war thought as an exile in Argentina in *Historical Reason*. This thread lies in his attempt to find a new basis for Spanish identity by

employing a certain methodological approach to Spanish memory in his works *Meditations on Quixote* (*Meditaciones del Quijote*), published in 1914, and *Invertebrate Spain* (*España invertebrada*), published in 1922. While in his early works Ortega was searching for the source of Spanish identity amid the disorientation of Spain's identity as an empire resulting from the country's defeat in the Spanish-American War, he sought to restore a vision of Spain for the future by reckoning with the memory of Spain's glory days in the empire.⁶ As I demonstrate, this methodological approach to memory in Ortega's early works remains consistent through his historical writings after the rise of Franco's fascist state.

Studies of Ortega's approach to memory of the Spanish Empire are not new. This debate is as old as scholarship on Ortega and has resulted in fierce debate about the character of Ortega's liberalism—and especially whether his liberalism was a precursor to Franco's fascism.⁷ Christopher Britt Arredondo, for instance, argues that Ortega follows the Generation of 1898 in promoting a nostalgia for the empire that seeks to return Spain to its previous imperial dominance.⁸ In recent years, Alec Dinnin has argued that Ortega's approach to liberalism after the Disaster of 1898 was an acknowledgment that liberalism was the best next step for Spain with the specter of empire still present in the Spanish consciousness.⁹ Contrary to Britt Arredondo, I argue that although Ortega's liberalism is bound up with the memory of the empire, it is not a nostalgic longing for a return to the empire that instructs his liberalism. Rather, in Ortega's approach to memory, a regime's predecessor always shapes the moral character of its successor. While Spain's imperial legacy from the era of Cervantes (*Meditations on Quixote*) and the origin of Spain's constitution from its illiberal beginnings with the Visigoths (*Invertebrate Spain*) continue to be an influence, his approach to memory is meant to address Spain's lost trajectory among European nations, a trajectory lost as a result of moral corruption in Spain's constitution. Hence, while references to the Spanish Empire are omnipresent in Ortega's early thought, this is owed not to a proto-fascist desire for authoritarian rule but to the search for a source of moral character to motivate Spain toward a

future where it can once again contribute to the European project of cultural modernization.

This essay is divided into two parts with several subsections in each. The first part concentrates on Ortega's *Meditations* as presenting a method for sifting through Spain's circumstances. His first attempt at this was to meditate on Spain's great novel, *Don Quixote*, to resolve Spain's decadence from the Monarchical Restoration era and replace it with a new patriotic vision of a future Spain. In this novel, he presents what I identify as his historical method of interpreting Spain's memory vis-à-vis his understanding that "I am myself plus my circumstances." In place of the decadence on the Monarchical Restoration, he insists that we learn from the short-lived Spanish Golden Age, following Cervantes, as the source of Spain's future potential. The Spanish Golden Age still has relevance for Spain's present circumstances because it presents a particular moral character upon which Spanish identity can be grounded.

The second part of this essay will demonstrate that this mission continued in 1922 with the publication of *Invertebrate Spain*. Instead of framing the Restorationist monarchists as the enemy of contemporary Spanish growth, Ortega here argues that the problem with Spain is a defect in its constitution. He suggests that because Spain lacked a traditional feudal hierarchy like that which emerged in England, it lacked the psychological imperative that "the mass man" should follow "the noble man." This defect led to the development of social individualism that ultimately disintegrates Spanish identity. Ortega's solution in this work is not to reinstate the Spanish Empire but to restore the social hierarchy with a new unifying belief. As will be shown here, Ortega employs the same historical approach in *Invertebrate Spain* as he did in *Meditations*, even though these works provide different histories. This essay concludes by assessing how Ortega's approaches to memory can be found in his more mature, post-civil war works, and it offers a liberal alternative to the nostalgic approach to the past that dominated the Restorationist regime of Antonio Cánovas del Castillo.

Ortega's *Meditations on Quixote****The Disaster of 1898***

Sometimes even the loosest connection to the distant past can become the firmest source of one's identity. Clearly this was the case for fin-de-siècle Spain. The root of modern Spanish identity can be traced to the emergence of the Spanish Empire in the fifteenth century. Ferdinand and Isabella's declaration as the sole monarchs over a unified Spain and the subsequent discovery of America by Columbus (whom Spaniards claim to be Spanish rather than Italian) sparked a period of political, economic, and cultural prosperity in Spain known as the Spanish Golden Age. Spain's Golden Age produced some of the greatest works of literature and art ever created, reaching its peak with *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. Spain's status as an empire also brought it to a stance comparable to that of other European countries, especially England, France, and Germany. However, despite Spain's attempt at clinging to its imperial identity, the empire entered a state of decline beginning in 1600. By the 1830s, Spain was facing an existential threat with the invasion of Napoleon, alongside independence movements reducing Spain's colonies to Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, and the Philippines, Guam, the Marianas, the Marshall Islands, and other smaller islands in the western Pacific. The Disaster of 1898 was the culmination of a centuries-long cultural decay in Spain.

