Imperial Emotions

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Conclusion:
Toward an Ethics of Imperial Emotions

In Achieving our Country, Richard Rorty writes “stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity” (13). According to this, it does not really matter whether the emotional stories about Spain’s imperial past studied in the previous chapters are objective or not. For objectivity, as Rorty goes on to argue, “is of little relevance when one is trying to decide what sort of person or nation to be” (11). What does matter – and matters decisively – is the moral quality of the national identities constructed by our essayists. We can easily grant that these emotional stories told about the imperial past are not an accurate representation of that part of Spain’s history, but this still leaves us with the rather more difficult question of evaluating the moral dimension of such stories. What type of political community is envisioned when the passing of the imperial past is insufficiently mourned (Unamuno), when there is a melancholic identification with it (Ganivet), when there is an indignant reaction to some of its manifestations (Maeztu), or, finally, when the Spanish imperial past is viewed with shame simply to make possible Catalonia’s pride in its imperial prospects (Prat de la Riba)?

The answers offered in this conclusion suggest that the difficulties in displacing affection from the empire to a more properly national object burdened the Spanish political imagination for a good part of the twentieth century. This imperial burden can be approached from both a historical and a moral perspective. Historically, the presence of empire in the political imagination can be gauged by examining the emotional investment in imperial myths found in some of the major essays on national identity published between the 1910s and the 1940s, a period when these myths progressively lost their capacity to arouse ambivalent emotions and thus increasingly became the object of an excessive – and by any standard, false – pride (the best example being the Francoist discourses about Hispanidad, the purported Spanish-speaking community on both sides of the Atlantic).
Needless to say, the moral consequences of the national identities forged by imperial pride are nothing short of disastrous.

The Vanishing of Ambivalence

Although Spain remained neutral in World War I (1914–1918), this armed conflict is widely seen as a watershed in twentieth-century Spanish culture and politics. The critical transformations ushered in by the war signaled the end of the turn-of-the-century regenerationist movement. The decline of modernist ideals, which advocated a total break with the moral, political, and aesthetic values embodied by the Restoration regime, was accompanied by the rise of bourgeois reformist projects carried out by a younger, more competent generation of intellectuals led by José Ortega y Gasset (Johnson 121–32; Juliá 139–78; Mainer, La Edad 143–82). As these reformist projects took center stage, there was a radicalization of the political and cultural right in Spain that had momentous consequences for the imperial emotions we have been describing.

Here it is necessary to distinguish between Catalonia and the rest of Spain. In Catalonia, the pride in Catalan imperialism that was evident in La nacionalitat catalana proved to be a short-lived, circumstantial phenomenon (Casassas 174–76). In the rest of Spain, the imperial pride that presided over the 1892 celebrations of Columbus’s first voyage took on a new life, glossing over the contradictory imperial emotions characteristic of the turn of the nineteenth century. The ambivalent reverberation of the Spanish Empire is still seen in José Ortega y Gasset’s España invertebrada (1921), where after his solemn declaration that the Spanish colonization of America was both “[un] maravilloso acontecimiento” [a wonderful event] (200) and “lo único verdadera, sustantivamente grande que ha hecho España” [the only truly, substantively great thing that Spain has achieved] (201), he proceeds to degrade its importance by considering that it was primarily an endeavor of the people that was carried out “sin propósitos conscientes, sin directores, sin táctica deliberada” [without conscious purposes, without directors, without a deliberate tactic] (201). By contrasting the supposedly popular character of Spanish colonization with the presumed aristocratic temperament of British colonization, Ortega was registering not only a historical difference but also a difference in the degree of modernization between both nations. On the one hand, and following the example of Rome (110), the Spanish Empire embodied both national unity and domination in its most perfect form:

la unión se hace para lanzar la energía española a los cuatro vientos, para inundar el planeta, para crear un Imperio aún más amplio.
Conclusion: Toward an Ethics of Imperial Emotions

[unity is achieved in order to spread Spanish energy to the four corners of the world, to inundate the planet, to create an even more extensive empire]. (122)

On the other hand, the Spanish Empire was an irritating reminder that Spain was out of pace with the modern world, that even its highest accomplishments were somehow flawed, tainted, defective.

