

# *Understanding our Past.*

## *Descriptions and Judgements of Value*

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Historians have recently been expressing concern about the political uses of the past. Examples of this are the conferences and seminars and the monographic issues of journals devoted to the subject<sup>1</sup>. However, there is considerable variation in what is understood by “political use”, and that variation is concomitant with what each author considers an unacceptable or misleading use of the past. Here I am going to refer to a particular political use of the past which is immediately related with the construction – some say “recovery”, others “imagining” – of traditions. The use that consists in stating that we cannot judge other times from our own time, that the values and beliefs of each age are so different and discontinuous from ours that the historian must make a moral *epoché* and devote himself to understanding and not making value judgements of the object of his study. Recently, this point of view has often appeared in connection with the politics of nationalisation of populations. For even in nationalist conceptualisations which understand themselves as civic or not ethnicist, those in which emphasis is placed on the political will of the citizens – or, as Renan puts it, those which understand the nation as a “daily plebiscite” – resort to the legacy of tradition when it comes to delimiting the body of civility which seeks to constitute or legitimise itself as a nation.

Renan’s theory – often cited as an example of political or subjective nationalism as opposed to the kind of objective or cultural nationalism that

1. Some examples are the seminars *Identità mediterranea: gli usi del passato politici*, at the Instituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Naples, January 1999, and the *Cursos d’Arrábita, Usages politiques de l’Histoire*, coordinated by Jacques Revel, September 2000. *Enquête*, the journal of the École d’Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, devotes a monographic issue in the third trimester of 2000 to *Les usages politiques du passé*; also *Pasajes de pensamiento contemporáneo* called its dossier in no. 1 in 1999 *Los usos políticos del pasado*, and Pedro Ruiz, in “La historia en nuestro paradójico presente”, in n. 9, December 2002, of the same journal, gives an account of numerous publications on this subject.

goes back to Herder – seems to be a privileged example in this aspect. For although it is true that Renan does not cease to insist on the universalist ontological and axiological principle that “man is a reasonable moral being before being enclosed in one language or another, before being a member of one race or another, an adherent or one culture or another”<sup>2</sup>, that does not prevent his definition of nation from expressing a tension, or even an ambivalence, between the two criteria of individuation that he establishes. As Todorov indicated, on the one hand the criterion of the willingness to live in common points to the freedom of the individual, but the criterion of cultural legacy points to external determination of the individual, not to freedom but to necessity<sup>3</sup>. This tension between the two criteria is clearly perceptible towards the end of his famous lecture:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. There are two things which constitute that soul, that spiritual principle, and which to tell the truth are only one. The first is in the past, the second in the present. One is the common possession of a rich legacy of memories; the other is the present consent, the desire to live together, the willingness to maintain the undivided inheritance that has been received. Man is not extemporised, gentlemen. The nation, like the individual, is the result of a long past of efforts, sacrifices and anxieties. The worship of our forefathers is the most legitimate of all forms of worship; our forefathers made us what we are. A heroic past, great men and glory (true glory, of course) – these are the social capital on which the idea of a nation is founded<sup>4</sup>.

So that, although Renan emphasises the aspect of the free will of individuals and seeks to detach the nation from external determinations, whether racial, ethnic or even linguistic, he ends up by thinking of an individual to whom it is hard to impute free decisions, since the “non-extemporised men” who constitute the unity of the nation are what their ancestors have made of them. Thus, even in this subjective, political conception of nationalism, the legacy of culture is reintroduced as the individuation criterion of nations; although, to be fair, in a subordinate way. Nevertheless, Renan reveals certain aspects that are pertinent for our present purposes. For, not without ambivalence, as if caught on the horns of a dilemma, for this defender of freedom and consent “forgetting and even historical mistakes are an essential factor in the creation of a nation, so that the progress of historical studies often becomes a danger for nationality”. The reason is that “unity is always brought about brutally”, and that the fundamental thing in a nation consists in the fact that “the individuals have a great deal in common, and also that they have all *forgotten many things*”<sup>5</sup>. It is true that Renan was writing only a few years after the Franco-Prussian War, when defeated France had lost Alsace and Lorraine to the Reich. And the context of

2. Ernest Renan, *¿Qué es una nación?*, Sequitur, Madrid, 2001, p. 73.

3. T. Todorov, *Nous et les autres*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1989.

4. Renan, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

5. Renan, *op. cit.*, pp. 35 and 39. The emphasis is mine.

his statements is the conflicts between two great nation-states, or rather between a consolidated nation-state and one in the process of constitution and integration. Just the kind of political entities that the renewed European stateless-nation nationalisms question. The ironical aspect of the matter is that Renan's affirmations could very well be applied to them, since the more or less strong processes of nationalisation of populations that they support duplicate the patterns of the historical ones that they impugn.

At this point I shall fix my position with regard to the political use I mentioned: I wish to defend the idea that abstaining from judgement of value is untenable from a moral and political viewpoint and also from an epistemological viewpoint. It is, in fact, an updating of the most sterile relativism which not only disguises or does not grasp the logic of understanding but also locks the person who maintains it into a dialogic inconsistency. In other words, it seems to me to be an updating of the most antiquated historicism, to put it in terms that belong to the historians; or of the most rudimentary emic viewpoint, to put it in the language of socio-cultural anthropology. For the fact is that this problem – whether it is proper and legitimate, and not a mere unjustified distortion, to make value judgements about aspects of other cultures, eras, ways of living, mentalities or suchlike matters – this problem, I say, has been recurrent and still is, both in the realm of history and in that of anthropology. However, to say that comparison and judgement of value are inseparable from the process of understanding must not be taken in the sense that the scholar, once his labour has concluded, should emit something like a moral ruling about whatever he may happen to have studied; still less that what he writes should resemble an unavowed or explicit sermon. What is being said is that comparison and judgement of value are inseparable from the logic and *effective conduct* of research itself, which could not be at all successful without them.