Very few Americans today think about what we call the Spanish-American War, which Spaniards, in contrast, called the Disaster of 1898, speaking without hyperbole. The Treaty of Paris of 1898, which ended the Spanish-American War, ceded Spain's last remaining colonies to the United States, including Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, and gave the United States temporary control over Cuba. Spain's defeat marked the end of Spain as a world empire, a self-understanding that had been declining since the late sixteenth century.¹⁰ In light of their defeat, Spaniards in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were searching for the soul of Spain to lead to a regeneration of Spanish identity. If Spain is not to be an empire, then what does it mean to be Spanish? This question is not solely about individual identity but rather holds major implications

for the causes of faction in Spain at this time. Spain had been experiencing quarrels among socialists, communists, anarchists, Carlists, and fascists, not to mention the waning influence of Spanish liberalism during the Restoration era. Moreover, nationalist movements in both Catalonia and Basque Country were pushing for independence in Spain proper—movements that rock Spain to this day.

Some people looked outside the memory of the Spanish Empire to answer this question. The Regenerationist movement, led by the Spanish intellectual Joaquín Costa, campaigned against the backwardness of Spain and sought to bring about social and economic reform, as well as to dismantle the Spanish fixation with past military glories. Following the disillusionment of Spanish imperialists in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, Costa argued that Spain needed a regeneration of Spanish identity, one found not in its imperial past but in abstract reason. Among these proponents of abstract reason as the source of identity were the Spanish Krausists—intellectuals influenced by the German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause.¹¹

The Monarchical Restoration era under Prime Minister Cánovas instead emphasized the importance of remembering the Empire.¹² Cánovas envisioned this product of Spain's glorious past through the framework of military heroism.¹³ In his desire to cultivate a nostalgia for the Empire, Cánovas campaigned in celebration of the fourth centennial of Columbus's expedition to America, hoping it would encourage Spaniards to identify Columbus's colonization of the Americas with Spain's attempt to continue imperial rule over the Bahamas.¹⁴ The memory of the Empire was hence to serve to create a grand narrative of Spain's past within which Spain's contemporary citizens still participated.

While Cánovas appealed to Spain's imperial past as both a memorial of Spain's past and a source of identity for the country's present, many challenged his approach. As Christopher Britt Arredondo argues, a movement of intellectuals called the Quixotists—among whom he includes Ángel Ganivet, Miguel de Unamuno, Ramiro de Maetzu, and even Ortega—proposed that Spaniards look instead to the great Spanish novel *Don Quixote* as their source of unification.¹⁵ This appeal made good sense, for *Don Quixote* represented Spain's

crowning cultural achievement reflective of the country's political hegemony during its brief Golden Age. Indeed, for the first half of the twentieth century, *Don Quixote* was widely cited by Spanish academics as a source of Spanish identity.¹⁶ Of course, while *Don Quixote* was a chief source of inspiration for scholars, scholars in this period lacked consensus about how best to interpret *Quixote* for their present political needs. In his book *Vida de Don Quixote y Sancho*, published in 1905, Unamuno, for example, considered the character of Don Quixote not as a fictional literary icon but as a heroic historical figure to be emulated as a tragic hero for modern times. As Morujão and colleagues observe, Ortega rejected the nostalgic approach to the past embraced by Spaniards at the time and instead interpreted Quixote with a more realistic bent.¹⁷ As Pedro Blas Gonzalez observes, Ortega interprets the metaphysics of Cervantes as one of "imagination and perspective," which makes *Don Quixote* not literature per se but a theory that poses "reality as the individual manifestation of reality."¹⁸ His interpretation of Cervantes, of course, requires that he interpret Cervantes as a perspectivist like himself. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza metaphorically represent two sides of an epistemological coin, neither of which is wholly right, as both present particular perspectives of reality. For Ortega, Quixote is an altruist and idealist who rejects the contemporary world's rules and lives according to his vision of the best conduct, and Sancho is a realist and materialist who grounds him. In the same way that Sancho's realism grounds the idealistic Quixote, so too does Ortega wish to ground Spain's identity crisis in reality itself.

As a reflection on Spain's circumstances, Ortega's *Meditations* is itself an act of Spanish patriotism. What pieces of Spain's circumstances was he critiquing? In *Meditations* (in contrast, as we will see, to *Invertebrate Spain*), he criticizes the failing monarchical regime from the Restoration period.

The Patriotic Mission of "Meditations"

In his author's preface to *Meditations on Don Quixote*, Ortega describes the work as short essays that concern Spain's "circumstances" (*circunstancias*).¹⁹ His goal in *Meditations* was to cope

with Spain's present realities, which arose from historical problems related to the Monarchical Restoration. The problem, Ortega notes, was that for centuries Spaniards had been seeing an "incessant and progressive collapse of values."²⁰ The Spanish regime of the Restoration period—the target of *Meditations*—was dying because it lacked creativity and because of its moral corruption. He contrasts the figures of the Spanish Golden Age with the reformation era life under Cánovas, condemning the Restoration as a mere "parade of phantoms" and Cánovas himself as "the impresario of that phantasmagoria."²¹ *Meditations* was also dismissive of the dominance of Spanish Krausism.²² Despite their attempts, Krausists had failed to redress Spain and instead spread the gospel of conformity via a German rationalism that failed to raise Spain to the level of the other great European nations and, as critics like Ortega argued, precipitated Spain's defeat in the Disaster of 1898. The Generación de '98, in contrast, offered critiques of the failing Spanish Restorationist regime but often without concrete solutions.²³ Moreover, authors like Unamuno thought the solution to Spain's ills was to turn to elements of Spain's history that had allowed it to rise to greatness in the first place. For Ortega, the solution to Spain's problems was instead to turn to Europe. For centuries, Spain had fallen behind other European nations in terms of its contributions to the European project.²⁴ Like Joaquín Costa, Ortega sought to give vitality to Spain by injecting it into Europe. Ortega's meditations on Spain's past great literature are reflections on a certain vision of Spanishness in an attempt to build a new Spain. Thus, Ortega here views *Quixote* as an answer to the question, "What is Spain?"

