

**Antoni Furió**

# God did not create the nations

**There are those who believe that on the first day God created the Heaven and the Earth, on the second, the firmament, and on the third, Spain. For Spain read France, Germany or any other nation with ancient origins, with a great deal of history and literature behind it. The nations, we all ought to know by now, predate man and their history is older than the history of humankind.**

Anyone who doubts this can consult the books by Fernando García de Cortázar, the latest “national history prize-winner” (a prize awarded by the Ministry of Culture of a supposedly progressive government), among which there is one with a quite explicit subtitle: *Historia de España. De Atapuerca al euro* (A History of Spain. From Atapuerca to the Euro). From Atapuerca, more than a million years ago that is, when the hominids that inhabited that mountain range in the heart of Castile had not as yet taken the biological step that would turn them into humans. In the important things, the Spanish have no doubts. Nor the French, nor the Germans. Nor the Serbs, the Croats or the Israelis. Many of the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> so far have been and are wars of history, religion and nation: namely, of sacred history. In the name of sacred national history, the Germans and the French kept hating each other and killing each other on and off for exactly three-quarters of a century, between 1870 and 1945, to fix the border between them on one side or the other of the Rhine, and to retain in the respective part the ancient regions of Alsace and Lorraine, French since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but German-speaking from the Middle Ages to the present day. In a particularly dark moment of recent European history, the rise of fascism and the triumph of barbarity and irrationality, the Spanish generals who rose up against the Republic, in the name, among other things, of the sacred unity of the fatherland, called themselves “nationals” and denied this same condition to their enemies, above all if they were standing up for a different nation. Serbs and Croats have been annihilating each other and exterminating Albanians and Bosnian Muslims, in a frenzy of blood and death on all sides, over questions of faith, liturgy, alphabet and, above all, the most ancient settlement in the territory under dispute. The Balkans are an immense palimpsest, a superimposition of histories and cultures, in which each side supports its own layer of scripture —the one corresponding to the most brilliant and expansive moment in the respective national history: that of Greater Serbia, Greater Croatia, Greater Albania...— as the only legitimate one, while refuting the others. And some Israelis invoke the Old Testament, a mixture of religion, history and literature, to justify their right to the Promised Land and to evict the Palestinians from it, or massacre them if they resist and revolt. **There are those, then, who date nations back to the third day of the Creation**, and put the rule of some over others down to the ways of an exclusive god, who makes them timeless, eternal, with no beginning or end. There are also those who, conversely, consider them a recent invention, a product of modernity, with no more than two hundred years’ history. For contemporary historians, the most credulous of historians, for they believe everything the documents say, starting with what the newspapers say, which at times are the only documents they use, and because they believe that everything begins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nation only appears after 1800 and, as a result, we can only properly talk of nations after that date. Not the modern nation, the contemporary nation or the bourgeois nation. The nation, full stop. A new political figure that replaces the monarchy as the possessor and repository

Many of the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> so far have been and are wars of history, religions and nation: namely, of sacred history

of sovereignty, of supreme power. In the *ancien régime*, the devotion and fidelity of the subjects was automatically channelled towards the monarch, in whom were embodied the country and the political institutions and in whom were concentrated all the powers. The nation, on the other hand, grouped together all the citizens and was at the same time their political expression, a product invented and defended by free men, who felt themselves to be invested with popular representation. Developing these arguments, Manuel Martí and Ferran Archilés have concluded that the Catalans' first nation, like it or not, has been the Spanish nation, or that one may not speak of a process of "denationalisation" of Valencian society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because "this would imply the existence of a previous Valencian 'nation', already established, something difficult to justify historically". Nations, everyone knows, are a creation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that there is an abundance of historical literature to the contrary is beside the point, that mediaevalists, modernists and historical sociologists speak naturally of nations and of national feeling for the respective periods they study or that examples of the use of the term "nation" in a modern sense, difficult to reduce to the place or the region of birth or to subordinate it to identification with the figure of the monarch, may be multiplied. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Generalitat de Catalunya did not hesitate to dispossess the natural king, John II, of the crown and offer it successively to Henry IV of Castile, Constable Peter of Portugal and René d'Anjou. Two centuries later, the war cry of the reapers was none other than "Long live the land", with the king nowhere to be seen, as the revolt was directed precisely against his bad governance. An irate cry that the labourer Joan Pey made even more explicit in 1653, after the revolt had been put down militarily: "Neither France nor Spain, long live the land and death to bad governance". The non-existent nation, or historically difficult to justify, as the critics would say, was here, in between France and Spain, in the cry of the labourer and his defence of the land. There are also more elaborate conceptions, in the considerable political literature of the time, in Catalonia and in Europe (in Holland and England for a start) that it would be a good idea to read before merrily claiming that national identities are a product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and leaving it at that.

