

## **Lluís Companys, the ‘Martyr-President’: The Rise and Fall of a Catalan Myth**

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### **Lluís Companys and present-day Catalonia**

Despite being heavily attacked by extreme right-wing authors such as Pío Moa, it is quite surprising to find a biography on the last President of the Republican *Generalitat* which is critical of the figure precisely from an opposite point of view, i.e., from the perspective of left-wing Catalan nationalism. With *Lluís Companys: La veritat no necessita màrtirs*, published in 2006, Enric Vila – a young historian, journalist and self-confessed Catalanist – proposes nothing less than a radical demystification of this historical figure whose tragic death has, according to the author, been a crucial element in the discourse of legitimization of Catalan nationalism (Vila, 2006: 405).

Descending from a family of wealthy farmers in the Province of Lleida, the young Lluís Companys started his political career early in the twentieth century while working as a labour lawyer in Barcelona. Together with other committed Republicans he took part in several subversive activities against the Restoration Monarchy. In 1921, he was elected Member of Parliament and in the same year he founded the *Unió de Rabassaires*, the Catalan tenant farmers’ trade union, for which he worked as a lawyer and journalist during the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923-1930). The stepping stone for Companys’ rise to the forefront of Catalan politics was the foundation of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC) in 1931, on the eve of the proclamation of the Second Republic.

The new party arose out of the effort to unite the Catalanist and Republican Left. It combined the petty-bourgeois Catalanism of *Estat Català*, led by its indisputable leader Francesc Macià, with the more proletarian Republicanism represented by Companys. The combination proved successful, transforming the newly established party into the leading political force of the region throughout that

period while relegating the formerly hegemonic Catalanism of the bourgeois *Lliga Regionalista* to second place. A mere one year later, in 1932, ERC reached its most important political goal when the Spanish Parliament, after months of strong resistance and difficult negotiations, finally conceded regional autonomy to Catalonia. Although many limitations had been imposed on the original draft, the fact in itself was still considered a historic victory. And, more than to anybody else, this victory belonged to Macià and his life-time struggle for national emancipation, for which he was rewarded with the presidency of the newly established organ of self-government, the *Generalitat*.

Companys initially held a series of different government posts until the unexpected death of Macià in 1933 brought him to the summit of Catalan autonomy. His ascent to the Presidency, however, coincided with the growing political crisis of the Second Republic that finally led to the outbreak of the Civil War. The 1933 national elections had brought the conservatives to power. And, as a result of this, the relationship between Madrid and the reform-orientated Catalan Government deteriorated rapidly. Political tensions culminated in the Catalan 'rebellion' against the Central government in October 1934, which initiated as a protest against the inclusion of three right-wing ministers into the cabinet. The opposition, however, was easily suppressed, leading to the suspension of Catalan autonomy and the imprisonment of its leaders until the victory of the Popular Front in the state elections of February 1936.

On the eve of the outbreak of the Civil War Catalonia, unlike the rest of Spain, experienced relative tranquillity. And when in July the military coup against the Republic started, the *Generalitat* stood ready to quell the uprising of the Barcelona garrison. Unexpectedly, however, the battle against the military conspirators broke the barriers of Republican order and gave way to a full-scale social revolution led by Anarchists and radical Socialists. Companys' Government lost control of the streets, but eventually succeeded in surviving alongside the newly established revolutionary powers. And from that point on, the *Generalitat* began a piecemeal struggle to restore the constitutional order, a process that culminated in the famous events of

May 1937 when in the streets of Barcelona the forces of law and order under the control of the Republic clashed with revolutionary militia.

While effectively quelling social revolution, the prospects of victory for the Spanish Republic over General Franco deteriorated progressively. However, active confrontation with the enemy only really reached Catalonia in autumn 1938 when Francoist forces started their last and decisive campaign and broke through the Republican frontline at the River Ebro. Afterwards penetration into Catalan territory advanced rapidly with the defeat of the Republic declared on April 1, 1939 with the Francoist declaration of the end to hostilities. Companys had fled to France in the previous January but was detained by the Gestapo after the Nazi occupation. The Germans handed him over to the Spanish authorities who, in a summary trial, found him guilty of 'military rebellion' and sentenced him to death. The execution took place two days later, on October 15, 1940, within the walls of Montjuïc Castle in the south-eastern corner of Barcelona, overlooking the port.

What appears above is the standard political biography of Lluís Companys. However, Enric Vila's view goes far beyond these facts. The author makes the issue personal as he relentlessly probes into the public and private behaviour of his protagonist. And, in doing so, he discovers a weak and contradictory character afflicted by narcissism, a childish wish to be loved by everybody and a tendency towards manic-depression which, it is alleged rendered him completely unsuitable for the responsibilities of political office and the demands of statesmanship. Or as Vila puts it: "Companys was not able to be a good politician; he was too much concerned with appearing to be a good person" (Vila, 2006: 16).