Meditations thus reflects on *Quixote* with this patriotic mission in mind. The purpose of meditating on this book without always drawing clear conclusions is to know what the reader has to reckon with when reading a work like *Quixote*. The topic under examination in *Meditations* is Spain itself. By reading *Quixote*, one can understand the character and frame of thinking of the exemplary Spaniard, Cervantes. This is necessary because, as Ortega posits, an individual cannot get his bearings in the universe except through

the “race” (*raza*) in which he is submerged. Ortega employed our contemporary meaning of race not as a socially and culturally constructed group of people but as a “historical manner of interpreting reality, an original version of the human.”²⁵ *Quixote* represents, for Ortega, the key to the Spanish reality, one that speaks to the problem of Spain’s destiny. He chooses *Quixote* in part because its profundity—as the wild antics of Don Quixote are juxtaposed by the grounded realism of Sancho—poses questions about the meaning of a life well lived, not just for the Spaniard but for all humanity. As Julián Marías observes in his introduction to *Meditations*, *Quixote* also presents a vision of “that peculiar way of human existence which is the Spanish way” that has been lost and in which can be sought “the iridescent gemlike Spain that could have been.”²⁶

The title of this work leads one to think Ortega is offering a literary criticism of Spain’s most famous novel. However, like most of Ortega’s works, *Meditations* branches off to discuss a seemingly disordered and eclectic assortment of topics—from Mediterranean culture to Spanish politics, the difference between the epic and the novel, and so on. Most important is that *Meditations* was written with a patriotic mission in mind. Ortega’s purpose was no longer to modernize Spain, as in his early days, but to bring about the “Europeanization of Spain.”²⁷ At this point, as W. Kim Rogers has noted, “[t]he Europeanization of Spain meant for Ortega the raising of Spain to a partnership in a dramatic dialogue in and through which there would be developed a Spanish culture different from French and German culture” to bring a Spanish interpretation of the world.²⁸ Ortega was offering an answer to the problem of Spain in light of what he saw as the insufficiencies of the Spanish Krausists, the Generation of 1898, and the Cánovas regime. The essays in *Meditations* argue that Spain needs to bring its grandiose view of the future back down to earth with the appropriate use of reason.

Ortega’s Approach to Memory in “Meditations”

To understand the patriotic mission of *Meditations*, one must understand what Ortega means by his famous existential

declaration that “I am myself plus my circumstances.” This is the culminating principle of Ortega’s metaphysical position of perspectivism, which he introduced in *Meditations*. Perspectivism is the metaphysical stance that each individual has a unique perspective of reality but that no individual can ever articulate the whole of reality. In this sense, there is an objective reality, but the capacity to understand it by oneself is infinitely limited.²⁹ For this reason, we need the opinions of others to better obtain a grasp of reality. “God is perspective,” Ortega writes. By this he means that God constitutes the whole of reality, of which each individual has access only to a part. In contrast, to claim one’s own perspective of reality as the whole of reality is the sin of Satan and, indeed, constitutes epistemological arrogance.³⁰

While Ortega’s perspectivism is usually understood chiefly as a metaphysical doctrine that places the individual experience as radical reality, here the point is that it can also be interpreted as an approach to understanding memory in politics. Although a metaphysical doctrine, it is written with a political pretext in mind. To assess one’s circumstances is to examine the facts of one’s past, which includes the past of one’s nation. In Ortega’s words, these meditations are a “pretext and an appeal for a wide ideological collaboration on national themes, and nothing else.”³¹ His framework for approaching the past in *Meditations* involves identifying all features of one’s circumstances. Spanish identity, he argues, can be understood through meditating not just on lofty principles as the Krausists do but also on the seemingly insignificant things like the peculiarity of the language of the poor, the peculiarities of language in general, the details of the Spanish landscape, cultural traditions and practices, cultural dress, and in general the “minute manifestations [that] reveal the innermost character of a race.”³² This includes, as we have seen, one’s Spanishness. As mentioned, Ortega terms “the mute things which are all around us” our “circumstances” (*circunstancias*). As Ortega writes, “Man reaches his full capacity when he acquires complete understanding of his circumstances.”³³

What does Ortega mean by our circumstances? One might be tempted to include only those things directly near us as our

circumstances. But Ortega warns that narrowing our circumstances only to those things that are near us would exclude most of our circumstances. Many of our circumstances are things we never notice. Put in existentialist terms, our circumstances are those things without essence that *are* all around us, including those things to which an individual has not yet given meaning. As Ortega writes, "Individual life, the immediate, the circumstances are all different names for the same thing: those parts of life from which the inner experience, the *logos* [i.e., meaning], has not yet been extracted."³⁴ Human existence, not knowledge, is thus radical (or principal) reality, for Ortega. This does not mean that what we know is not real; rather, it means that knowledge is founded on the reality of the world. While our circumstances are ever-changing, our inner self—that is, that we are always individuals experiencing the world—always stays the same.