**Of course, another matter entirely is nationalism, a recent historical product**, which has dominated political life in the last two centuries and has also been the reason for a few wars, the most horrific known to mankind. And which has also impregnated other expressions of political and cultural life, literature and music at school, the media and governments and parliaments. There have been, and there are, forms of nationalism oppressed, peripheral, resistant, and forms of nationalism oppressive, dominant, even though they may not want to recognise themselves as such, because the term —not the content, which is still more alive than ever— is increasingly discredited. But, I say, nationalism —a modern product— is one thing and nations are another. Let us not place everything in the same bag. There have been, and there are, nations without nationalism.

With regard to this business of nations and national identities, collective identities in general, I am more and more convinced that not only can categorical and decisive formulations, which may be based on supposedly objective facts, not be made, but that it rather falls wholly within the formless and shifting sphere of representations and subjective identifications. And in these representations, in these identifications, the historical narratives that create them and reproduce them have played a crucial role, much more than the linguistic, cultural and ethnographical materials that nourish them. Spain is Spain thanks above all to the history of Spain, to the historical discourse of Spain. To a narrative —to a script, says Miquel

Barceló— that establishes an essential continuity from ancient times to the present, *from Atapuerca to the euro*, and which has its points of anchorage and identification in the great figures and the great events: Viriato, Don Pelayo, Covadonga, El Cid Campeador, Las Navas de Tolosa, the Catholic Monarchs, the taking of Granada, the discovery of America, the Gran Capitán, the *Tercios* of Flanders, Lepanto, Don Juan of Austria, Agustina de Aragón, Bailén...

In times of greater critical exigency and intellectual rigour, some of the names, above all at the two ends of the chronology, have dropped out of the list (Tubal, grandson of Noah, for being imaginary and barely credible, and Franco, for being ruthless), but the narrative script has remained firm, resisting all attempts at erosion.

More than by any other way —the Church, military service or the press, which also contribute to it— Spain enters the minds and hearts of the Spanish, in Castile and Catalonia, in Andalusia and the Valencian Country, through the schools and the school textbooks. Through the map of Spain on the classroom walls that acts as the background to the photographs of uniformed pupils, often the first photograph of many generations of Spaniards. Through poems and songs, drawings of

monarchs and battles, categorical phrases destined to stay in the memory. Such as “Rome does not pay traitors”, “What Spain gave to Rome: emperors, like Trajan, Hadrian and Theodosius; philosophers, like Seneca and Quintilian...”, “It makes no difference”, “Our Lady of the Pillar says/that she doesn’t want to be French...”. Images, verses, ardent

sentiments are the material from which nations are made. Here and in France and Germany. The nationalisation of the masses, as it is called, is a relatively late phenomenon, beginning at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is when the masses burst onto the political stage. Before that, the state did not even bother with them, for politics was the stuff of dignitaries, cliques and court intrigues, and education in schools was far from being widespread and having as its prime objective instilling the national values. A late phenomenon, but solid and effective, for it managed to stamp these values, stated and interiorised as supreme, on the chests of many of the schoolchildren and future citizens, who would later be able to die for the fatherland on the battlefields of Europe and Africa or during the bloody Spanish Civil War.

Francoism exacerbated and exploited these passions, and the Transition missed an excellent opportunity to deactivate them, to dismantle the old-fashioned and jingoistic narrative that impregnated and was reproduced through the school syllabuses. The institutions and political customs were modernised, but the ingredients of the old traditional national discourse were left intact, or slightly retouched. They did not dare to touch them. They did not dare to dismantle them, despite the criticisms of the educators and the critical historians. They were more afraid of the reproaches, opposed to it, of the old-school professors, alarmed at even the slightest attempt at renewal, at any timid attempt to replace the history of names and events, of great figures and great events, with a more critical and rational, more scientific, explanation of the past. Julio Valdeón, an old torchbearer of Marxist historiography and now a member of the Real Academia de la Historia (Royal Academy

**Nationalism, a modern product, is one thing and nations are another.**

**Let us not place everything in the same bag**

of History), was and is right when he claimed that the abandonment of national history in primary and secondary schools, the replacement of the history of kings and battles with that of structures and history without names and passions, would be detrimental to the very notion of Spain and would result in the patriotic, national disarmament of the Spaniards. The drift towards nationalism of Valdeón and other progressive historians and intellectuals is in itself evidence of how strongly rooted, internalised, are the traditional ingredients of the national discourse of Spain, the narrative of Spain, which they are reluctant to dismantle. Nationalist convictions carry more weight than critical reflections, and in this the differences between the right and left wing are not always clear.