According to this reading Companys, a man of mediocre ideological conviction particularly in terms of Catalanism, was always in search of a guiding father figure. Although in due course he became fully identified with the Catalanist cause, Vila highlights Companys' early flirtations with Lerrouxism, a populist Republican and explicitly anti-Catalanist tendency organized by the Andalusian demagogue Alejandro Lerroux in the Barcelona of the early decades of the twentieth century. Even more adverse is the appreciation offered of Companys' performance as leader of the Catalan administration. In

Vila's view, it was precisely these personal defects which brought about a series of misjudgements and failures.

In October 1934, for example, he had allowed himself to be dragged along by the radicals of his party in a senseless act of rebellion; in the summer of 1936 he wilted in the face of social revolution and closed his eyes to the violence in the streets. And finally, after the notorious events of May 1937, he fell prey to the pressures of central government which imposed its will on the *Generalitat* concomitant with its move to Barcelona in the autumn of that year. In the end, the only thing that the defeated President had left was a terrible feeling of guilt which drove him to seek redemption in one last heroic act of self-sacrifice that Vila highlights as his only true political success: "His death not only gave a heroic sense to a failed life. It was a passport to heaven that saved his image in the face of the effluence of mediocrities with which the memory of the republican leader had been landed." (Vila, 2006: 20).

From a historiographic point of view Vila's book offers little that is new whereas many of the author's assertions are apt to produce a decided sense of unease if taken uncritically. Indeed, the explicit boldness of his psycho-analytical approach as well as the all too obvious sarcasm while analysing the life and deeds of his subject raise doubts as to how serious the author wants his conclusions to be taken. And this is probably the reason why professional historians in Catalonia received the book with widespread silence. For the wider public, however, Vila did not fail to attract the attention he had doubtless been seeking as the publication of his book coincided spectacularly with the sixty-sixth anniversary of Companys' execution in October 2006.

Indeed, the author's ruthless reinterpretation of a key period of Catalonia's recent past provoked a flood of reviews and comments in the daily press as well as in several prominent magazines. And most striking was the fact that nearly all of the comments were not only favourable but sometimes even enthusiastic about the new perspective that Vila's work appeared to offer. Especially the conservative *La Vanguardia* applauded the author for his unconventional courage to debunk one of the allegedly most persistent historic myths of present-day Catalonia (Carreras, 2007). But also the liberal press and even

some papers sympathetic to the nationalist cause received the book with great interest and consideration. In contrast, the only negative criticism was to be found in a radical internet daily that denounced the book as an insult to the memory of the former president (NacioDigital.com, 2006).

The political implications of Vila's work are considerable if one looks at the broader context of the recent debate on the claims of the victims of Franco as well as the new political protagonism of the Catalan Left since the regional elections of 2003. The turn of the century saw the emergence of a state-wide citizens' movement which started to open anonymous Civil War graves while claiming reparation for the countless victims of the dictatorship who never had been officially recognized (Bernecker & Brinkmann, 2009: 266-278). The political parties of the Left quickly adopted these demands and put them on the political agenda. And in Catalonia it is particularly ERC, precisely Lluís Companys' former party, that is the first to stand up for the rights of the victims.

Having been left in the wings of Catalan politics for many years in the elections of 2003 ERC achieved its best results since the transition to democracy and was able to play a decisive role both in Catalan domestic politics and also at the level of state. And a key element in the party's espousal of the 'politics of memory' has been precisely the appeal of the former President as the most prominent Catalan victim of Francoism. Although today's ERC – unlike ERC of the 1930s – sympathizes with independentism, Companys continues to be a key icon which proves useful in order to promote the whole issue of memory which is now so current. In 2004, for instance, ERC demanded an official apology from the Spanish Government for the execution of the Catalan President (Cué, 2004). And in October 2007 the Vice-President of the *Generalitat*, Josep-Lluís Carod Rovira, presented a new and semi-official biography of Companys in two bulky volumes (Departament de la Presidència, 2006) which vindicated his memory as a key reference for "Catalonia's political left – progressive, non-confessional and Catalan, connected to the interests of the popular classes" (Departament de la Vicepresidència, 2007).