There are certainly differences between anthropology and history. It might be said that, in their respective constitutive canons, if the former looks towards the borders, the latter looks backwards; if anthropology looks at those who do not form part of our own genealogy, history looks towards our ancestors. Yet it is also true, as Geertz pointed out, that nowadays it is not so easy to make this distinction, for they both tend to look backwards and towards the borders. Ricoeur says that the otherness of the foreign, the otherness of the past and the otherness of inscription are conjugated to fix historical knowledge in the realm of social sciences. I think that a good deal of anthropology after the classical period – that is, after the Second World War – satisfies this threefold conjunction, although it is true that there are still examples of fieldwork, the discipline's watchword, which characterise many of the current ethnological or ethnographic studies. However, rather than speculate about the criteria of delimitation and identity of the two disciplines, it is better to look at the literature that has been produced in recent

decades. If we apply Wittgenstein's methodological "look and see" to studies such as Pagden's *The Fall of Natural Man*, Todorov's *The Conquest of America*, Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, Detienne's *The Daily Life of the Greek Gods*, Veyne's *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?*, Geertz's *The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* or Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village*, to take very diverse examples, are they historical studies or anthropological studies? Depending on the academic and supra-university milieus of the various linguistic areas, the list of cases could be endless. The fact is that as we move away from the paradigmatic cases of each discipline the question becomes hard to answer, whereas with those cases it is easy to resolve. However, what is new is the increasing number of studies of "blurred genre". Even with regard to fieldwork as the distinctive note of anthropology, the matter becomes complicated if one takes into account what has become known as "history of the contemporary world" or "history of the present time", in which archive work is combined with testimonies, interviews with survivors or informers<sup>6</sup>, and documents – shared by historians and anthropologists – in which the inscription is not in writing but in pictures or in still or moving photographic images. One may well ask, once again, whether the chapters of Peter Burke's recent book concerning the use of pictures as historical evidence about material culture, stereotypes of others, or children and women in daily life are history or anthropology<sup>7</sup>.

For our present purposes, therefore, the differences between anthropology and history can be left somewhat to one side, for the fact is that they both seek to study what is other, different or alien; although, for our present purposes once again, there is a difference – which has been treated at some length – in what has been the effective experience of the two disciplines. As has been pointed out by Marcel Detienne – but Detienne is a professor of social and cultural history, mythology and anthropology of Greek civilisation at Johns Hopkins University – "when an anthropologist meets a historian, as he greets him he must be aware that history – I am speaking of the science – was born national, whereas anthropology was always comparative by nature"<sup>8</sup>. I will come back to this aspect later, in the third part of this talk, as those who defend a moral *epoché* in the understanding of what is alien tend to look for support in the affirmation that one can only compare the comparable, and that one cannot judge what is not comparable with ourselves. So that what both kinds of knowledge are about is the privilege and uniqueness that we grant to the particular, how we think about it in relation

6. See *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli*. Seuil, Paris, 2000, p. 437, and Geertz, C. *Available Light*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, ch. V, especially pp. 118 ff.

7. P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001.

8. M. Detienne, *Comparar lo incomparable*, Península, Barcelona, 2001, pp. 29-30.

to ourselves, a thinking and relation that, depending on whether they are of one kind or another, will substantially alter what we understand as “ourselves”, which is what should interest us. For the problem is not so much the mere fact that the past is at the service of the present as the purpose for which it is. In short, if the so-called human and social sciences must be of interest to us it is not because of some desire for erudition devoid of life, or even contrary to life, or as techniques for social organisation and control, but for the possibility they may offer of other ways of imagining ourselves with a view to a better life. It is with regard to this axiological option concerning history or anthropology that I say that the use of the past which consists in emphasising the “unrepeatable and incomparable individuality of historical situations” entails the moral and political risk of finding oneself “defenceless against the inertia of what is established, becoming an advocate of what exists because it has been historically transmitted” [and] “the famous understanding easily turns into justifying everything”, as J.J. Carreras says with regard to the German historicism of Ranke and Meinecke and as can be said of any particularism that only admits immanent analyses<sup>9</sup>.

Indeed, those who argue for abstaining from judgement of value do so with the implicit assumption that all historical individuals – whatever their concretion, whether they be people, actions, practices or collective bodies – have the same value, because, as comparison is neither possible nor desirable, value can only be decided on the basis of criteria and models that are internal to what is valued. However, someone who affirms equality of value for all cases affirms, *eo ipso*, that nothing has value, for the very notion of value is nullified, as it has the sense of indicating the set or system of our preferences: something has value for us because we prefer it to something that does not have value for us. And this is not an empirical question but a conceptual one, since it has to do with how we use our language. The fact is that from the abolition of the notion of value one can derive some unexpectedly pernicious consequences insofar as memory and the use of memory are concerned. I believe that Todorov, in a context of constant, somewhat simplistic invocations of memory *tout court*, has the merit of having emphasised an aspect which is no less important for being simple: the fact that memory and forgetting are not the terms of a simple opposition, since forgetting is a constitutive part of the exercise of memory<sup>10</sup>. Only the fraudulent device of an omniscient divine intellect could lead us to imagine complete, transparent access to past, present and future. Insofar as we are dealing here with human intelligences, what is opposed, strictly speaking, is not memory and forgetting, but *suppression* (forgetting) and *conservation*, as

9. J.J. Carreras, *Razón de Historia*. Marcial Pons, Saragossa, 2000, p. 58.

10. T. Todorov, *Les abus de la mémoire*, Arléa, Paris, 1995. See further in *Memoria del mal, tentación del bien*. Península, Barcelona, 2002.

*memory* is the result of the relation of the two aspects. Consequently, *selecting* what we wish to conserve from the wealth of our past is constitutive of memory. This shows the need to involve our preferences, which the scholar, if he is not a solipsist bordering on autism, will think of, if not as universal, then at least as capable of being generalisable. All the more, perhaps, if one reckons that selective recovery of the past is tensed by the subsequent use that we may wish to make of it. So that those who argue for abstention from judgement, those who consciously or unconsciously are still guided by the ideal of a distant objectivity of the natural sciences, in ruling out all judgement of value, in excluding any possibility of selection, convert historical study into a mere indistinct accumulation which weighs down and impedes the project dimension – imagining preferable ways of life – of the exercise of historical memory.

Moreover, overdoing this viewpoint – abstaining from making value judgements for the sake of not distorting what is considered to be incomparable and irreducibly different – leads the person who maintains it either to silence or to dialogic inconsistency, if he does in fact go on talking about anything. For either what he talks about has something to do with us, or else it hasn't. If it has something to do with us, if it concerns our lives, then comparison and judgement are unavoidable. On the other hand, if there is no sense that can be common to others and ourselves, then it is best to be silent because discourse is abolished. Note that I said "sense" and not "agreement", because it is only possible to agree or disagree about something that we understand. The fact is that anthropology, a discipline with even more moments of identity crisis than history, has already faced this disjunctive: either to accept that there is some sense common to others and ourselves or to be silent. It was after the classical period of the discipline – the time of the incipient period of decolonisation – that this issue was raised, once anthropology had been defined as a "sociology of primitive peoples" (Lucy Mair). If it could serve for those of us who were not "primitive peoples" to understand ourselves, then anthropology was something more than sociological knowledge referring exclusively to others. But if such a use was not possible, then another no less urgent question arose: why practise it? As a private solace for adventurous hearts, or for a better understanding of others with a view to a more efficient administration of them politically and economically? Obviously, this latter possibility was excluded by the anti-colonialist movements themselves. Michel Leiris, an atypical ethnologist, has the merit of having been one of the first to grasp the situation clearly<sup>11</sup>.