**In the face of this powerful national narrative of Spain**, which has historically demonstrated its effectiveness and ability to survive, the alternative has to be a critical, radical discourse and not another national narrative, completely the opposite, a narrative in which the same content would be reflected inversely. The alternative to the history of the Pelayos and the Alfonsos, of El Cid and El Gran Capitán, cannot be that of the Jaumes and the Borrells, of the Almogàvers and Roger de Flor. This could not be achieved by the *Renaixença* —either the Catalan or the Valencian— due to its own limitations, due to its social and ideological conditioners, or by

The drift toward  
nationalism of progressive  
intellectuals is in itself  
evidence of how strongly  
rooted is the national  
discourse of Spain

the stale regionalism of then and now. The Valencianists of the 1930s were the first to try it, that promising generation of young university students, progressives and republicans, suddenly cut short by the war and, above all, by the repression: death, exile, prison, purges... In the difficult years of Francoism, Joan Fuster tried it again, the heir to that progressive Valencianist tradition of the Republic, which he managed to revitalise

with the new interpretative keys of the past and present offered by Vicens Vives and Marxist analysis. *Nosaltres els valencians* (We the Valencians) is a new reading of the country, of the history of the country, in the light of the social, cultural and political concerns of the present, of that present of the early 1960s and, also, of the most innovative historiographical proposals of the period, at a time when the university was becoming one of the most dynamic agents of the struggle against the regime. The book caused a furore and achieved the adherence of many young university students, not only from Valencianist circles, which were and would continue to be tiny for a long time, but from all the progressive sectors in general, because it offered another discourse, another view of the past and, with it, another proposal for the future, closer also to their own concerns. The most iconoclastic and subversive thing, however, was not so much the analysis of the past (the Catalan origins of the Valencians, resulting from the conquest and the settlement of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the common language and culture

shared with Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, a unity that was neither challenged nor placed in doubt in the Valencia of the 1950s), as the future project, which for the Valencians —and not just the Valencians— as a people, as a people subordinate and nebulous, in danger of dissolution, could only help to strengthen the links with the Principality (of Catalonia) and the Balearic Islands within the communal framework of the Catalan-speaking countries. Fuster also surprised and connected with broader sectors than Valencianism proper because his discourse was modern and deliberately gave a wide berth to all the traditional stereotypes of regionalism, in particular, that utterly smug complacency that went so well with conformism and subordination. Some years before, Vicens Vives had written for the future captains of industry and commerce that would one day lead Catalonia —Fuster did so for the university students that would one day transform and reinvent the Valencian Country.

The recent past has not turned out this way. But I do not think that either the failures of political Valencianism or the disappointments or frustrations that this has generated may be laid at Fuster's door, as he neither stood for any public post nor designed any electoral strategy. Nor can they be wholly laid at the door of political Valencianism. Alfons Cucó and other authors have recalled not only the formidable offensive launched by the right wing

## The Spanish state could not afford another Catalonia or Basque Country, and in this offensive the most primitive anti-Catalanism was an effective weapon

—a right wing wild and yet to be established, in which the more moderate sectors of the regime coincided with the bunker holding out against losing the positions of power that it still controlled— in order to neutralise the electoral hegemony of the left, but also the doubts, the hesitations and the final capitulation of this same left wing, completely subordinated

to Madrid. The Spanish state could not afford another Catalonia or Basque Country, not even another Navarre. And in this offensive, the most primitive anti-Catalanism was an effective weapon, because anti-Catalanism, let's be honest, is an essential ingredient of the Spanish identity and, properly stirred up, an ingredient also of Valencian victimhood, of Valencian Spanish-supporting regionalism. The battle, in which no resources were spared, was not so much fought on the field of ideas as on that of symbolism, which excites the most easily aroused, most irrational feelings, and that of institutional politics (the 5% level that hindered the parliamentary expression of a still incipient nationalism).