The contrast between ERC's policy regarding memory politics and the message of Vila's book is obvious. But what can be said about the role played by Lluís Companys in Catalonia's social memory? Does his name fit as a political reference the way Carod Rovira claims? The results from a survey on the historical awareness of Catalan society conducted by the *Fundació Acta* back in 1991 drew a very different picture. To the amazement of many Catalans, the study brought to light a very low level of knowledge of history in general. And although more remote epochs of Catalonia's past were known even less, only 34% of the respondents were able to associate the name Lluís Companys correctly with his historic role and destiny. Bearing in mind that the survey data was collected only one year after the fiftieth anniversary of Companys' execution in 1990, which had been celebrated with open-air concerts, historical exhibitions and other official activities, the results were even more disappointing (Simon i Tarrés, 1994: 194; Strubell, 2004: 209).

But even if one takes for granted that one third of Catalan society is familiar with the name of the former president, there is less evidence that his personality arouses sympathy. In this sense, the results of *El Favorit*, a Catalan television show which called upon viewers in 2004 to choose the most popular figure of Catalonia's past, are revealing. Neither Francesc Macià, the pioneer of Catalan autonomy, nor his unfortunate successor were shortlisted. Instead, the contest was won, with 57% of the votes, by the medieval King James I, the ruler of Aragón and the conqueror of Valencia and Mallorca, followed by the early twentieth century cellist Pau Casals (*Favorit*, 2004). Obviously, popular opinion does not reflect the significance attributed to Companys by his more informed supporters and detractors. In the light of these findings, however, we are left wondering about the position and status of Catalonia's last Republican President in the history of the collective memory.

### **An ambiguous symbol: Companys and the revision of Historic Catalanism**

Whether intended or not, there is no doubt about Vila's assertion that Companys' self-sacrifice was the starting point for the myth-making process around his name. Once the news of his execution in Montjuïc had spread to the Catalan communities in exile, his fame rose immeasurably and, at least for a moment, Catalans felt united in view of the terrible fate Companys had suffered. "God and history will judge his deeds. We Catalans will never forget his death", wrote Joan Antoni Güell, an exiled conservative politician and son of the homonymous industrial dynasty, when the news of the President's execution reached him. And in exiled communities all over the world, requiems were held and poems appeared honouring the memory of the 'Martyr-President' (Surroca & Barrera 1983: 69-149).

The general mourning, however, did not reflect the real situation of Catalonia immediately after the Civil War. Post-war Catalan society, whether at home or in exile, was deeply split along the traditional class lines underlying the whole conflict. Any unity was still compromised by the rift which ran through the Republican camp and continued to separate the revolutionary forces of anarcho-sindicalism from left-wing Republicans and Communists who had defended the constitutional order against revolution. For confessed Catalanists, the hardest thing to take was the fact that Catalanism itself had been utterly divided by war and social conflict. Although differences of opinion between left and right-wing Catalanism were not new, nobody could have expected to find such division as exemplified by the support given by many in the conservative *Lliga* to the explicitly anti-Catalanist military.

However, with the outbreak of war it seems that class solidarity proved definitely stronger than the loyalty to the Catalan nation. And the war experience would be crucial for the early post-war years and the prospects for co-ordinated anti-Francoist action. Although Catalonia suffered the most brutal political and cultural repression, opposition forces were to maintain their differences and generally refused to collaborate in their struggle against the regime (Brinkmann 2007: 44-72).

But, in spite of the many animosities stirred up by the conflict, for some Catalanists at least the experience of a 'Civil War between Catalans' made it necessary to re-examine the nationalist ideology of

both sides. In other words, the future restoration of a united Catalan nation was unthinkable without a new Catalanism that would be able to bridge the innumerable gaps which had opened up after three years of terrible bloodshed. This awareness, however, developed slowly and grew only after the Second World War and with the disappointment over the decision of the Allies not to act by force against the Franco regime.

At the end of the 1940s, all hopes to quickly overthrow Francoism had been frustrated and a ruthless police repression further aggravated the crisis of the anti-Francoist caucuses. At the turn of the decade, the opposition had been severely weakened and some of the 'old' groupings as, for example, the Anarchists had virtually disappeared despite some sporadic interventions. One of the major survivors within the working-class movement was, of course, the Communists, the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (PSUC). In the 1950s, the grouping developed a new strategy of class struggle by infiltrating the regime's trade unions. And indeed, the fight for workers' interests from within the regime proved much more effective than the initial violent struggle against the dictatorship and assured them of an ever increasing popularity among industrial workers.