But in authors more firmly entrenched in conservative positions, the ambivalence with which Ortega still related to the early modern empire progressively vanished, making pride the dominant – and almost exclusive – emotion attached to the imperial past. This progressive vanishing of ambivalence is already evident in Julián Juderías’s La leyenda negra (1914), an essay with heavy nationalist undertones addressed to those who “aman el pasado, creen en el presente y confían en el porvenir glorioso de la Madre España” [love the past, believe in the present, and trust in the glorious prospects of Mother Spain] (16). In addition to giving one of the first definitions of the Black Legend as the story of an inquisitorial, ignorant, and fanatical Spain prone to cruel outbursts and violent repressions (24), Juderías associates imperial expansion with national pride, claiming that for contemporaries of the early modern Spanish Empire “las tierras de América y las islas de Asia, inmensas, riquísimas, misteriosas, vírgenes, revestían los caracteres de un prodigioso ensueño de opulencia y de poderío” [the lands of America and the islands in Asia, vast, rich, mysterious, and virgin possessions, were like a prodigious dream of power and opulence] (92). Although sixteenth-century Spaniards took pride in the power they wielded over the New World and its riches, Juderías argues that present-day Spaniards should take pride in their “spiritual legacy” in the Americas, by which he means the cultural achievements of empire (143–52).

Equally proud of this cultural legacy is José María Salaverría in La afirmación española (1917), an essay explicitly written against the pessimism and cosmopolitanism that, according to him, were characteristic of fin-de-siècle intellectuals. Devoting a whole chapter to Spain’s actions in America (123–32), Salaverría unsurprisingly concludes that the conquest and colonization of the Americas was the “suceso más grande que fuera realizado desde el Cristianismo” [the greatest event since the advent of Christianity] (123). Around the same time, the Spanish government designated the commemoration of the so-called “Discovery” of America by Christopher Columbus on October 12, 1492 as Spain’s national holiday, effectively reviving the tradition inaugurated by Cánovas del Castillo’s government in 1892. Officially instituted on June 16, 1918, this holiday was intended for Spaniards to honor and recognize themselves in Columbus’s glorious
feat. In other words, the date of October 12 was meant to be the object of a civil religion, of a religion where “the political state [...] is the essence of belief and rite” (Nisbet 525). And with this new religion went a new set of rituals, creeds, and liturgies designed to elicit popular reverence for the monumental event of the “Discovery.” Neither in the celebratory rituals nor in the above-cited essays is it possible to discern a trace of ambivalence or hesitation: in both cases, the Spanish empire in the New World is represented as the source of grandiose achievements. Indeed, as we move further away from the colonial crisis of the mid-1890s, the Spanish empire in the Americas seems capable of arousing only one emotion: pride. This powerful emotion dominates Ernesto Giménez Caballero’s *Genio de España* (1932), Ramiro de Maeztu’s *Defensa de la Hispanidad* (1934), and Ramón Menéndez Pidal’s “Idea imperial de Carlos V” (1937).

During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and its aftermath, the moral identity forged by imperial pride sunk into abjection. These were times when, as writer Juan Benet notes,

se ponen de nuevo en circulación las ideas de Imperio, Hispanidad, Reconquista, etcétera, y suben a los altares los apóstoles de una pasada y delirante ambición de grandeza – Donoso Cortés, Vázquez de Mella, Maeztu, Salaverría – que cifran la regeneración del país en la doble práctica de la espada y el rosario.