All this is too well known, but it is useful to keep harking back to it time and again because the fact that it was not a particularly heated confrontation of ideas or a battle that was only played out on the field of symbolism is often overlooked. We cannot forget the interests at stake or make an abstraction of the social, economic, political and cultural context in which it took place. The right wing was able to domesticate the left and both right and left, for electoral, party reasons, were able to block political Valencianism's path to parliament. And not just the parliamentary path —its media presence too and, therefore, the limited capacity to influence public opinion. The left, and the country in general, was to suffer this later. It is still suffering it. The PSOE gave up on politics —and the ideas that make politics

worthwhile— for party and intra-party strife, for institutional power or organic power. It does not seem to want to return. It feels more comfortable on the playing field and with the rules of play —the symbols, the language, the water, the construction— set by the right, which will always have the upper hand, because the electorate will always prefer the original to the copy. The words of the new secretary general of the Valencian socialists do not exactly invite us to be optimistic: not only does he accept and fully defend the current framework of the charter of autonomy, but he sends the conflicting standpoints that his party may have had on the matter of symbols and names back to the scrapheap of history.

The saddest thing about all this controversy over the official symbols of the Valencians, over the cancellation of Fusterianism as a critical revision of the past and above all as a viable proposal for the future, over the defence of Valencianist autochthonism as opposed to so-called Catalan imperialism or uniformism, is the stinginess of its objectives and thinking. And, what is even worse, it seems like *déjà vu*.

**Let me make it clear that I have nothing against the revision of Fusterianism**, the revision of the history of the Valencians from a regionalist or neo-Llorentinist standpoint. Everyone is free to concoct the narrative that suits them best and make propaganda of it wherever they wish, to adapt to the reality. A reality, however, that is not merely the official symbolism of self-government, but also that of a country devastated by corruption and property speculation, by the collusion between public business and private interests, by the close connivance between politicians, developers, wheeler-dealers and fortune hunters of all kinds; that of a country where the society has changed enormously, with the transformation of its productive foundations, in a breakneck transition from agriculture to services, and the sedimentation of the successive migratory waves, since the 1960s; that of a country where *Valencià* (the Valencian language) is spoken less every day, when the language has until recently been one of the chief factors of social integration and cultural identity; where the institutions neither defend nor promote the use of *Valencià*, but pour scorn on it and discourage it, marginalise it or eliminate it from public forums and the media; where the real problems are those imposed by job insecurity and the economic crisis, the dismantling of the welfare state, the feeling of insecurity and the loss of confidence in the future, as well as the racist and xenophobic reactions that are occurring, or the inadequate democratic culture that could make it possible to condemn and rectify these and other instances of selfish or simply anti-democratic behaviour.

In this context of moral ruin and social decay, the quarrelling over the images, the symbols, does not cease to be, now like thirty years ago, a joke in bad taste. An expedient to divert the attention somewhere else: deliberately, as the right does every time elections are near or it has to cover up its dirty business, or naively, as the good souls of accommodating Valencianism propose to us, who do not seem to be too sure of which country they are living in. Indeed, although Fuster is accused of being essentialist and ethnicistic (Oh, goodness gracious me!), his discourse does not abandon this terrain. Reality is seen merely in symbolic terms, and the great remedy for Valencianism to obtain popular support is none other than the acceptance of the official symbols. On the other hand, the critical analysis of the social reality, the denunciation of the corruption and the depredation that is devastating the country, of the control and the manipulation of the media, of the retreat in the social use and prestige of *Valencià*, of the poor democratic quality of political life in general, does not count or is not so interesting. At least it is missing from the criticisms of those spirited

neo-Llorentinists, who only have Catalanism in their sights or, as they usually say, Fusterian nationalism or cultural nationalism. Moreover, his ideas are not all that original as they reproduce the postulates of the regionalist Valencianism of the last hundred and fifty years, whose history they stand for and from whose ideas they take inspiration. Dwarf-like, plain Valencianism, lacking dignity and ambition, capable of coexisting with and fitting perfectly in the political and ideological machinery of the Bourbon Restoration, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, Francoism, *blaverisme* and the neo-foralism practised by the current occupant of the Palau de la Generalitat. An innocuous regionalism that in no way disturbs or questions the hegemony of the Spanish nationalist discourse, which because of this not only did not persecute it, but tolerated it and made use of it in the dark days of Francoism.

At heart, all these protests over their own space, set apart, strictly Valencian, similar to the anti-Catalan movement in Majorca, the anti-Basque movement in Navarre and the folkloric and complacent Valencianism against which Fuster rebelled, have as their basic framework of reference the Spanish national discourse, the narrative of Spain.