The renovation of Catalanism, however, arose primarily from the middle classes and drew on different sources. One ingredient was the faltering Christian Democratic tendencies that had already existed before the war. Another important element was the generational change which took place in Catalan society. In the 1950s, a new cohort gained political awareness that had not shared the war-time experiences. Among these young middle-class Catalans, the notion of being the heirs of a shattered and divided nation was widespread. 1939 represented the year zero of Catalan history as well as of the failure of the ambitions of the previous generation. Consequently, the dominant left-wing sentiment of pre-war Catalanism was subjected to a severe revision. Criticism centred on its radical non-confessional orientation which was held partly responsible for the violent persecutions the local church had suffered during the war. But also the reactionary Catalanism of the *Lliga* seemed outdated because of its entrenched social conservatism and its collaboration with Francoism. Instead, the newly emerging Catalanist idea combined a basic Catholic orientation

with democratic values and civil rights as well as a commitment to the social question (Riquer & Culla 2000: 300).

For the working classes during the post-war period, Catalanism was problematic owing to the social pressures generated by the great number of immigrant workers who poured in from other regions of Spain. Moreover, there was a tendency among Catalan Communists to consider nationalism a petty-bourgeois ideology which should be ideologically rejected. But by the end of the 1950s, the Communist party had freed itself from Stalinist orthodoxy and now gradually accepted the claim for freedom and regional autonomy. On the other hand, Catalanism itself grew ever more political; and activists such as Josep Benet and Jordi Pujol stepped forward and challenged the authority of the dictatorship with several symbolic actions.

Step by step, the growing anti-Francoist mobilization brought together Catalanists, reform-oriented Catholics and working-class representatives and the obvious benefits accrued out of this joint action instigated by the common goal to free Catalonia from Francoism. By the end of the 1960s, innumerable contacts were established between working-class parties, the openly anti-Francoist Benedictine monastery of Montserrat and the Catalanist movement. And opposition activities ranged from anti-Francoist agitation to a broad cultural mobilization that promoted the revival of Catalonia's forbidden culture and language. Catalan anti-Francoism culminated in 1971 with the celebration of the *Assemblea de Catalunya*. Prepared by a mosaic of anti-regime caucuses, the *Assemblea* became a most influential and broad-based social initiative integrating political parties, civic associations and independent intellectuals. In the following years, the *Assemblea* spread from Barcelona all over Catalonia while propagating four fundamental claims behind which the entire opposition united: political amnesty, a return to democratic liberties, the recuperation of the Statute of Autonomy and co-ordination with democratic forces elsewhere in the state.

Given the deep structural changes which had occurred in the political landscape of Catalonia since the end of the war, it is reasonable to suppose that the memory of the Republican past had lost its currency. And indeed, during the 1940s as well as in the following

decade, the name of Lluís Companys seemed to have fallen more and more into oblivion. In particular, the post-war generations either did not know enough about the Republican period or had rejected Companys' political legacy in the wake of the disaster of defeat. In this respect, the only ones responsible for keeping alive the memory of the *President-Màrtir* were his direct ideological heirs, who bravely clung on to the ritual of mourning his death on October 15, every year (Surroca & Barrera 1983: 52). However, with the gradual emergence of a broad anti-Francoist movement, Companys' name began to regain importance and returned to the political vocabulary. What made his memory valuable was obviously his martyrdom for the sake of Catalan autonomy. Although only a few may have wanted to return to the ideas Companys embodied, the commemoration of his violent death epitomized all the crimes committed against Catalonia for which immediate reparation was claimed.

A first clear sign of the return of the historic Companys to the status of national symbol was the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his execution in October 1965. On this occasion, the artist and left-wing Catalanist Manuel Viusà had written a brief biography which only one year later would be distributed in greater numbers within Catalonia (Viusà, 1977). Furthermore, illegal newspapers of different ideological provenance published obituaries and commentaries on his life and death, while posters with his portrait appeared in the streets of Barcelona.

The most explicit indication for the general acceptance of Companys as a symbol for Catalan claims, however, was to be found in the Capuchin convent of Pompeia in the heart of the Catalan capital. A few days after the anniversary - and against the explicit interdiction of the bishop -, the Capuchin community celebrated a requiem in honour of the former president (Hermet, 1986: 370). As well as in Catholic circles, Companys became increasingly popular among the Communist-dominated working classes. In October 1970, for example, Communists and left-wing Catalanists called for an illegal commemoration of his death in Lleida, the capital of his home province. But on this occasion, Francoist authorities had discovered the plan and frustrated the meeting by employing a massive police presence. Nevertheless, in the early 1970s, Companys' popularity as

an icon of national resistance reached its peak, given the overall claim to restore the Statute of Autonomy spread by the *Assemblea de Catalunya*.