It is true that we cannot now do away with the strongly ethnocentric loading of a definition of anthropology that was based on the poorly formed

11. See M. Leiris, "L'ethnologue devant le colonialisme", in *Cinq études d'ethnologie*. Gallimard, 1997.

and problematic distinction between “civilised” and “primitive”, a distinction constructed within cultural evolutionism, a theory that raised the discipline to its academic status, at least in English-speaking countries. It is also well known that in the fifties this conceptual distinction began to shift, both because of the logical impossibility of defining simplicity absolutely – simplicity being the criterion used by the evolutionists to determine the primitive – and to get away from its dangerous moral and political effects. For the distinction between civilised and primitive was converting all that was different into a kind of bastard or aborted emergence of the civilised, that is, of the anthropologist’s cultural frame of reference (for instance, remember the categorisation made by Frazer – and the whole British intellectualist tradition, as Evans-Pritchard called it – of magic as bastard physics or false science). Along the same lines, in the case of history it was the impulse to get away from the contemplation of the past “as a collection of injustices, superstitions and errors” that led German historicism to criticise the supposition of “a human nature fitted into a theory of progress, which made it necessary to judge each era not in relation to itself but on the basis of what it contributed to general standardising progress”<sup>12</sup>. I believe that J.J. Carreras’s affirmation about Meinecke’s historicism can be repeated, word for word, with regard to the particularism of Boas and Ruth Benedict when they confronted cultural evolutionism for similar reasons. And it was in this way that the emic perspective appeared, long before Pike technically established the emic/etic distinction.

Nevertheless, opposing oneself to the undesirable effects of evolutionism and its central category of progress – as the historicists wished to do in history and the particularists in anthropology – need not necessarily lead us from an undesirable viewpoint to a worse one. That is to say, getting away from precisely what the historicists and the particularists sought to avoid does not inevitably lead one to postulate incomparability, or abstention from judgement of value, or a renunciation of criticism and therefore an understanding which ultimately amounts to justifying everything. And not for the reasons offered so far, but because of the very logic of understanding what is alien. For that pretension of understanding “from nowhere”, of would-be objectivity, as if it were possible to understand human actions without involving the pre-understanding and understanding of my own cultural assumptions, is in various aspects indebted to a conception that seeks to make the study of human phenomena analogous to that of natural phenomena, as the sciences of nature were conceived before the criticism of the positivist conception of them. I shall continue with my argumentation in three parts: firstly, I shall criticise the sharp dichotomy between facts and values; secondly, I shall expound how comparability, insofar as it is necessary for understanding, implies judgement of value; finally, I shall criticise

12. Carreras, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

a non-explicit supposition of the supporters of incomparability and valorative *epoché*, namely their conception of cultures or epochs as uniform units, as "drops of pure cultural blood" or "semantic crystals", to borrow expressions used by Geertz concerning what he calls the integral configurational conception of cultural identity.

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Those in favour of abstaining from any value judgement in cultural or historical interpretations explicitly or implicitly suppose that one can establish a sharp distinction separating two kinds of discourse between which there can be no possible bridges or transitions: factual or descriptive discourse and valorative discourse. Infringing this exclusive distinction would imply either committing a moralistic fallacy (basing a prediction about a future state of things on a moral judgement about the present situation) or else a naturalistic fallacy (consisting in proceeding from a factual premise to a moral judgement)<sup>13</sup>. An example proposed by Ulises Moulines a few years ago, slightly modified, may show how the affirmation of these two fallacies is, in turn, a meta-fallacy. Consider this conversation between two people:

A. Did you know that Gómez Olivas has strangled one of his colleagues?

B. What? Has he gone mad?

A. No, although that's what he's trying to make the university and the police believe.

B. So did he act unthinkingly, overcome by confusion?

A. No, everything indicates that he had it carefully planned. Ever since they started a public controversy, Gómez Olivas had been suggesting that his colleague was raving, that he couldn't cope with his sense of guilt, that he had had suicidal tendencies ever since he was a child, and that he was in fact going to do away with himself by strangling himself. And Gómez Olivas thought that he would get away with it because he's a man with considerable influence in certain academic and political quarters.

B. But what motive did he have?

A. He wanted to be victorious in the dispute, and he wanted his opponent to appear unbalanced and not worthy of belief.

B. That Gómez Olivas is a scoundrel and a coward!

Well, if we consider this dialogue we see that all A's affirmations are "matters of fact", in which physical, psychological or sociological attributes of Gómez Olivas are predicated, except for the conclusion, in which B finally makes a moral valuation of the strangling professor. According to those who defend the sharp dichotomy between facts and values, this would seem to be a clear case of naturalistic fallacy, because a value judgement is inferred from factual premises. Yet this argumentative conversation is perfectly reasonable, so reasonable that many of the moral interpretations in our lives are of a similar kind. Even legal interpretations, incidentally, in

13. U. Moulines, "Hechos y valores: falacias y metafalacias. Un ejercicio integracionista", *Isegoría*, n. 3, 1991, pp. 26-43.



which cruelty, bad faith and so on are sometimes established on the basis of questions of fact which are considered proven – someone took advantage of the darkness of the night, and so on. The example of the strangling professor shows that maintaining a strict dichotomy between descriptive language and valorative language is fallacious. Whether in the sciences of nature or in the humanities, inasmuch as we are dealing with interpretations, our historically constructed language of reference, with its implicit and explicit valuations, is the only one with which we can give an account of our experiences (although, on this point, there are some differences between ordinary language and theoretical languages on which I shall not dwell now).

It is true that the relation existing between factual premises and decisions is not identical to the relation between facts and theory which occurs in natural sciences, but this should not prevent us from accepting that there are many kinds of relation between factual premises and conclusions. Rather than an exclusive dualism, what we have is a great variety of different kinds of factual statements and different kinds of decisions (think of the argumentations of politics, of art and its criticism, of economics, and so on). The facts are certainly given, yet this is not equivalent to saying that what causes a fact to be considered as such is also immediately given, but rather it emerges from the various ways in which people live (whether considered from a transcultural or a historical viewpoint). Which does not mean that we have to discard absolutely the distinction between facts and values, between descriptive or factual language and valorative language. In general, this distinction has to be understood as one of degree and not of kind, where there is room for very different densities of each of the two things in each discourse. Only a circumstantial analysis can indicate to us when we are really committing a fallacy, an improper transition between what “is” and what “should be”.