To understand the circumstances of Spain, in a sense, aids one's understanding of oneself. According to Ortega, culture forms from "objects already purified which once possessed a spontaneous and immediate life" and have taken up a space in the world of ideals that transcend our personal life. Spain is part of one's circumstances because it is part of *what is given* to someone. A Spaniard does not choose it, yet it is still his own. All that is accepted as culture today once came from the inner life of the immediate. The cultural act is to give meaning (*logos*) to that which still lacks meaning (*ilógico*). Ortega then identifies stages of the process of how culture gives meaning to the still meaningless. The process starts off by our learning things in the abstract. Those things with meaning still seem to us abstract and meaningless, but they are in that stage where acquired culture has value only as an instrument and weapon of new conquests, one that we use to cope with the immediate. This, of course, carries certain implications for Ortega's view of the role of the Empire in Spanish memory. For Ortega, the previous regime is part of one's circumstances and hence always enters the mind of the one that succeeds it. This idea carries over into one of his next major works, *Invertebrate Spain*.

Ortega's *Invertebrate Spain*

As Ortega had established in *Meditations*, different circumstances yield a different notion of the self and thus require a different origin story. After all, this, he claims, is why philosophy never finishes and ought to be studied across generations. Even though we moderns may disagree with Plato and Aristotle, they approach philosophy from unique circumstances that guide their perspective. They see something we do not see. Likewise, a reflection on one's identity only a few years later might produce a different perspective. Ortega demonstrates this principle in his third major work, *Invertebrate Spain*, published in 1922.

When examining *Invertebrate Spain*, Ortega scholars have tended to concentrate either on its predecessor *Meditations* or Ortega's more mature formation of ideas like "the mass mentality" in *Revolt*. I wager, however, that this book is important to review for two reasons. First, it presents an early version of Ortega's theories of social compartmentalization and the mass mentality that would allow him to rise to fame with *Revolt*. A closer look at this text reveals that it is far more than a mere precursor to *Revolt* and that its ideas are rich for their own sake and, for our purposes, that it speaks to this problem of memory, not least through its approach to history. Ortega confirms the importance of history in his approach to the work, calling his approach "historical, and not political."³⁵ Now, *Invertebrate Spain* is not a work of intellectual history but a work of philosophy. However, as Nelson Orringer writes, Ortega's understanding of history was shaped by Henry Buckle, with whom Ortega understood history as "a philosophically ordered interpretation of the Spanish past from its medieval origins to the moment in which the historian writes."³⁶

Ortega's interpretation of Spanish history leads to the second reason to read *Invertebrate Spain*: it is necessary for understanding the origin of Spain's identity crisis. One need look no further than the title to witness this. The title phrase *España invertebrada* of course means that Spain, Ortega reckons, lacks a spine. But this is not to say that the Spaniards were a nation of cowards. Rather, the Spanish people, understood as one body, lack a vertebrate to hold

that body upright. Put otherwise, Spain still lacks a unifying identity, as the country did when Ortega wrote *Meditations*. The absence of identity, Ortega argues, is attributable to Spain's social structure, which was skewed from its origin in history. Spain's crisis, then, is a historical problem, not an abstract philosophical problem as Descartes may have said, nor a political problem.³⁷

Ortega's Problematic: Spanish Particularism

Like *Meditations*, *Invertebrate Spain* deals with the problem of the decline of Spanish grandeur.³⁸ The reason for the loss of Spanish grandeur, as he identifies in this work, is the problem of "particularism." The problem of particularism, Ortega relays, is that it poisons the political community with a socially disruptive psychology of individualism. Ortega describes it thus:

The psychology of particularism may be summed up by saying that it always appears when, within a certain class or group, there arises the delusion that other classes have no existence as social entities, or, at least, that they ought not to have. Or, to put it in simpler terms, particularism is that state of mind in which we believe that we need pay no attention to others. Sometimes through overrating ourselves, sometimes through under-valuing others, we lose the sense of our own limitations and begin to feel ourselves independent of the rest.

Invertebrate Spain is the first instance in Ortega's works where he denounces the growth of social compartmentalization in Spain.³⁹ "Spanish social life in our day," Ortega remarks, "offers an extreme example of ... atrocious particularism. Spain is today not so much a nation as a series of water-tight compartments."⁴⁰ The reason for the phenomenon of particularism is the sociological organization of Spain where "the mass" guides the people rather than the people guiding the mass. The Spaniards are organized such that the mass "refuses to follow the directing minority."⁴¹ The result is that "[t]he people as a people are disarticulated and become invertebrate. . . .