### **The commemoration of Companys during the transition to democracy**

The transition to democracy which started around the death of General Franco in 1975, took a slightly different course in Catalonia because of the claim for a return to self-government. The first free general elections in June 1977 meant a sudden democratization of the inherited machinery of the Spanish state. In Catalonia, however, political structures above municipal level were still missing. Hence, for Catalan political parties, it became crucial to some extent to leave aside ideological differences in order to pressurise the Spanish Government to fulfil the common political claim. The first and most important step back to regional self-government was the return of the Catalan President in exile, Josep Tarradellas, in 1977 and the recognition of his position as leader of the *Generalitat* in October of that year. The symbolic value of this concession can hardly be overestimated. Indeed, the reinstatement of the *Generalitat* would be the only official recognition of any political institution of the Second Republic during the transition to democracy. Nevertheless, the need for joint action of the Catalan parties persisted until a new and definite Statute had passed the Spanish Parliament and until the first regional elections in 1980 definitely closed the transition to democracy (Brinkmann, 2007: 106-109).

During these five years, it actually looked as if Lluís Companys and the Republican era were the most important elements of Catalonia's entire history. Unlike in the rest of Spain, where the memory of the Second Republic remained understated, in Catalonia the return of the Statute of Autonomy became a key reference for the political discourse of the transition to democracy. Private and semi-official publications explained to a wider audience the history of Catalonia's first period of self-government in the modern era. And the appeal to the *President-Màrtir* spread to all political camps of the Catalan opposition. On October 15, 1976, the first anniversary of

Companys' death after the disappearance of the dictator, his name resounded throughout Catalonia. Josep Maria Poblet, a militant of ERC, had published a new biography, of which only at the first day of its appearance more than a thousand copies were sold (Poblet, 1976).<sup>1</sup> In addition, in various places supporters of a variety of parties distributed leaflets with biographical information and all Catalan newspapers reported on the life and death of the Martyr-President. Again, posters with his portrait appeared on walls and public buildings. In Tarragona, Francoist road signs were pasted over with the name of Companys and at Montjuïc Cemetery his alcove became a gathering point for the leaders of the opposition. Finally, in the evening and in the presence of members of the Companys family, a holy Mass was celebrated in the Capuchin's convent of Sarrià (*Mundo Diario*, 16/10/1976).

What was most striking was how naturally the conservative wing of Catalanism – the Christian Democrats as well as the newly founded *Convergència Democràtica* – adhered to the political heritage of Companys. Indeed, politicians of both parties had been among the organizers of the celebrations at Montjuïc Cemetery in 1976. And the party newspaper of *Convergència* did not hesitate to defend the cult around the former President against criticism from the Spanish Right. Dismissing the accusation of a mentality seeking only 'revenge' the paper declared: "To pay tribute to with a requiem mass to the last democratically elected President is, above all, an act of justice" (*CDC Informacions*, 15/11/1976). *Convergència* even went so far as to adorn its first official appearances in public with portraits of Companys and Macià. However, the ideological distance between this group and left-wing Catalanism was brought out by a third portrait which pictured Enric Prat de la Riba, the founder of the conservative *Lliga Regionalista*, in a finely balanced attempt to unite the two poles of Catalanism which, in historical terms, had proved so incompatible.

As has been mentioned, the anniversary of Companys in 1977 coincided with the return of the President in exile, Josep Tarradellas. Autonomist euphoria, therefore, reached its climax, and any doubt

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<sup>1</sup> On the following day the Ministry of Information stopped the sales for several months until the Francoist censorship was definitely abolished.

about the Republican past as a legitimate reference for the present time had obviously disappeared. Catalan newspapers published advertisements for votive medals and souvenir plates decorated with the images of Macià, Companys and Tarradellas as if there was no doubt about the irreversibility of the transition to democracy. And in the same sense, initiatives emerged to perpetuate Companys' memory in the form of road signs and public monuments. In Tarrós, the home town of the former president, an all-party celebration was held on the anniversary of his death in 1978 – shortly before the enactment of the new constitution – in order to dedicate the main street to his memory. But more than anywhere else, the memory of the Martyr-President was linked with Montjuïc of Barcelona, the place where he had been executed and where his remains had been buried. Therefore, on October 15, 1978, the interim president Tarradellas set a precedent for a new official ritual by visiting the alcove of Companys early in the morning (*La Vanguardia*, 17/10/1978).

Later in the day, a group of some 2,000 people passed by the grave and finally gathered in the *Fossar de la Pedrera*, an old stone quarry at the back of Montjuïc Mountain close to the cemetery. Before the war, this place had already served as an anonymous graveyard. The largest number, however, were constituted by the more than 2,000 victims of Francoist repression who had been buried here in the early post-war years. At the end of the 1970s, the *Fossar* left a distinctly sad impression, showing an extensive space surrounded by rock faces, while its uneven ground was covered with innumerable wooden crosses.

