

## **“El pasado bajo tierra. Exhumaciones contemporáneas de la Guerra Civil”**

### **(The Past Below Ground. Contemporary Exhumations from the Spanish Civil War)**

Francisco Ferrándiz, Anthropos Editorial, Barcelona, Spain (2014) 331 pages

The excavations of clandestine mass graves from the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) have been one of the most controversial and contested subjects shaping public Spanish debate in the last fifteen years. *The Past Below Ground. Contemporary Exhumations from the Spanish Civil War* (2014) by the social anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz offers the first comprehensive study of that phenomenon and its societal and historical consequences, not only for a reevaluation of the dominant narratives about the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) and the following transition process, but also on an individual level for relatives who wish to locate, identify, bury and commemorate their lost kin. The unmarked mass graves of Republican victims who were shot by the Falangist troops, clandestinely buried and subsequently abandoned until today, represent crucial evidence of long silenced repression and unfinished mourning.

The book is a chronological compilation of revised articles published by the author between 2004 and 2013. Taking stock of his extensive research in the field, it attempts to provide a discursive history and genealogy of the social and political dynamics activated by the mass grave exhumations. One of the main underlying questions of this study refers to the memory processes the excavations of Civil War mass graves trigger in its diverse facets.

As a multi-situated “ethnography of the exhumations” (38), Ferrándiz offers a profound analysis that embraces his anthropological fieldwork at the site of the graves, including interviews with family members. In addition, he describes commemorative rituals and portrays local and heterogeneous grassroots civil society associations as the central actors of the ongoing memory work. He also depicts links to the regional and national political levels, reaching to transnational and global circulations of international judicial terms like ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘enforced disappearance’ and their local adoptions.

The introduction presents a wide spectrum of the theoretical approaches applied, providing a “road map” for the following study (35). For instance, using Katherine Verdery’s famous concept the *political life of dead bodies*<sup>1</sup>, Ferrándiz illustrates several layers of analysis. Taking the *bodies* of the vanquished as the underlying framework for the book, he expands this term to encompass *medial, cultural, associative, judicial, political or scientific and forensic* fields of meaning as an open catalogue, stressing the *multiple lives of the dead bodies* in

the context of the immensely complex questions that mass grave excavations are raising in twenty first century Spain. In Ferrándiz's own metaphorical term, he is undertaking a "social autopsy" (37) directed towards the impact that the reappearance of the exhumed human remains are having, referring on the one hand to its dynamic, vivid and unfinished character of their reappearance, while on the other hand emphasizing its important and diverse symbolic dimensions, illustrated for instance in forensic practices as well as commemorative discourses.

The following first chapter provides an in-depth description of the anthropological work at the mass graves, reflecting the impact the current exhumations had, especially after 2000, which in the local context was shaped by the sensation of spectrality and 'haunting'<sup>2</sup> due to the re-emergence of traumatic and suppressed memories. The second chapter is a single case study based on the qualitative data of an ethnography of an exhumation conducted close to Valdediós in Asturias. Ferrándiz reconstructs very sensitively the detailed family story of his informant, Esther Montoto, who, in 1937 as a three-year old girl fled with her traumatized mother and two sisters from the Francoist repression into exile in Cuba. Now – sixty-six years later – Esther is searching for the human remains of her father, who was shot during the Spanish Civil War and whose destiny for her could never be fully clarified.

Afterwards, the third chapter analyzes the impact of the public exposition and narratives about the exhumed violence. Ferrándiz shows how these images of skeletons and fragments of bones, with signs of repression, trigger discourses about the terror politics expressed in public practices. The author offers some insights into his fieldwork, for instance at an exhumation conducted in Villamayor de los Montes in Burgos, a region that Ferrándiz describes as the "capital of the crusade" (121), the area where, currently, the greatest number of excavations are taking place. In that respect, Ferrándiz highlights the role of testimonies at the site of the grave as a privileged place to trigger memory processes. Especially in a local and rural context, it is impressive how relatives of the victims beside the exhumed grave break their silence and start to tell their stories, in many cases gaining the public attention that they never had before. In these acts of recognition and 'rehumanization' of the victims through mass grave exhumations, Ferrándiz describes how a process of mourning can be activated through different rituals before, during and after the exhumation.