In Spain we are now living in the midst of an extreme case of this historical invertebration.”⁴² Even among the leading parties of the Right, one did not see the leaders guide the mass but rather the mass guide their leaders to adopt whatever position the mass desired at whim.⁴³

This sociological organization, Ortega reckons, is embedded in the identity of the Spanish people. The chief example of this is the particularism of the military that made it lose any sense of national cohesion. Regarding the army’s entry into the Moroccan affair of 1900, for example, Ortega speaks thus:

The Moroccan affair was not big enough to temper the spirit of a militia like ours, but, small as it was, it was sufficient to re-awaken professional pride. *The army’s group consciousness was then re-formed, it concentrated on itself, it united within itself* [emphasis added]. But this by no means meant that it rejoined the other social classes. . . . Morocco made the broken soul of our army into a clenched fist, morally prepared for attack. From that time on, the military group has been a loaded rifle with no mark to shoot at.⁴⁴

The Spanish military, which thrives on a shared sense of unity, felt the force of the sweeping egalitarianism in Europe by viewing its members as separate from the Spanish people. As Ortega puts it, “In the famous July days of 1917 [and 1936], the army completely lost the consciousness that it was a part and only a part of the Spanish whole.”⁴⁵ This contemporary symptom of particularism was not a problem just with Spain in Ortega’s day. It can be traced back to a defect in the Spanish constitution. This is where we can see Ortega’s application of his approach to memory.

Ortega’s Approach to Memory in “Invertebrate Spain”

As is well known, Ortega made deliberate advancements in the philosophy of history that rejected the progressive view of history common in his day. For Ortega, our circumstances just happen to us, unguided by any telos of history. Yet when we place historical

events in a certain order, they will reliably yield certain results like a science experiment. Putting this principle into practice, Ortega argues that the phenomenon of Spanish particularism was not an accident of Spanish history that could have been avoided with different actions. Nor, however, was it destined to happen, as though history operated under the teleological hand of the Hegelian *Geist*. Rather, it was founded on a defect in Spain's constitution from its origin. At bottom, Spain's crisis of identity derives from the absence of feudalism within the foundation of the Spanish Empire. Whereas the constitutions of all other major European powers—in particular England and France—were built on the back of a feudal aristocracy, Spain's was not. Spain was the only exception among major powers. Historians at the time would have argued that the great strength of Spain's history was that it was not built on feudalism. Ortega retorts that, to the contrary, the absence of feudalism was the greatest source of Spain's misfortunes. Many say that Spain became different from France or Germany not because of differences between the Gauls and the Frank but because of the "different quality of tribes which invaded both territories."⁴⁶ Spain was invaded by the Visigoths, whom Ortega characterizes as a "decadent people" full of drunks, whereas the Franks were full of vitality. This, Ortega recognizes, is an unorthodox interpretation of history, yet it explains Spain's present struggles as an enduring historical problem that can be linked to the present Spanish identity crisis.

In France, the few noble men transported to the masses the idea of being a unified nation. Once the landowning lords built social structures, a sense of national unity formed: "[t]herefore, it is a great mistake to assume that the feebleness of its feudal system had a positive value for Spain." For Ortega to say this is equivalent to commenting that "[i]t is a good thing that present day Spain has few scholars, few artists, and, in general, few men of any real talent, because intellectual vigor makes for hot argument and leads to contention." The intelligent minority composed a minority of feudal lords in Spain, whereas in France the intelligent minority were plentiful, and the most powerful. As Ortega puts it,

Historically, they molded their material to suit themselves, flooding the entire popular mass with the sense of being a nation. In the process, the French corpus had to live disjointed for centuries. Bit by bit cohesion took place; the lords built structures that were more and more complex, that consisted of duchies, counties, and provinces. At the same time the power of the lords defended that essential territorial pluralism against premature unification into a kingdom. But there was no such select minority among the Visigoths.⁴⁷

The historical trend of Spanish history can be explained by the Visigoths' conquest of the few weak lords at Spain's beginning in the Middle Ages. Ortega writes, "The fact that the lords were few and weak explains the lack of vigor which afflicted us in the Middle Ages. The same fact also explains our surplus of vigor from 1480 to 1600, Spain's great century." Indeed, how did Spain become a great nation for 120 years? "Between 1450 and 1500 there was only one new thing of importance that happened—the unification of the peninsula."⁴⁸ Spain was the first country to become a nation that concentrated "all its energies and capacities in the hands of a single king."⁴⁹ "But just as suddenly as we had risen to greatness in 1500 did we fall from greatness in 1600. Unity operated like an injection of artificial energy; it was not a symptom of vital power. On the contrary, the reason that unity was achieved with such speed was that Spain was weak, that she lacked a strong pluralism supported by great personalities of the feudal type."⁵⁰ Spain's lack of feudalism, usually seen as a strength, was the source of her weakness; and even though it sparked its glorious unity, this unity was the result of previous deterioration.

That grandeur was a symptom of Spain's constitutional defect also explains the conquest of the Americas. Spain's national unity corresponds with American colonization, which Ortega identifies as the only great thing Spain has accomplished, and a fleeting thing at that. "Spanish colonization of America was the work of the common people," he writes.⁵¹ English colonization was planned and executed by an elite few (i.e., "the noble man"). In contrast,

Spain's was founded by the accidental actions of the common people from the pueblos. Ortega explains it thus:

English colonization was the planned and deliberate action of minorities, either in companies having a business basis, or banded together in a chosen group which sought for lands beyond the sea where they could worship God to their own liking. In Spanish colonization, however, it was the "pueblo," the common people themselves, who, without conscious design, without directors, without deliberated tactics, engendered other peoples. Both the greatness and the misery of our colonization stem from this. Our "pueblo," our common people, did all that had to be done—populated, cultivated, sang, wept and loved. But they could not give the new nations what they themselves did not have—discipline from above, a live culture, a progressive civilization.⁵²

The problem of Spain's sociological organization comes from its lack of intelligent design. The common people who constituted Spain's empire—the cultural descendants of drunken Visigoths, according to Ortega—were incapable of instantiating discipline into the social structures they invented in the new colonies.