The group of visitors consisted mostly of family members of victims who had gathered to form a civilian association, the so called *Associació Pro-Memòria dels Immolats per la Llibertat de Catalunya*.<sup>2</sup> The main goal of this initiative was to convince the newly established authorities to initiate a remodelling of the *Fossar* in order to turn it into a public cemetery. The association counted on the support of Cassià Just, the abbot of the famous monastery of Montserrat who had already proposed the idea to the City council of

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<sup>2</sup> English: 'Pro-Memory Association of the Victims for Catalonia's Freedom'.

Barcelona. Moreover, some days before the anniversary, Just himself had visited the *Fossar* and had publicly declared his support for the concerns of the *Associació Pro-Memòria* (*Avui*, 07/10/1978).

The emergence of civic associations that fought for the recognition of the victims of Francoism was by no means an exclusive phenomenon of Catalonia. However, in contrast to other Spanish regions, the more salient dynamic of Catalan society along with the broader anti-Francoist solidarity between Left and Right lent a greater public weight to such demands. Although it actually had been the left-wing parties which had suffered most under the dictatorship, many middle-class Catalanists also belonged to the pressure group in support of the victims of Francoism, thus lending the claims of the associations an inter-class significance.

The *Associació Catalana d'Ex-Presos Polítics*, a self-help group of former political prisoners, for example, was presided by Joan Colomines, a militant of *Convergència*. Moreover, Josep Tarradellas, acting as their honorary president, gave the demands of the former prisoners an official touch. Besides, the second honorary presidency of the Association had been awarded to Companys who, being the most prominent Catalan victim, became the figurehead for their claims. In October 1979, the biggest gathering on Montjuïc was organized by the victims' groups in order to repeat their demand to dignify the mass grave in the *Fossar*. And on this occasion, Josep Poble, Companys' biographer, expressed the idea to complete the future memorial with a monument for the ashes of the *President-Màrtir* (*Avui*, 16/10/1979).

It seems worth noting that in each and every context where Companys' name appeared during Catalan transition to democracy, his life was strictly reduced to his sacrifice for the sake of Catalonia. As the most prominent Catalan he became a symbol of all Catalan victims of Francoism and, at the same time, the fact that he was shot as the democratically elected President of the *Generalitat* made him the symbol for the sufferings of a whole nation.

However, at the end of the 1970s nobody dared to look much beyond the individual tragedy. The memory of his political failures might have damaged the politically expedient effects which his tragic end seemed to confer. And indeed, evidence from different cultural

productions of the time suggests that in some way a silent consensus existed over the way Companys should be remembered. Together with the celebration of the date of his execution biographical notes in the daily papers concentrated preferentially on the few months of his exile, trial and death (*Avui*, 15/10/1976; *Mundo Obrero*, 15/10/1976). And also the first new historiographic contributions were more interested in picturing the horrors of his last days in the hands of the vicious Franco regime than anything else (Benet, 1978b; Crusellas, 1979). The culmination of this political 'martyrology' might be seen in the production of a full-length movie that would reach Catalan cinemas in 1979. Under the direction of Josep Maria Forn *Companys, procès a Catalunya* again tells the story of the last months in the life of the President, thus refusing to shed any light on his performance as a politician and statesman (Alberó, 1999).

Although the same can not be said for most of Companys' biographers, it is difficult to find any severe criticism as regards his performance as President of the *Generalitat*. Instead, Companys is often portrayed as an adorable and sympathetic character who fell victim to the disastrous circumstances of his time (see particularly Ossorio y Gallardo, 1976; Poblet, 1976). A case in point is probably Josep Benet who appears to be the most widely read biographer of Companys. Benet was certainly one of the outstanding figures of the anti-Francoist opposition who had always put the striving for national unity above ideological differences. And according to this priority, his political career led him from an early affiliation with Christian Democrats to a close cooperation with Catalan Communists who in the late 1960s represented the best organized oppositional force.

However, Benet's Catalanist creed not only bridged the gaps between former enemies, but was also prone to sacrifice historical accuracy with regard to the political cleavages that had once blighted Catalan society so prodigiously. In a number of public conferences held in 1976 right after the death of General Franco, Benet launched the thesis of the 'Catalan oasis' claiming that civil war had been forced upon Catalonia only from outside (Benet, 1976, 1978a). The political intention of this historic exculpation lay obviously in repressing painful memories of the past in order to strengthen anti-Francoist unity in the present. Moreover, Benet's interpretation of the

outbreak of war in Catalonia served to absolve its highest representative. With regard to Companys, Benet's biographical contribution – published only in 1990 – offers the most complete account of his martyrdom. With regard to the accusations against his political performance before and during the war, however, the author proceeds selectively. While leaving aside the highly controversial events of October 1934, Benet concentrates on rejecting all accusations against Companys' behaviour in the face of the social revolution of July 1936. And his conclusion comes close to a full-scale apology for the Martyr-President who – instead of fleeing responsibility – opted for the most humane way of saving a chaotic situation by: “trying with prudence and skill to bring it back on track so that the Generalitat would regain its lost authority, on the one hand, and, on the other, to make the greatest effort in order to save as many human lives and goods as possible” (Benet 1990: 67).