[the ideas of Empire, *Hispanidad*, Reconquest, etc., are put back into circulation, and the apostles of a bygone and delirious ambition of greatness are placed on an altar – Donoso Cortés, Vázquez de Mella, Maeztu, Salaverría – identifying the country’s regeneration with both the sword and the rosary]. (188)

Dark times indeed, when the Franco regime compensated for the nation’s internal destruction and international isolation by unleashing a propaganda campaign about Spain’s empire in the New World. Spurred by Menéndez Pidal’s lecture “The Imperial Ideal of Charles V,” philologist Antonio Tovar published *El Imperio de España* (1941), where he argued that the Francoist state was the legitimate heir to and continuation of the sixteenth-century Spanish Empire. These grandiloquent ideas were institutionalized in official organizations such as the Consejo de la Hispanidad and propagated in journals such as *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* and *Alférez*. At the popular level, movies such as *La manigua sin Dios* (1949) and *Alba de América* (1951) ensured that “the spectators of a ruined country in which food stamps still existed could attend the spectacle of their own greatness” (qtd. in Kamen, *Imagining* 106; on this topic, see also Labanyi, “Internalisations of Empire”).
This is not to say that Unamuno, in failing to fully mourn imperial glory, or Ganivet, by melancholically identifying with it, foreshadowed or prepared Francoist imperial propaganda in any way. Recent interventions have suggested just that, casting these authors as creators of a “proto-fascist” conscience (Barriuso 163) and as developing a series of myths “that helped lay the cultural, ideological, and imaginative groundwork for Spanish National-Catholic fascism” (Britt Arredondo 3). As congenial as these revisionist efforts are, I believe they are profoundly anachronistic for at least two reasons. First, they impose on the works of Unamuno and Ganivet an ideology (Fascism) that was simply not available at the turn of the century. And second, they ignore that those who revived the myths of empire in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s (the likes of Salaverría, Giménez Caballero, and Maeztu) did so by fiercely criticizing both the spirit and the works of the 1898 Generation (in the case of Maeztu, this criticism took the form of self-criticism, of a disavowal of his earlier works). At best one can argue that the moral identity forged by Unamuno and Ganivet was unable to displace affection from empire to a more properly national object, and that the lingering imperial emotions were subsequently appropriated by other, more conservative intellectuals and institutions who instrumentalized them for other, more reactionary projects. In the end, the main drawback of the emotional register employed by Unamuno, Ganivet, and Maeztu is that, by focusing on the emotional dimension of national identification, they left the role that institutions were to play in the nation unconsidered – surely a less exciting, but perhaps more productive intellectual endeavor (Villacañas Berlanga, “El carisma”). Rather than anticipating Fascism, the fin de siècle appears as a missed opportunity to build a decent post-empire Spain.

The Moral Implications of Imperial Emotions

We have seen that the pride aroused by the imperial past sustained a vision of the Spanish community based on the identification of the nation with both unity and domination. As principles of collective conduct, unity and domination failed to forge a moral identity acceptable to a majority of the citizens of the Spanish state. When the best of Spain’s history is identified with imperial expansion, and when this endeavor offers no reasons for shame, then it is difficult to argue for the moral worth of the resulting national identity. If the political argument about which historical episodes we should take pride in is better described as “an argument about which hopes to allow ourselves and which to forgo” (Rorty 14), then the hopes allowed by the persistence of imperial pride in public discourse during the 1910s–1940s would have seemed unbearable to anyone committed to
a generous, non-exclusive love of country like the one Maurizio Viroli attributes to patriots (as opposed to nationalists). The nationalist’s and the patriot’s love of country, Viroli tells us, have a different nature and intensity. While the former “preaches the necessity of defending the country’s culture and history as values to be retrieved and defended in their entirety, as goods to be cherished because of their distinctiveness and particularity” (165), the latter “allows us to keep both eyes fixed on our country’s greatness and miseries” (165). Less ambivalent and less tolerant of heterogeneity than the patriot’s love of country, the nationalist’s love of country promotes unconditional loyalty and blind attachment, leaving no space for a generous and charitable love (2).