In any case, *en passant* we have shown something that agrees with what was pointed out by Ricoeur in his recent book, *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli*: that, given the character of our statements, interpretation and its suppositions move on the three levels of historical discourse, the documentary level, the level of explanation and understanding, and the level of literary representation of the past<sup>14</sup>. The same could be said of anthropology. And so I shall move on to the second stage in my argumentation: how comparison, inasmuch as it is necessary for interpretative understanding, implies judgement of value, something that is present on the three levels of historical discourse.

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Indeed, after the controversial interpretations to which *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* gave rise, Kuhn warned that incommensurability did

14. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

not mean incomparability<sup>15</sup>. On the contrary, in order to determine the degree of incommensurability of two theories, or two languages, the first thing to do is to compare them. So that one can say that comparison and contrast is an unavoidable stage in understanding. If this is so, this comparison and contrast of what is alien can only be carried out in my own language of reference. What other possibility is there? In other words, it is impossible to proceed to such a comparison except from the theoretical pre-understanding and understanding that we have of ourselves. So that we tentatively situate an action or a practice or a set of them as corresponding to or opposed to some aspect of those actions or practices that make up our life. Certainly, what bothers us in evolutionist conceptions is the fact that in their case such behaviour unfailingly concluded in a judgement that understood what was alien as something defective with regard to what was proper to ourselves. This was the case with Frazer – and the neo-Frazerians of the sixties and seventies, such as Jarvie – in considering magic to be false science or mistaken physics. Nevertheless, the important thing for our discussion is that there is something that still links us with Frazer, since we share with him a certain sense of reality and certain very general principles which characterise what is considered a good argument or an acceptable inference. For example, although we no longer interpret rainmaking rituals as false physics but rather as an emotional expression or as the representation of the satisfaction that takes the place of the desire that it should rain, nevertheless we continue sharing with Frazer the idea that it is *true* that the rituals do not bring rain. Taylor is right when he says that “we cannot say that understanding them [others] without distortion means showing them as not being mistaken in some important aspect”<sup>16</sup>.

But let's turn to a closer example belonging to the construction of traditions, which tends to be a breeding-ground for affirmations of incomparability and, therefore, abstention from judgements of value. I shall now take the case of a commemorative use of the past: the year of the Borgias, celebrated during the academic year 2000-2001 in Valencia, and also the year of the fifth centenary of the promulgation of the papal bull that founded the University of Valencia (Universitat de València-Estudi General), the university I belong to. In that context, an ironic article in the press which recalled the responsibility of Rodrigo Borgia, Pope Alexander VI, in the justification of the conquest of America, the giving of it to the Kingdom of Castile and its evangelisation – with the consequences which all that brought about – sparked off a virulent controversy. Todorov, distinguishing between witness, historian and commemorator, says that the first two submit their ac-

15. T. Kuhn, *¿Qué son las revoluciones científicas? y otros ensayos*, Paidós, Barcelona. See “Comensurabilidad, comparabilidad y comunicabilidad”, pp. 95 ff.

16. Ch. Taylor, *Argumentos filosóficos*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1997, p. 209.

counts to the evidence of truth, whereas this does not happen in the case of the third; he also says that history makes complex and that commemoration simplifies, "as its commonest aim is to provide us with idols to venerate and enemies to abhor"; that history is sacrilegious and commemoration sacralises<sup>17</sup>. The interesting thing in this case is that the types of the commemorator and the historian were synthesised in various people moved by the same interest: acclaiming the glory of "one of the more illustrious and powerful Valencian families in history...". It is significant that, among all the outbursts in the controversy, that restitution of historicism was recurrent, with an insistence, as a collateral argument or a last resort, on the idea that the historian should limit himself to "understanding and not judging" Alexander VI, because he "was a character in history and not a politician to be asked for explanations", that the Borgias were "people who behaved in accordance with what the times demanded ...", and so on.

So let's take the Borgia Pope and his first American papal bull as a case to illustrate the affirmation that comparison and value judgements are inseparable from the logic, or from the effective conduct, of understanding itself. In his papal bull *Inter Caetera*<sup>18</sup>, Alexander VI gave the Indies "in perpetuity" to Isabel and Fernando, confirming them as "owners of them, with full, free and absolute power, authority and jurisdiction". In the document we can read that of all works the most preferable is the "exaltation" of the Catholic faith so as to bring about "the downfall of the nations of barbarians and the subduing of them to our faith". And, according to Alexander VI, there was nobody more deserving than the King and Queen of Castile and Aragón, "as can be understood from the reconquest of the Kingdom of Granada from the tyrannical power of the Moors". Thus the text establishes a connection between bringing about the downfall of nations of barbarians, subduing them to the Catholic faith, deeming the Moors to be barbarians, and considering that their political regime was "tyrannical". For the agent, the Borgia Pope, this connection was what mainly justified the gift.

Now it is true that in order to understand the matter it is necessary to refer to many premises which are not explicit but form part of the understanding that the Roman Catholic church has of itself as expressed in its language. And so, in the interpretation of the text, one must certainly bring in the fact that the Moors were a problematic case, for according to the dominant conceptual schema it was hard to consider them as barbarians, since the category of "barbarian" was understood positively (as a good savage) or negatively (as a bad savage), but in any case as equivalent to an uncivilised savage. The problem in the categorisation of the Moors came from

17. T. Todorov, *Memoria del mal, tentación del bien*, op. cit., p. 159.

18. I am using the version of the bull which is reproduced in the documentary annex in Bestard, J. and Contreras, J. *Bárbaros, paganos, salvajes y primitivos*. Barcanova, Barcelona, pp. 361-362.

the fact that, on the basis of the most visible empiric evidence – their scientific knowledge and their techniques, as shown in the material achievements of their societies – it could not be simply stated that they were savages in the strict sense of the word. And here the addition of the “tyrannical power” characteristic of the Moors comes to help us in our interpretation, and Rodrigo in his justification. Why? Well, because according to the books of Aristotle’s *Politics* – in which the theory of natural servitude is established – the slave is barbaric by nature, and the criteria for determining barbarity are either the absolute inability to live in a political regime – hence the reiterated quoting, at that time, of the *Iliad*: a barbarian is someone who lives “without society, without law, without family” – or else the absence of a rational political regime, that is, living under a tyrannical regime. However, Aristotle’s assertion is reinterpreted by St Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* as meaning that “where there is no true justice, however much justice there may be or appear to be, as in those who lack the Christian faith, there is no law or justice, and very little that could be called a true republic”<sup>19</sup>. Ergo, someone who does not live under the prescriptions of true religion lives under a tyrannical regime, therefore he is a barbarian, and therefore the Moors are barbarians although not strictly savages.