Spain is a nation of a rural mentality. The curse of Spain is that its temperament is rural and that Spaniards were never able to rise above their ruralism.⁵³ Ortega does not give examples of the qualities of rural versus urban people, but he seems to think he does not need to. The rural spirit lacks the refinement and intelligence of an aristocratic class in its ideas, sentiments, virtues, and vices. To quote Ortega again: "The face, the figure, the repertory of ideas and sentiments, the virtues and the vices are typically rural. In Seville, a city three thousand years old, there are hardly any faces on the streets except those of country people. You can distinguish the rich countryman from the poor one; but you miss that refinement of features which urbanization and selection should have brought about in men who are the product of a city thirty centuries

old.”⁵⁴ Even though there are rich farmers and larger dispersions of populations, the mode of thinking of the people has remained rural. An aristocracy never formed.

Ortega does not elaborate on what makes the rural spirit of Spain adorned with the mass mentality unqualified to rule nor does he identify what features would allow their rural spirit to mature to become qualified. The missing piece, however, seems to be that the mass mentality lacks a historical consciousness. History displays the hierarchy of nature, where the noble man rules the mass man, to create a properly ordered social structure. Those classified as the mass man rebelled against this fact of history by attempting (unsuccessfully) to make their ideals about how they wish the world to be a reality.⁵⁵ Ortega concludes chapter 4 with the mission that “[w]e must make a new type of Spaniard.”⁵⁶ Unlike in *Meditations*, this new type of Spaniard is not based on the greatness achieved during that brief period of Cervantes’s triumph in Spain’s Golden Age. Rather, the ideal Spaniard is someone who aspires to make something of himself in the future.

By Ortega’s reckoning, Spaniards often interpret their own history, beginning in the Middle Ages, as one of decadence.⁵⁷ However, to call Spain’s condition the result of decay is ridiculous, since even in its best Spain was on a downward slope. Instead of looking for an external source of decay, we must search for a defect in Spain’s own constitution. This is why Ortega thinks it useful to move the discussion of Spanish decadence from the modern age to the Middle Ages in which Spain was born.⁵⁸ From its genesis Spain lacked “best people” and so did not have them to foster national unity among the masses. Thus by Ortega’s reasoning, Spain was defective from its nascency.

Let us now reflect on the implications of Ortega’s reasoning. In *Invertebrate Spain*, we see an alternative approach to reckoning with Spain’s history as an empire. Whereas *Meditations* saw the Empire as a starting place for the type of lost potential that should inspire Spain’s future, *Invertebrate Spain* sees the Empire as itself a symptom of the flaw in Spain’s constitution as a people. This shift between the two books is at once a development in Ortega’s

thinking but also an extension of his perspectivism in *Meditations*. The different circumstances Ortega experienced when writing *Invertebrate Spain* called for a different approach though addressing the same problem of the loss of Spanish identity. *Meditations* seeks to be a series of reflections on how Spain can reach its potential in the near future, whereas *Invertebrate Spain* is an assessment of the historical problem of Spain's decline. Two different political questions thus call for two different angles on the Spanish problem, even though they employ the same circumstantialist approach that Ortega establishes in *Meditations*.

Conclusion

This essay has considered two of Ortega's major works in his early period: *Meditations on Quixote* and *Invertebrate Spain*. Let us now return to the original question of this essay: What is the role of the memory of the Spanish Empire in shaping Spanish identity during the country's identity crisis in the early twentieth century? In both *Meditations* and *Invertebrate Spain*, Ortega returns to Spanish memory to inform the present circumstances of Spain's crisis. However, he approaches this question with two different accounts of history that in their formulation both consider Spain's present circumstances. In *Meditations*, Ortega appeals to Spain's recent mistakes with the Monarchical Restoration as the source of their present lack of cultural creativity in their identity and returns to the practical ideal of Cervantes as a realistic vision of Spain's potential. In *Invertebrate Spain*, he turns to the past, to Spain's formation in the late 1400s, not for inspiration but to diagnose the problem of Spain's quasi-democratic constitution.

These reflections on memory and identity from Ortega's early works continued developing in his more mature writings. His formulation of the species of thought he would call *razón histórica*, rightly understood as his most mature understanding of *razón vital*, can be seen as a development of this method of sifting through memory in his early works. For Ortega, reason should be understood and employed from the standpoint of how it serves human life, rather than how it serves abstract scientific ends. Life, for Ortega, is not a

static phenomenon but a drama complete with constant changes.⁵⁹ The dramatic character of life is true not just for the individual but also for the nation. His work *Man and People* continues this line of thought by echoing how distinct human history is from animal history because of the human capacity to enter society.⁶⁰

The question remains: Does Ortega's narrative about a historical decline of Spain and a lost Spanish Golden Age represent a proto-fascist structure within Ortega's thought?⁶¹ There are two responses to this question. First, most scholarship on Ortega's nationalist tendencies applies a variant of Benedict Anderson's thesis that all nations, including Spain, are "imagined communities" and that this conceptualization of nationhood emerged as a modern phenomenon.⁶² However, even if Ortega's historical narrative is suspect to some (a question not addressed here), the narrative he tells is largely moral rather than historical. He suggests that the Spanish people have a unique character and temperament that descends from their historical circumstances, which he claims is also true of every nation. Second, it seems that a robust theory of liberalism must carry a unifying narrative of the past that brings people together as actors in a shared narrative. To call Ortega's appeal to the past exclusive either to fascists or nationalists, in my mind, is itself suspect. Instead, we must read Ortega's exploration of Spain's past as a lifelong effort to unify Spain. Without this, Spaniards in Spain, not to mention in Europe, will all be like the lonely, stateless sojourner in Buenos Aires.