The fourth chapter reconstructs historically the different exhumation circles from a long-term perspective, beginning with the first excavations already taking place during the postwar period under the Franco dictatorship, which exclusively commemorated the Civil

War victims from the Francoist side. A second wave of exhumations was initiated during the transition process by relatives of the defeated, who only after the end of the dictatorship had the possibility of commemorating their lost kin by burying them properly in a cemetery, although without any institutional support.

The fifth chapter, revealingly entitled ‘From the Mass Grave to Human Rights’, presents transnational perspectives on the judicial and political conflict by Spanish Magistrate Baltasar Garzón. When, in October 2008, Garzón started the investigation of the *desaparecidos* going back to the Spanish Civil War, he opened the first criminal investigation into Francoist repression. This ‘judicialization’ of the mass graves, based on international human rights principles was a – finally failed – attempt to vanquish the Amnesty Law from 1977 and consequently, impunity in Spain, following the demands of local memory initiatives. Ferrándiz analyzes how Judge Garzón’s attempt to indict Francoism became crucial to the eruption of human rights discourses and practices in the debates around ‘historical memory’ triggered by the excavation of mass graves. Ferrándiz reaffirms how legal concepts such as the judicial figures of ‘forced disappearances’ and ‘impunity’ have travelled transnationally from human rights discourses emerged previously against the background of Latin America’s Southern Cone dictatorships and were adopted by local memory movements to inform Spanish public debate.

The last chapter traces the history of the ‘Valley of the Fallen’, the sinister and anachronistic monument to, and mausoleum of, the dictator Franco where the founder of the Falange José Antonio Primo de Rivera is buried as well. Ferrándiz, as an appointed member of the expert commission founded in 2011 that was given the task to ‘resignify’ the martial and uncanny symbolism of this huge and contested site of memory close to Madrid that combines fascist and Catholic symbols, calls it the *mother of all mass graves*. With that, he refers to the at least 33 000 bodies reburied there between 1959 and 1983 after being exhumed from Civil War mass graves across Spain. While these human remains are still lying in the monument’s crypts, or in the Cuelgamuros cemetery, the identity of many republican victims remains unidentified today.

Another recurrent and illuminating, although more implicit, aspect of the study refers to how the existence of mass graves destabilizes the hegemonic narrative about the idealization of the Spanish transition model, making evident that the democratization process was largely based on silencing public discussion concerning the dictatorship’s repression.

The book is limited to the Spanish case, hence it raises a more general question that goes beyond the scope of Ferrándiz's study: does excavating mass graves on the whole have a healing momentum and cathartic character, especially in other, often, non-Christian, cultures? While this basic *transitional justice* assumption is hardly questioned, and generally taken for granted, it would be interesting to open a comparative perspective with cases from other societies where relatives have dealt differently with, or have rejected, this kind of effort to come to terms with a violent past.

Despite a complex and dense writing style, Ferrándiz's accessible language and entertaining approach means the book is well written, with a clear argumentative structure. In his thick description, Ferrándiz offers a discourse analysis based on multiple documents ranging from different media such as press and television sources, but also including forensic reports, parliamentary debates, laws, poems, novels and films, etc. By offering ground-breaking insights into the exhumations current cultural, political, social and judicial effects (among others), Ferrándiz shows how memory discourses have been changing in the last years, reflected not least in the evolution of the author's own theoretical production of meaning itself.

All in all, Ferrándiz describes with great sensitivity and empathy the multiple repercussions in the process of exhuming mass graves in contemporary Spain. From my point of view it is an important and essential study that reflects how, today, the excavation of mass graves has become a powerful metaphor for a process of recovering historical memory, while simultaneously being an important way of remembering the violence of the Spanish Civil War, which has been officially silenced for decades.

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Verdery (1999): *The Political Live of Dead Bodies*, New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrándiz refers to the work of Avery F. Gordon (1997): *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.