What it is interesting to emphasise is the conduct followed in the interpretation of an action and its justification in order to understand – in the sense of “grasp” – its peculiarity. It is true that I have had to bring in elements that belong to the language of the agent, or his self-understanding, or his world view or whatever one likes to call it. By proceeding in this way I have obtained greater clarity about his motives and reasons. But this is not at all the same as saying that I abstain from judging, since Aristotle’s criteria for classifying humanity and the theory of natural servitude and St Augustine’s conceptions about the true political regime seem to me to be false or incorrect and undesirable, something to which I cannot commit myself and about which I cannot feel indifferent. However, *those implicit aspects which I do not share* are precisely the ones that at first made the Borgia Pope’s reasons obscure and opaque for me, and the ones which consequently sparked off the interpretative process that seeks clarification of what, *ab initio*, is only partially intelligible or unintelligible. And so, like the case of the rainmaking rituals, the immediate thing is the comparison and contrast of an action, institution or practice or set of them, alien and at first not

19. I have taken the quotation from Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. *Apologética Historia Sumaria*. Obras Completas, ed. Ángel Losada. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1988, vol. 8, p. 1584. In “Soberbia, racionalidad y sujeto en el discurso antropológico clásico”, in M. Cruz (ed.), *Tiempo de subjetividad*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1996, I have shown how this conceptual assumption – namely, the irrationality or, as appropriate, defective rationality of those who do not live under the cultural and political regime of the “true religion” – is shared even by those who seem most distant from this assumption (Las Casas himself).

clearly understandable, with actions, institutions or practices that correspond to my way of life (in this case, a lay democratic conception of politics and an affirmation of the equal dignity of all men). But at the same time as the establishment of the comparative contrast there is a valuation of what is alien. And no objection to what I have said is entailed in agreeing with the affirmation that the possible moral decisions depend on the morality in which the problem arises, as not every moral problem is brought about in any given morality. For to accept that the moral problems and the decisions which might be taken by subjects depend on their various moral contexts does not mean that we abstain from indicating the moral emptiness, or sometimes abyss, that this entails.

Cases of genocide and war may be privileged examples: there are many testimonies, provided by the agents and by the victims, which affirm that the most grave horrors and cruelties are possible owing to the non-consideration of the humanity of those massacred. Joanna Bourke<sup>20</sup> has recently emphasised the racial component in the war of extermination in the USSR, practised against the Jews and the "Slav races" not only by the Einsatzgruppen of the SS but also by the Wehrmacht troops. She also shows how the invasion of Poland was conceived as a war of annihilation. It is quite true that Hitler had given the soldiers instructions to "be merciless, be brutal", but it is no less true that an analysis of the war diaries of ordinary soldiers reveals that the usual way of referring to the Poles was "primitive people", "subhumans". Perhaps that is why 15% of the Polish children were deported to work as slave labour in Germany; perhaps that is why 2% of the French population died in the war whereas the percentage rose to 20% in Poland. Other revealing cases are the behaviour of the Japanese army in China from 1937 onwards or the wholesale retaliation carried out by troops of the Red Army on German soil, where women were considered to be the spoils of war and mass rapes and plundering were general practice. In all these cases those who committed the cruelties did not show repentance, the authorities themselves encouraged them, and some poets exalted them in terms of courage and a sense of justice.

Probably the Soviet soldier who had experienced the barbarity of the Germans in his fields and cities, who had seen his family and friends killed or tortured, and who was hardened by hunger, fatigue and fear, spurred on by the instinct to survive and comforted by the brotherhood of war, saw no objection to his behaviour in the final struggle against fascism. To us it seems appalling. Probably the soldier who advanced in the *Orbe Novo* – justified by the *Requerimiento*, which in turn was legitimised by the Borgia Pope's bull – saw no moral problem in setting dogs on American Indian

20. See J. Bourke, *The second world war. A people's history*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

populations and tearing them apart, considering them to be barbarians and pagans and therefore subhuman. But there is no need to be an evolutionist or to share Hegel's philosophy of history for some historical developments to appear to us to be gains that should not be reversible if we do not wish to make our whole world burst into smithereens. Examples of this are a certain universalism in which all human beings count, or in which we should strive to make them count, so that they are subjects in their own right; not tolerating physical injury, suffering and violent death; feeling moved by these things and attempting forms of reparation and aid (which, of course, are conceived in many different ways); or, as we have been talking of popes, defending a lay conception of the State which conceives religious beliefs to be a private matter<sup>21</sup>.

One does not need to adopt a strictly comparatist perspective to affirm that the process of interpretation inevitably entails comparison. It is true, as I recalled when I quoted Detienne, that anthropology has had a greater vocation for comparison, whereas history – with the exception of certain recent, and increasingly abundant, developments – has been inclined to study its objects “in themselves”. But the canonically ethnographic works also study this and that – a rite of passage, a magical practice – in an isolated way, “in themselves”. Jürgen Kocka, a defender of comparative analysis in so-called “critical social history”, repeatedly affirms, when reviewing recent historiography in German and English, that “history, as a specialised discipline, has not shown any special inclination for comparison for a long time”<sup>22</sup>. Incidentally, Detienne, in his critical denunciation of the lack of comparatism among historians, does not exactly say that this methodological behaviour is entirely absent, but rather that the usual thing is to practise it within nearby national or state frameworks in the European context, thus avoiding comparisons between contexts that are distant in space or time and, therefore, cooperation with anthropological studies. However, Kocka's observations, more moderate on this point, seem opportune: the frequency of comparison between European nation-states is largely due to the fact that the empirical sources and material of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are to be found in specifically national forms (statistics, archives of professional associations, legislation, or oral documents such as memories of war experiences, etc.). But if one is dealing with matters where there is a clear overlap between history and anthropology, such as the case of how societies have managed the memory of their defeats or of their guilt (the example is his), then Kocka does not hesitate to advise comparison between epochs within greater spaces, such as Graeco-Roman Antiquity or the European Middle Ages.

21. Once again I agree with Taylor, although not with the whole of his position.

22. J. Kocka, “La comparación histórica”, in *Historia social y conciencia histórica*. Marcial Pons, Madrid, 2002, pp. 58-59.