### **Echoes of the transition to democracy: The silent relegation of a symbol**

Although Benet's work was re-published later on in two modified versions (Benet 1998 & 2005), his apologetic approach stood somehow against the political mainstream of these years. Once the new Statute of Catalan Autonomy had been enacted and the Spanish democracy was on its way to consolidation, Companys lost much of his attraction as a political symbol. As has been shown, his memory had served primarily to remind Catalans of the historic injuries the Spanish state had inflicted on their nation. With the successful restoration of regional self-government, however, the appeal to Companys' martyrdom became obsolete for most political parties.

Moreover, with the first regional elections in 1980, a decisive shift in the political balance of power had taken place. Against general expectations, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), the moderate Catalanist party alliance under the leadership of Jordi Pujol, won a majority of seats whereas the once hegemonic ERC was marginalized. And only four years later, the leading role of Pujol was confirmed with an absolute majority for his party which was to last for at least another decade. Hence, the march of Catalan politics from the Left to the

Centre rendered superfluous any reason to cling to the symbols of the Republican *Generalitat* of the 1930s. CiU had long ago removed any allusion to Companys from its symbols. And neither the Catalan Government nor the Socialist-dominated City council of Barcelona showed interest in erecting the public monument for the Martyr-President as repeatedly demanded by members of ERC. While the celebration of Companys' political legacy fell back to his direct heirs, the tribute of official Catalonia would, from now on, be limited to the presidential visits of his alcove at Montjuïc Cemetery every October 15.

Although their lack of interest was obvious, Catalan authorities kept their word in their promise to rebuild the *Fossar de la Pedrera* into a public cemetery. As early as 1982, the City council entrusted the project to the young Catalan architect Beth Galí. Galí proposed a complete rearrangement of the whole site that envisaged the laying out of a memorial park with a modest mausoleum for Companys' remains in its centre. In May 1984, work started. One and a half years later, the *Fossar* was ready for inauguration. With a budget of about 84 million pesetas it was one of the biggest public-work projects of that period (*El Periódico*, 28/10/1985). And the outcome of this rearrangement was widely applauded for its aesthetic and respectful design.

The entrance to the *Fossar* is provided by a curved path leading through rows of cypress trees and stone columns engraved with the names of the victims. Behind this point, the view opens up to a broad plain that is surrounded by the rocky walls of the quarry. The steep rock faces contrast with the peacefulness of the inner space which is divided by a large curve of concrete benches separating a walkway from the lawn of the cemetery. Near the quarry walls at the back of the space, crosses and individual monuments in honour of the victims are gathered. On the right side, a modest bow of concrete, situated on the edge of an artificial water pond, covers the remains of Lluís Companys. Near the entrance, the stylized monument of a *Pietà* funded by the *Associació Pro-Memòria* underlines the character of the place (Falcone, 1990).

Parallel to the remodelling of the *Fossar*, another initiative tried to draw public attention to Companys. On the forty-fourth

anniversary of his execution, ERC militants advanced the claim for a judicial rehabilitation of the *President-Màrtir* by an annulment of his death sentence. The activists questioned the legal basis of the verdict and presented a draft bill for Companys' rehabilitation. Besides, they demanded the withdrawal of the equestrian monument of General Franco which still decorated the courtyard of Montjuïc Castle. Catalan political elites at first reacted favourably to these claims – with the exception of the Spanish right-wing *Alianza Popular* – and, in March 1985, the Catalan Parliament decided to accept the draft bill for further deliberation.

However, right from the start, confusion arose about what the proper judicial procedure would be. First of all, the competence to revise or annul a sentence passed by Francoist courts would lie exclusively in Madrid whereas the Catalan Parliament only had the right to offer recommendations. What is more, the draft bill did not say whether the rehabilitation should be carried out by a legal review or an annulment. And, in fact, both ways involved considerable inconveniences. As some commentators stated, a revision would have meant a re-examination of the ruling without considering the underlying framework of legal decisions under the Franco regime. In contrast, an annulment would have affected the entire Francoist jurisdiction, thus creating a precedent for many other sentences that might ensue a multitude of reparation claims against the Spanish state. Although in 1982, the Spanish Socialists under Felipe González had won an absolute majority, the new government in Madrid showed no willingness to deal with any kind of 'memory politics' with regard to the victims of Francoism. Consequently, the prospects for both options were less than dim (Alba, 1984).