Notes

1. Alec Dinnin, "Disoriented Liberalism: Ortega y Gasset in the Ruins of Empire," *Political Theory* 47, no. 5 (October 1, 2019): 619–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591719830794>
2. Ortega left Spain in 1939 to seek exile in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He moved from Argentina to Lisbon, Portugal, in 1942, and then back to Madrid shortly after.
3. Peter G. Earle, "Ortega y Gasset in Argentina: The Exasperating Colony," *Hispania* 70, no. 3 (September 1987): 475, <https://doi.org/10.2307/343400>. For Ortega's critical view of the state of the Argentine

people's existence and his view of the Americas, see Kessel Schwartz, "José Ortega y Gasset and Argentina," *Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea* 8 (1983): 59–81.

4. Rockwell Gray, *The Imperative of Modernity: An Intellectual Biography of José Ortega y Gasset* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 268.
5. It is often noted that Ortega's mission in *Meditations* was to "Europeanize" Spain. He sought to raise Spain to the cultural prominence of other European countries like Great Britain, France, and Germany. See, e.g., Carlos Morujão, Samuel Dimas, and Susana Relvas, "Spain Is the Problem; Europe Is the Solution," in *The Philosophy of Ortega y Gasset Reevaluated*, ed. Carlos Morujão, Samuel Dimas, and Susana Relvas (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2021), 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79249-7_1. As I will note, Ortega's true mission is more complex, as he wishes not simply to make Spain like Europe but to transform Spain into a country worthy of contributing to the European project of modernization.
6. This is especially true in his early works. *España invertebrada* concentrates on Spain as the problem and Europe as the solution. However, by the time he published *Revolt*, he had come to see the same problem of "the mass man" within Europe, not just Spain.
7. The reception of Ortega's thought is notoriously scattered and, much like a nation's historical memory, has often changed depending on the group interpreting him. After Spain's civil war, Ortega's writings were claimed by both Franco's fascists and Spanish Catholics who attempted in vain to reconcile Ortega's existentialist metaphysics to medieval scholastic metaphysics. After Ortega's death, Catholic thinkers came to prefer Ortega's contemporary Xavier Zubiri's metaphysics instead and critiqued Ortega as a Nietzschean nihilist. For a Catholic critique of Ortega, see José Sánchez Villaseñor, *Ortega y Gasset Existentialist: A Critical Study of His Thought and Its Sources*, trans. Joseph Small (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1949). After the 1960s, the number of Ortega studies would taper off every twenty years and return for a brief period, as it did in the late 1980s with an intellectual biography from Rockwell Gray. See Rockwell Gray, *The Imperative of Modernity: An Intellectual Biography of José Ortega y Gasset* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). In the last decade, scholars have concentrated on the character of Ortega's liberalism, with Alec Dinnin characterizing Ortega's thought as carrying intellectual foundations of later Spanish fascism, while Brendon Westler views him as carrying on the nineteenth-century Spanish liberal tradition.

8. Christopher Britt Arredondo, *Quixotism: The Imaginative Denial of Spain's Loss of Empire*, Reference, Information and Interdisciplinary Subjects Series (New York: SUNY Press, 2004).
9. Alec Francis Dinnin, "Democracy and Disorientation: José Ortega y Gasset's Post Imperial Liberalism" (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2020).
10. Ortega identifies the period 1480–1600 as the height of the Spanish Golden Age. See Ortega, *Invertebrate Spain*, 79.
11. For the methods of the Spanish Krausists, see Daniel Rueda Garrido, "Krause, Spanish Krausism, and Philosophy of Action," *Idealistic Studies* 49, no. 2 (2019): 167–88, <https://doi.org/10.5840/idstudies20191015103>
12. Esperanza Illán Calderón, "Cánovas y los orígenes ideológicos de la Restauración," *Revista Internacional de Sociología* 43, no. 3 (1985): 509.
13. Javier Krauel, *Imperial Emotions: Cultural Responses to Myths of Empire in Fin-de-Siècle Spain*, Contemporary Hispanic and Lusophone Cultures 10 (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 89.
14. Krauel, *Imperial Emotions*, 50.
15. Britt Arredondo, *Quixotism*. A problem with Arredondo's account of Quixotism lies precisely in his attempt to lump all the Quixotists together as promoting a nostalgia for empire. Ortega, we will see, interpreted *Quixote* with a greater bend toward realism than nostalgia.
16. This tendency among Spanish intellectuals to cite Quixote is known as Quixotism. See Britt Arredondo, *Quixotism*.
17. See Morujão, Dimas, and Relvas, "'Spain Is the Problem; Europe Is the Solution,'" 1–11. For studies of Ortega's *Meditations*, see Tatjana Gajic, "Reason, Practice and the Promise of a New Spain: Ortega's 'Vieja y Nueva Política' and Meditations del 'Quijote,'" *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 77, no. 3 (July 2000): 193–215, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074900050083121>; Helio Carpintero, "Ortega, Cervantes y las 'Meditaciones del Quijote' / Ortega, Cervantes and the 'Meditations on Quixote,'" *Revista de Filosofía* (Madrid) 30, no. 2 (2006): 7–34; Philip W. Silver, *Ortega as Phenomenologist: The Genesis of Meditations on Quixote* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Andrew J. Weigert, *Life and Society: A Meditation on the Social Thought of José Ortega y Gasset* (New York: Irvington, 1983).
18. Pedro Blas Gonzalez, *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega Y Gasset's Philosophy of Subjectivity* (Paragon House, 2005): Part III.
19. Ortega, *Meditations*, 31.
20. *Ibid.*, 34.