From a clearly moral perspective, the hopes allowed by pride in empire also fail to satisfy the set of criteria established by Catherine Frost to judge the moral worth of nationalist arguments. Frost ties the moral worth of nationalism to its ability to provide “a shared frame of reference that enables representation” (7) and that meets three conditions: “relevance (a frame of reference must reflect real circumstances), currency (it must be revisable), and equal moral worth (it must respect individual members of the population)” (6). That the nationalist expressions of imperial pride of the 1910s–1940s fail to meet all three of these conditions can be easily determined by briefly noting that the frame of reference provided by expressions of imperial pride was neither relevant – for it enshrined the cultural myths of empire when Spain was isolated and in ruins – nor current – for it argued that empire was the eternal essence of Spain – nor respectful of the individual members of the population – for it sought to eradicate all political and cultural diversity.

As democracy replaced authoritarianism in the late 1970s, the myths of empire waned but did not completely disappear. In fact, as Henry Kamen has suggested, “the imperial vision received a new facelift, and the emphasis on the sixteenth-century achievement was directed towards culture and language rather than at national chauvinism” (Imagining 125). This was clearly noted by the editorial published in El País on October 12, 1992, which recommended that during the 1992 celebrations of Columbus’s first voyage Spaniards celebrate not “el modelo de conquista ni el de colonización” [the model of conquest or colonization] but rather “la significación histórica de unos episodios que supusieron el más importante esfuerzo de proyección exterior de los españoles” [the historical significance of a series of episodes that involved the Spaniards’ greatest effort in their foreign projection]. Aware of the many dissenting voices that were casting the discovery as conquest in 1992, the editorial insists that “esa empresa forma parte de la historia y constituye, independientemente del juicio que merezcan las conductas, un hecho de civilización” [that endeavor is part of history and constitutes
Conclusion: Toward an Ethics of Imperial Emotions

a fact of civilization above and beyond the judgment that certain conducts might deserve. And it closes by suggesting that Spaniards should relate to the events of 1492 “sin triunfalismos ni complejos” [without triumphalism or complexes] (“Octubre del 92”).

Despite *El País*’s injunction to fend off both pride and shame when commemorating the events of 1492, there is hope today for the establishment of an ethical relationship with respect to the emotions generated by the conquest and colonization of the Americas that goes beyond a declaration of emotional neutrality. In particular, two conditions obtain today that make it possible to imagine an ethics that will appropriately direct the emotions evoked by the Spanish Empire. First, the possession of an empire has ceased to be a criterion for evaluating the past, present, and future of nations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a nation’s status within the international community was dependent upon an ethico-political standard that required “[la capacidad] para la afirmación de la nación en un contexto europeo de competencia por el dominio del mundo” [the ability of a nation to assert itself in a context where European nations competed for dominance over the world] (Álvarez Junco, “La nación” 411–12). Today, after the different waves of decolonization and the rise of postcolonial studies, this is no longer the case. In this context, expressions of imperial pride are seen as being thoroughly inappropriate.

Second, the number of loud and passionate critiques coming from a variety of constituencies during the 1992 commemorations suggests that there is a plurality of emotional investments in the Spanish Empire that is striving to gain moral recognition. At the turn of the twentieth century, the fragmentation of the Spanish public was above all the result of the rise of Catalan and other sub-state nationalisms. Today, Catalans, Basques, and Galicians have different stakes in the collective memory of the conquest and colonization of the Americas as do the mass of immigrants coming from Ecuador, Colombia, or Argentina, to name just three former colonies with a significant immigrant population in Spain. With Spain’s population composed of more than 1,100,000 immigrants coming from Central and South America, the narrative that portrays Spain’s actions in the Americas as a series of glorious achievements (cultural or otherwise) shows all of its painful inadequacy. Aware of this inadequacy, some Spanish intellectuals, like Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio or Eduardo Subirats, joined the chorus of dissenting voices in 1992 by penning scathing indictments of the neo-imperial vision that had gained prominence by the early 1990s.