Nevertheless, the draft bill was passed on to the Committee of Justice for further deliberation. But when the forty-fifth anniversary of Companys' execution came closer, the governing CiU decided to go ahead with its own proposal. At the beginning of October, it passed a resolution declaring to celebrate the date together with the official inauguration ceremony of the remodelled *Fossar*. Furthermore, the resolution declared the unlawfulness of the death sentence against Companys and stated that "the rights of all innocent victims of the Civil War – symbolized by the sacrifice of the one who had been their

president – have already been restored in the light of justice and equality” (Grup, 1991: 49).

Obviously, the intention behind this resolution was to neutralize the left-wing Catalanists’ claim for a legal rehabilitation of Companys which actually would have led to a conflict with the Central government. Moreover, the *Generalitat* even avoided the October 15, probably because of its symbolic charge, and instead rescheduled the ceremony for the 27<sup>th</sup>. The wish to divert public attention from Companys was underlined by the speech of Jordi Pujol. In front of the leading members of the Catalan parties and a gathering of some 5,000 people, Pujol recalled the fact that the *Fossar* was a graveyard to victims of both sides of the warring parties. The ceremony, therefore, was meant to be an act of national reconciliation. His allusion to Companys, however, was limited to the astute assumption that his martyr image had done more for Catalonia than “any other individual or collective action of political Catalanism” (Moliné 1985; *El Periódico*, 28/10/1985).

The emphasis on reconciliation of the official ceremony underlined the unwillingness of the Pujol Government to pursue the rehabilitation issue any further. And indeed, in the Justice Committee, government representatives blocked the processing of the draft bill for several years. When in March 1990, the law was finally submitted to the Catalan Parliament for its final vote, the majority of CiU repeated the manoeuvre of 1985. Having explained their objections against the law, the party’s representative commented on the preparations for the official homage to Companys on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his death that were already under way. And just as a few years earlier, on the occasion of an ERC proposal to name the newly built Olympic Stadium after the Martyr-President, the Law of Rehabilitation was again overruled by the majority of CiU (*La Vanguardia*, 21/03/1990).

## **Epilogue**

As was said at the outset, the 2003 Catalan elections not only ended the political hegemony of CiU, but also the way the memory of the Martyr-President was treated officially. Right from the start, ERC –

now the junior partner of a three-party coalition (*tripartit*) – reverted to its unrealized claim for the rehabilitation of Companys and made it the spearhead of its ‘memory politics’. This manoeuvre aimed primarily at the newly elected Spanish Government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who had promised moral and material reparation for the victims of Francoism. And as a sign of goodwill, in October 2004, Zapatero sent his vice-president, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, to attend the official ceremony in the *Fossar* in order to promise a “complete judicial rehabilitation” of Companys (Rusiñol, 2004).

However, as in the 1980s, the only way to achieve this goal was by a legal annulment of the death sentence that would have set a precedent for the regime’s entire political jurisdiction with unforeseeable consequences for the Spanish legal system. Hence, in the following month the reluctance of the Socialist government grew and the presentation of the promised ‘Memory Law’ was postponed several times. After nearly two years of deliberations over a whole set of legal measures in favour of the victims, Spanish Socialists finally reneged on their promise and offered a compromise formula which was immediately rejected by ERC. Nevertheless, the socialist draft bill finally passed the Spanish parliament in December 2007 with support from the leftist *Izquierda Unida*, CiU and the Basque *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (Bernecker & Brinkmann, 2009: 327-329; *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 2007).

At the beginning of 2009 the polemic about the death sentence against Companys was re-launched because of the decision of central Government to close the case definitely by issuing the announced ‘personal rehabilitation’ while rejecting any possibility of a legal annulment. This time not only ERC but also its two partners in Government headed by President José Montilla as well as the oppositional CiU expressed their indignation and promised to pursue the case further (Andreu, 2009). But, given the very poor prospects it is easy to unmask this announcement as a symbolic gesture directed at underlining the distance which separates them from Madrid and to foster Catalanist sentiments.

In fact, at the outset of the new century to turn the rehabilitation issue into a legitimizing argument for Catalanism seems somehow obsolete, if not downright eccentric. This is at least the most

obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the revisionist reading of Companys' life story by Enric Vila. And in this respect, not even Josep Benet, against whom Vila's book was directed implicitly, would have disagreed.<sup>3</sup> Because, in October 2005 while presenting the third version of his work on Companys, Benet stated that he did not see "any sense" in claiming the annulment of the death sentence against his protagonist (*El Mundo*, 15/10/2005).

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<sup>3</sup> On the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2008 Josep Benet died at the age of 87.

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