I must insist, however, that the type of comparison that I am defending is not this one, which is inevitably involved in the interpretation of the past, but the comparison which is derived from the fact that, *ab initio*, I cannot help setting out from the conceptual and valorative suppositions of my language of reference when I set about the interpretation. Even if only as a symptom, I think that this aspect is shown when Kocka seeks to qualify comparative history in the "proper sense". It is characterised by systematic comparison of the similarities and differences between two or more historical phenomena not only in order to describe them and explain them convincingly but also, and at the same time, with the aim of "formulating far-reaching statements about historical actions, experiences, processes and structures". And now let's turn to the symptom: that proper sense, he says, must be distinguished "from those studies in which the comparisons appear only in passing, marginally or implicitly ... through comparisons insinuated between the before and the after. Such proto-comparisons are often found"<sup>23</sup>. I believe that these "proto-comparisons", to use Kocka's term, are inescapable owing to our "home language", given the impossibility of "the view from nowhere", cosmic exile or the perspective from the eye of God (take your pick from Nagel, Quine or Putnam).

A relatively different matter is the strict comparative behaviour in which one seeks to establish similarities and disparities between two or more units of analysis, either with a view to achieving a better understanding, through contrast, of what makes them peculiar, or else with the aim of highlighting coincidences and arriving at generalisations. When Kocka reviews the uses and risks of comparison, he repeatedly warns about the "decisionist elements" which the practice of comparison entails. The decisions that have to be taken are various, although they refer especially to the question that is formulated (for the sake of which the comparisons are established and directed) and to the requirements entailed by the various kinds of arguments in which a comparison is involved, taking the various contexts and aims into account. Dealing with German National Socialism in terms of the concepts of "fascism" or "totalitarianism" permits one set of comparisons or another: "both comparisons are legitimate. Which of them is undertaken depends on what one is interested in knowing"; the decision between synchronic and diachronic comparisons "can also not be taken a priori, but rather it depends on what one is interested in knowing". In general, the choice of the units of comparison "cannot be made without resorting to decisionist elements, for historical reality often lacks univocal delimitations, which nevertheless have to be presupposed..."<sup>24</sup>. And in the end what we are interested in, a value judgement, always appears.

23. *Ibidem*, pp. 43 and 44.

24. *Ibidem*, pp. 50 and 52-53.

The fact that historical judgement differs from judicial judgement inasmuch as the latter is closed (in the end a definitive sentence is pronounced), whereas in the case of history the "concentric circles" of the explanation continually reopen so that history is rewritten a thousand times, does not nullify the involvement of value judgement in the interpretation of history. For the reopening of the writing of history is due not only to new contributions or reinterpretations of the archive, or the consideration of new causes and reasons when it comes to explaining or understanding, but also to the various interests and values that are shown in the renewed representations of the past in literature. Certain documents and not others, one model or another, one scale or another, one organisation of the plot or another, showing or telling ... On all these levels of historical practice the centrality of selection is shown: and we select one thing or another because we judge it to be preferable in terms of interest, because we value it in a certain way, in order that the past may illuminate our present and the future be in accordance with our renewed aspirations<sup>25</sup>.

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To conclude I shall touch on a more or less implicit supposition made by the supporters of incomparability and valorative *epoché*. Those who defend the judgment immanent in the historical object studied think of epochs, cultures, societies and so on with a uniformity and homogeneity that are clearly false. The further away they are from us in time or space, the more homogeneous they are considered to be. This is due to a mistaken understanding of a correct affirmation: that meaning is constructed socially<sup>26</sup>. However, stating that meaning is constructed socially is not the same as imagining humanity as if it were a set of semantic monads without windows. As a result they think that individuals are totally determined in their action, without any margin for dissent or deviant behaviour, as if in a particular period there were only one possible moral judgement that belonged to it. In his latest book Clifford Geertz criticises this integral configurational notion of cultural identity which conceives it from the fundamental perspective of consensus. A conception which thinks of different cultures as being seamless units, absolutely integrated totalities, with precise, enduring limits, seen from the aspect of a pointillist landscape which eventually makes up a mottled world of different cultures, in which each is a compact, homogeneous, simple, uniform unit.

In that image, or mode of representation, anthropology and its reception have a considerable part of the responsibility. Another part corresponds to the philosophies of history, such as Herder's. In the case of anthropology, this pointillist conception of cultures comes from the kind of fieldwork that

25. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, pp. 421 and 442 ff.

26. See C. Geertz, *op. cit.*, p. 78.



anthropologists carried out in political situations very different from the present ones. The fact that after the First World War the increase in prolonged, participative fieldwork – the famous participating observation – took place on islands in the Pacific (Malinowski and his Argonauts) or in small African communities (Evans-Pritchard and the Nuer or the Azande) transformed the generic conception of culture characteristic of evolutionism into a configurational conception of it. Culture was what nations had in common, each with its own particular culture. But after the Second World War not only the political processes of decolonisation and of formation of new states but also the actual decrease in those nations – peoples of the jungle or the Arctic, of the ocean or the desert – led anthropologists to look towards more complex milieus (there was a time when British anthropology took the Mediterranean Basin as a theme for research, and now there are well-established anthropological research programmes about Europe, and even about the highly “exotic” process of decision-taking in the European administration in Brussels).

All this caused the configurational conception to become imprecise and therefore unmanageable. It must be understood that what happened was not that the gradual disappearance of encapsulated nations of this kind caused a particular kind of culture to disappear, but that the fact that anthropology was looking at other kinds of community led to a change in the very conception of what cultures were like, of the criteria for individuating them and of cultural identity. In fact, when societies of this kind which have become residual are considered now, they are no longer observed with the same concept of culture as was applied before. Because, both before and now, the situation has always been that nations are not isolated and do not lack internal diversity. So that culture, of one kind or another, can no longer be viewed as was done by the configurational conception: as a consensus about what was fundamental, about the true, the good and the beautiful; or, if you prefer, as a consensus about conceptions, feelings and values.