21. In this section, Ortega cites several paragraphs from his 1914 lecture series *Old and New Politics*. See Ortega, *Meditations*, 71.
22. For an overview of Spanish Krausism, see Daniel Rueda Garrido and Philosophy Documentation Center, “Krause, Spanish Krausism, and Philosophy of Action,” *Idealistic Studies* 49, no. 2 (2019): 167–88, <https://doi.org/10.5840/idstudies20191015103>
23. Morujão, Dimas, and Relvas, “Spain Is the Problem; Europe Is the Solution,” 1–11.
24. For Ortega, the problem of Spain is not just to Europeanize Spain but also to “Hispanize” Europe. Spain required something to contribute to the European project in a greater attempt to reimagine what Europe is. See Gayle Rogers, *Modernism and the New Spain: Britain, Cosmopolitan Europe, and Literary History*, *Modernist Literature & Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.
25. Ortega, *Meditations*, 19.
26. Marías, Julián. “Introduction.” In *Meditations on Quixote*, by José Ortega y Gasset, translated by E. Rugg and D. Marín (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 20.
27. As Rockwell Gray has written, “Though he wrote a great deal about pre-modern and modern Spanish culture, what he had to say own country was largely a function of his overriding concern to put twentieth-century Spain in touch with the cultural creations of the rest of Europe.” Rockwell Gray, “Ortega y Gasset and Modern Culture,” *Salmagundi*, no. 35 (1976): 6. See also Morujão, Dimas, and Relvas, “Spain Is the Problem; Europe Is the Solution,” 1–11.
28. W. Kim Rogers, “Ortega and Ecological Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 3 (July 1994): 503, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709852>
29. The belief in an objective reality is why Ortega’s position cannot be called relativistic.
30. Ortega, *Meditations*, 45.
31. *Ibid.*, 40.
32. *Ibid.*, 41.
33. *Ibid.*, 41.
34. *Ibid.*, 43.
35. José Ortega y Gasset, *Invertebrate Spain*, trans. Mildred Adams (New York: Howard Fertig, 1974), 1.
36. Nelson R. Orringer, “Henry Buckle’s Decadent Spain in Ortega’s ‘España invertebrada,’” *Hispanic Review* 72, no. 1 (2004): 113.

37. The crisis is a historical crisis. Its solution comes not from seeing humans as a philosophical abstraction as Descartes and his disciples did but from the acceptance that humans are at once searching for authenticity while also being bound by their circumstances as beings in the world.
38. See Manuel Maldonado-Denis, "Ortega y Gasset and the Theory of the Masses," *The Western Political Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (September 1961): 676, <https://doi.org/10.2307/444285>. Maldonado-Denis argues that Ortega considered the mass man a sociological phenomenon in *Invertebrate Spain* and a psychological phenomenon in *Revolt*. I disagree. In both works Ortega describes them as a psychological phenomenon that arises from a sociological arrangement—in *Invertebrate Spain*, this arrangement is the conquest of Iberia by the democratic Visigoths.
39. By social compartmentalism, Ortega refers to the socially bred instinct to retreat to one's inner circle, neglecting the greater good of one's society in favor of serving oneself, friends, and family.
40. Ortega, *Invertebrate Spain*, 40.
41. Ibid., 60.
42. Ibid., 60.
43. Ibid., 62.
44. Ibid., 45.
45. Ibid., 46.
46. Ibid., 72.
47. Ibid., 77.
48. Ibid., 80.
49. Ibid., 80.
50. Ibid., 80.
51. Ibid., 81.
52. Ibid., 82.
53. Ibid., 83.
54. Ibid., 83.
55. In my own assessment of Ortega's *Revolt*, it is the indifference to history that characterizes the mass man.
56. Ortega, *España invertebrada*, 84.
57. Ibid., 77–78.
58. Ibid., 78.
59. Felix Alluntis, "The 'Vital and Historical Reason' of José Ortega y Gasset," *Franciscan Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 1955): 60–78, <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.1955.0001>

60. José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 38.
61. Dinnin, in particular, argues that “Ortega’s strategy for coping with the end of the empire was to ascribe to liberalism the task of cultural regeneration.” See Dinnin, “Disoriented Liberalism,” 621.
62. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2016).