In the context of my own argument, what Sánchez Ferlosio’s *Esas malditas y equivocadas Yndias* (1994) and Subirats’s *América o la memoria histórica* (1994) show is that today it is no longer possible to consider, as our essayists did,
only the range of imperial emotions that were relevant to them and their immediate readers (the people of Spain and Catalonia). Lest one adopts a resolutely provincial and chauvinistic viewpoint, it is hard to ignore the many constituencies that have a different stake in the story of the conquest and colonization of the Americas. The very same existence and thriving of new collective identities such as those embodied by indigenous activists and social movements is testimony to the idea that Spain's imperial past has not one but many meanings, and that those multiple meanings originate in a variety of emotional investments. Rather than flattening out or glossing over those differences, the challenge seems to be to do them justice, or at least to provide a space for their proliferation.

To be sure, imagining new ways of feeling about a number of events as heterogeneous, complex, and contradictory as those that are grouped under the label “the conquest and colonization of the Americas” is a rather daunting task. It is also, however, a timely intellectual project in view of the ethical significance of emotions, a topic that has garnered a fair amount of critical attention in recent years. If, generally speaking, it seems hard to lead an ethical life without cultivating one’s emotions, then it should seem equally hard to hope to establish an ethical relationship with Spain’s imperial past without considering the variety of emotions it has evoked in its more than four hundred years of history. Bearing this in mind, my reflection on the imperial emotions offered by the fin-de-siècle essayistic tradition has sought to better understand the emotions of the past in order to better imagine the emotions of the future, a time that will hopefully bring new ways of feeling about Spain’s expansion into the New World. This momentous event, which has had a decisive claim upon the history and the conscience of Spain, the Americas and, more largely, the West, certainly deserves it.

Notes

1 Enric Ucelay Da-Cal offers an alternative account, claiming that imperialism is an inextricable part of Catalanism, regardless of ideological persuasion (El imperialismo 810). In this regard, he depicts the republican, leftist economist Carles Pi i Sunyer as an imperialist (810–13), a characterization that flattens out the ideological differences between Prat’s conservative nationalism and Pi i Sunyer’s progressive nationalism. Casassas’s thesis about Catalan imperialism being a circumstantial phenomenon seems more persuasive than Ucelay Da-Cal’s.

2 Drawing on the experience of the Unión Ibero-Americana (1885–1939), a conservative organization that since 1912 had intensely lobbied for the designation of October 12 as a national holiday, political leaders gave speeches, presided over marches, and paid homage to Columbus’s statue in Madrid. For a brief history of this state-funded, hispanoamericanista organization, see Sepúlveda Muñoz 164–70. The journal published by the UIA was Unión Ibero-Americana (1887–1926), which
in 1926 was replaced by Revista de las Españas (1926–1936).

3 Also paradigmatic of the post-Civil War conservative uses of the imperial past is Ricardo del Arco y Garay's *La idea de imperio en la política y la literatura españolas* (1944), a book that appropriately closes with dictator Francisco Franco's evocations of the idea of an imperial Spain (802–04). For a critical revision of Ramón Menéndez Pidal's notion of empire and that of his followers, see Villacañas Berlanga, *¿Qué imperio?*

4 As Trouillot writes: "For varying reasons and in various degrees, native and black Americans, Latino-Americans, African, Caribbean, and Asian leaders denounced the celebration of the conquest or tried to redirect the narrative of The Discovery" (138).

5 Already in the early 1970s philosopher Bernard Williams argued for the centrality of emotions in moral life in his "Morality and the Emotions." Since then, several philosophers have broached the same topic in different directions. Three recent books that make the case for the role of emotions in our moral development are Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), Robert Solomon's *True to Our Feelings* (2007), and Victoria Camps's *El gobierno de las emociones* (2011).