If those in favour of incomparability and abstention from judgement were to take their particularism to its final consequences, if they paid attention to the diversity which they apparently defend, they would see that it is much greater, because groups, subgroups and exceptional or anomalous individuals make up a tangled mesh of cultural differences. A mesh of broken lines, constantly shifting, in a constant state of metamorphosis. Not all societies have the same degree of complexity and dynamisms, but they are all complex and dynamic. It is not true that in the time of Aristotle the defence of natural slavery and the related notion of barbarity were inevitable. Aristotle himself says, in his *Politics*, when he is beginning to expound his theory: “but others think that herile [master and slave] government is contrary to nature, and that it is the law which makes one man a slave and another free, but that in nature there is no difference; for which reason that power

cannot be founded in justice, but in force"<sup>27</sup>. And, certainly, the poet Philemon and the philosopher Metrodorus, among others, were opposed to slavery. Even earlier the sophist Antiphon had said: "We respect and venerate 'the children of good parents', but we do not respect or venerate those who do not come from a good home. In this respect we behave in the same way as barbarians, since by nature we are all, barbarians and Greeks, made equal by nature in all things. One has only to observe the natural needs of all men. All men seek to satisfy those needs, and in this there is no distinction in any one of us, whether he is a barbarian or a Greek"<sup>28</sup>. Note that the first part of the quotation refers to the absence of moral virtue, and it is with reference to the moral sphere that the equality of barbarians and Hellenes is established.

Along the same lines, in the times of the discovery and the conquest there was discussion about the scope of the papal bull, whether the dominion granted to Isabel and Fernando was temporal or spiritual, and so on. The fact that there was a diversity of voices is shown by the controversy between Sepúlveda and Las Casas. However, there were different voices not only "here" but also "there". To confirm this one has only to consult León-Portilla's *The Broken Spears*, or Todorov's *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. A diversity that affected the American Indians themselves, since even the Aztecs or Mexica were in turn valued and judged on the basis of their customs by the nations subjected to them, or in constant frontier wars to capture future sacrificial victims, and so on. Jonathan Glover takes C.R. Browning's account of the behaviour of the "ordinary men" of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in the killings of Polish Jews as a basis for asserting that their increasing brutalisation was not the cause of their conduct but, on the contrary, the effect of their participation in the killings. Joanna Bourke, however, on the basis of the same report, tells the case of August Zorn, who could not bear to go on taking part in the execution of women, children and old people in the town of Zozofow<sup>29</sup>. There is always the possibility of a moral exception. So, when it comes to interpreting the actions of an agent, there are various possible contemporary assessments of the reasons that inspire or justify them, and there is no doubt that among them there may be some that are closer than others to the axiological wealth of the historian or the anthropologist. No longer as a member of a cultural community, which itself is plural, but as an individual who, in the exercise of his liberty, goes beyond the legacy of the tradition to which he belongs,

27. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253b.

28. *Sofistas. Testimonios y fragmentos*. Translated by Antoni Piqué Angordans. Bruguera, Barcelona, 1985, pp. 223-224.

29. See J. Glover, *Humanidad e Inhumanidad. Una historia moral del siglo XX*. Cátedra, Madrid, 2001, and J. Bourke, *op. cit.*, Both refer to C.R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Harper Perennial, New York, 1993.

although necessarily not in an absolute way because of the logical conditions of doubt, as Wittgenstein showed in *On Certainty*.

In the case of anthropology, Lévi-Strauss was emphatic on this point, precisely in the double context of his clarification about what should be understood by racism – avoiding imprecise definitions motivated by good intentions – and of the defence of cultural pluralism. Citing the testimony of Lowie, who had studied the Crow and Hopi Indians, getting on perfectly with the former and barely being endured by the latter, the French anthropologist stated that – belonging, as he did, to a culture with a “different system of values” and lifestyle – there were “very different” cultures which did not appeal to him: “If I study them as an ethnologist, I do so with all the objectivity and even with all the empathy of which I am capable. This does not prevent certain cultures from agreeing worse than others with my own”<sup>30</sup>. I do not know if it would be politically correct now to reproduce the severe judgements which Lévi-Strauss considered that Islam deserved in the mid-fifties, or at least the Islam that extends at the foot of the mountains of Kashmir – from Rawalpindi to Peshawar – for, although his criticism is general, the experience described is local. Quite the opposite of his sympathy for Buddhism: “Now I see India as being above Islam; but the India of the Buddha, before Mahomet, who, *for me, a European, and because I am a European*, rises up between our reflection and the doctrines closest to it as the awkward spoilsport who separates the hands of East and West, interrupting a round that destined them to come together”. However, when he summed up the reasons for his malaise in relation to Islam, he said: “In it I rediscover the world from which I come: Islam is the West of the East”<sup>31</sup>. It is this apparent paradox that he takes as his theme at the end of *Tristes Tropiques*, in the last part of the book, which significantly bears the heading “The Return”.

There, just before his severe analysis of Islam, he devotes himself to inspecting a dilemma which transcends that case. Either the ethnographer adheres to the norms of his society, and therefore others inspire in him only a mixture of curiosity and reprobation, or else he surrenders totally to alien societies and his objectivity is impaired because, at any rate, he has renounced one of them (his own). This dilemma appears in various forms. If we judge other social groups in relation to aims comparable to our own, then we shall judge that on some occasions some groups are superior to us,

30. C. Lévi-Strauss, *De cerca y de lejos*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1990, p. 207.

31. See *Tristes Trópicos*. Paidós, Barcelona, 1992, pp. 462 and 459, respectively. The emphasis in the first quotation is mine. It is not possible here to reproduce his comparative analysis of Islam and Buddhism. Compare the chapters “Taxila” and “The Kyong”, the very last two chapters in the book. They even deserve a rhetorical analysis, which would show what is also stated explicitly with a harshness free from any compromise or blurring: his aversion for Islam and his sympathy for Buddhism.

whereas on other occasions they are inferior; there is no doubt, however, that in this way we reserve a privileged position for our norms and customs. On the other hand, if we accept that in the range of options open to societies each one has made a choice, and these choices are incomparable and have the same value, then we yield to “an eclecticism that forbids us to repudiate anything in any culture: even the cruelty, injustice and poverty against which that same society which suffers them sometimes protests. And as those abuses also exist among us, what right will we have to combat them definitively if all that is required to make us bow before them is for them to appear elsewhere?” Lévi-Strauss speaks of the paradox implied by an ethnologist who is “critical at home and conformist abroad”, an ethnologist who, “if he acts in his own milieu, deprives himself of the possibility of understanding others; but if he wishes to understand everything, he will renounce changing anything”<sup>32</sup>. The solution that he adopted in response to this dilemma is well known: the ethnologic study should seek the invariants in any society in order to construct a model “which no society reproduces faithfully”, which “does not correspond to any observable reality”, but which must guide all social investigation. However, if we ask ourselves in what direction, then the assumptions about it appears in Lévi-Strauss resplendently, without any restriction: it is Rousseau – “the most ethnographic of philosophers ... Rousseau our master, Rousseau, our brother ... to whom every page of this book could have been dedicated ...” – who should guide us to find the kind of natural man immanent in the social state, to unravel the principles of social life “which we shall apply to the reform of our own customs and not the reform of other societies”<sup>33</sup>.

When Kocka reviews the methodological functions of comparative behaviour in the strict sense, he says that from a paradigmatic viewpoint comparison shows the “cultural specificity and historicity” of the concepts that the historian handles. So that it “gives rise to reflection about language, and therefore about the cultural position of the researcher who compares”<sup>34</sup>. That is quite true, and nothing has yet been said about the logic of the mutation of the valuations themselves, which can occur in the process of interpretation of what is alien, or of the elasticity of those changes and their limits. It can be said, quite rightly, that if what is desirable is only home truths, then what is the point of all the hard work of considering what is alien. What I am aiming at, of course, is not a self-satisfied repetition of that attitude. My purpose is to defend the view that the logic of interpretation necessarily entails comparison and judgement values. Initially it can only be done by setting out from the values and system of preferences implicit in

32. *Ibidem*, pp. 439-440.

33. *Ibidem*, p. 446.

34. Kocka, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

the interpreter's language of reference. But that is not the same as agreeing that judgement should always conclude in rejection, in a negative judgement, of what is alien. In any case, in the elucidation of the way of reviewing one's own beliefs, one must distinguish various situations: those in which the others are copresent, and therefore possible interlocutors, and those in which the otherness refers to people of the past, so that imagining a conversation with them is only a metaphor. At this point anthropology and history diverge, and the former, if its study is about peoples that coexist with the researcher, tends to transmute into political philosophy, even if only in the form of the debate about multiculturalism or about the range and limits of tolerance. It is not possible now to go into the complexity that this discussion has acquired in recent decades.

However, Ricoeur's historico-typological reconstruction of the virtue of tolerance, precisely in relation to cultural traditions, seems to be appropriate and opportune<sup>35</sup>. Ricoeur understands the historical vicissitudes of this virtue as a double process of *delegitimation* of the right to prevent and of *disarming* of the power to prevent. Initially, at a time corresponding to the Peace of Westphalia and the Edict of Nantes, the form of tolerance might have been condensed into the assertion "I reluctantly endure something of which I disapprove because I have no power to prevent it". A second stage, representing a point of unstable equilibrium between criticism and conviction, corresponds to the ecumenicism of Erasmus or Leibniz, with a formula that might be summed up as: "I disapprove of your way of life but I strive to understand it, even though I cannot go along with it". The third step does not involve shared truth but recognition of the right to error: "I disapprove of your way of life but I respect your freedom to live in your own way because I recognise the right to manifest that freedom publicly". This is the moment of enlightenment from which we derive the rights of opinion, expression, association, publication, manifestation and so on – positive freedom, the equal right to take part actively in the constitution of political power. In the following formulation there is a presumption of truth in the other: "I neither approve nor disapprove of the reasons for which you live in a different way from me, since it may be that those reasons express a relationship with goodness and truth which escapes me owing to the finiteness of human understanding". But justice and truth now come together, with the risk of an implosion of truth, so that tolerance may turn into indifference. The fifth link in the chain, "I accept all ways of conducting one's own life on condition that no injury is done to others, on condition that third parties are not manifestly harmed", involves a minimalist politics and

35. See P. Ricoeur P., "Le dialogue des Cultures. La confrontation des héritages culturels", in *Aux sources de la culture Française*, Editions La Découverte, Paris, 1997, pp. 97-105.

morality: avoiding harm. The problem, however, is the various interpretations and reinterpretations of benefit and harm, a problem that can only be a cause for conflict.

Ricoeur defends "cofoundation": rethinking all the components of our complex European cultural heritage in accordance with the unfulfilled promises of the past, and remembering what has been forgotten, what did not come to maturity. On this point he seems to be in agreement with one of Wittgenstein's somewhat cryptic annotations: "The insidious thing about the causal point of view is that it leads us to say: 'of course, it had to happen like that.' Whereas we ought to think: it may have happened *like that* – and also in many other ways"<sup>36</sup>. With regard to the way of reviewing our beliefs, Ricoeur argues for a consensual-conflictive notion of tolerance, a conception that seeks partial consensus and accepts reasonable disagreements. Insofar as there are irreducible aspects in differences in conviction, not all the conflicts can be eliminated. Therefore one must distinguish between those with which it is or is not possible to argue, which shows that Ricoeur is thinking of a situation in which conversation can take place (and therefore can also be blocked). Consequently, even though he insists on the great historical conquest implied by the model of tolerance, from the outset of his reflection he states that what moves him is "the search for a more positive foundation, going beyond what remains of *abstention* in the concept of tolerance"<sup>37</sup>.

To conclude: my main aim has been to criticise the point of view which tends to obviate any judgement of the past because, once again in the words of Renan, "if looked at too closely, the King of France loses his prestige"<sup>38</sup>. For, taking the example of the commemorative use of the Borgia Pope with a view to "constructing", "imagining" or "recapturing" a cultural tradition which might help to delimit a Valencian identity, his apologists do compare and implicitly judge – positively – in accordance with certain aspects: it seems praiseworthy to them that the Borgia family is "one of the more illustrious and powerful Valencian families in history"; in the same way that, in indicating the groundlessness of the "black legend" and insisting on their patronage and on their courtly Renaissance refinement, they do so on the basis of the value that the fine arts have for them, or the fact that this family retained Catalan in Rome as the language for ordinary relations long after abandoning the then Kingdom of Valencia. In this case, too, however, the fact is that, if looked at "too closely", the Pope loses his prestige.

That it is not so for some of us depends not on the impossibility or illegitimacy of comparing and judging but on the effects of distance, whether

36. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 37e.

37. P. Ricoeur, "Le dialogue des Cultures. La confrontation des héritages culturels", *op. cit.*, p. 97. The emphasis is mine.

38. Renan, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

physical or temporal, on the moral imagination. From a distance there seems to be a cultural and moral homogeneity which, de facto, never exists in societies; likewise, from a distance it appears that people's suffering and the perverse decisions that affect them become blurred and diluted in an indistinct continuum which we tend to call cultural legacy or tradition. Although quite prepared to condemn the totalitarian barbarity of the twentieth century, they nevertheless think it impertinent to bring up the legitimisation of the conquest of America. But the fact that they do not want to look "too closely" also depends on a way of thinking that puts the obsession with cultural identity in the centre of every picture. The fact that they think that individuals are, or should be, formed by a culture to which they belong depends on moral, historical and political options. The wretchedness which that culture may include is not important; what matters is, as Renan pointed out, that the individuals in it should have a great deal in common and that they should all have forgotten many things.

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# TRUTH AND JUDGEMENT

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