This nationalism is not alternative or transformative, but accommodating. It hides its inner emptiness behind its emphasis on the modernisation of the Valencian economy and society,

the policies of major public works and road infrastructures and major media events.

The real groundbreaking, modernising discourse was, fifty years ago, Fuster's. Not just because it distanced itself from the conservative, archaic Valencianism of the post-war period but because it broke unequivocally with the narrative of Spain, the Francoist one and the

## Fuster's main achievement is his contribution to rethinking the country, to constructing an alternative national discourse

one before Franco, in which Don Teodor Llorente and his continuers had so comfortably installed themselves. Also, because of its wish to escape from the agrarian reflections of a still rural country only just then plunging itself into a process of industrialisation that would transform it completely within a decade. With his determined commitment to modernity and rationality, to a barely "nationalistic" Valencianism and Catalanism, barely based on the festive celebration of its own glories or on the essentialist ingredients of the national identity, Fuster broadened his audience far beyond the traditional, even reactionary, circles in which post-war Valencianism had been enclosed, and the alternative and progressive groups that were beginning to appear in the late 1950s and early 1960s, to connect also with a broader social and political spectrum, going from the representatives of a civilised and modernised right wing to the left-wing parties and organisations, opposed to Francoism. Needless to say, all of them were still very much in the minority and disorganised.

Fuster's main achievement, in those years of desolation and absolute intellectual poverty, is that of having contributed to rethinking the country and, above all, to rethinking it outside the narrative of Spain, to constructing an alternative narrative, another national discourse, which did not begin at the dawn of time or in the cave of Parpalló, but with James I's

conquest and the creation of the kingdom of Valencia; a discourse that gave pride of place to the common language, culture and history of Catalans, Majorcans and Valencians and proposed, as a political project, a similarly shared future. A political project in the broadest sense of the term, as any proposal for the future, the collective future, is necessarily political, and which has not always made itself understood, especially when one insists on the failure of Fuster's postulates, in their defeat at the polls or in the face of reality. Fuster's diagnosis, so criticised in recent years, but which still seems valid to me, is quite simple: if the future is not shared, there is no future. Not for the common language, culture or history. Nor for that thing, so ethereal, they call the nation, the shared nation, and which he called the *Països Catalans* (Catalan-speaking countries).

Nor for Catalonia proper, increasingly uncomfortable with what is going on south of the river Sènia. The Principality has never known what to do with the Valencians, so peculiar that they do not even get on with each other, and in recent years Catalan nationalism has stepped up its regionalist and isolationist reflexes, convinced that from the Valencian Country only problems and headaches can come.

Some think that now is the time to take different paths, to distinguish between the "Catalan nation" and the "Valencian nation". But isolation, withdrawal, is just suicidal, and the Catalan nationalists would do well to realise that what is happening to the language in the Valencian Country, what is happening to the Valencian Country itself, will sooner or later happen to Catalonia as well. Furthermore, the "Valencian nation" is fine as an empty gesture or if the basic framework of reference is Spain: it does not promise anything, and in the end Spain will continue to be the *nation of nations*. It is purely a question of terminology —purely a question of names— for internal consumption. Seen from outside, from Europe or from a world increasingly globalised, nations are something else and the future project of the Valencians —of the Valencians as a people, of course, and not just as residents in the territory— and also of the Catalans, lies in the Catalan-speaking countries, in a shared future.

I am not so sure that all this has failed, as those who now advocate its liquidation tell us and try to convince us, nor that all in all the balance is negative. After almost fifteen years of right-wing government, a right wing that preys on the country, socially unsupportive and hostile to the language and culture, there is still life in the country of the Valencians. There is not a single town or city from the north to the south of the country where there is not one, minimal though it may be, restless and resistant civil network, active, militant, made up of the young and the not so young, of cultured and aware people (this is a country, and I shall never tire of repeating it, that has been created by the teachers and the people of culture, musicians, singers, writers, painters, school and university teachers, who are also the basis of the hopes for the future), by people who, despite the disappointments, do not resign themselves and keep on doing things. The capacity for resistance and protest, the desire for change, has not completely vanished. The political realism so called for by those who propose to do away with Fuster's legacy —a legacy more critical and political than ideological— and radically change the Valencian way of thinking is not at odds with the utopian wish to change reality. In the end, utopian objectives —fair, possible, achievable— are the only ones worth fighting for. Capitulation, on the other hand, leads to conformity and demobilisation, plunging us into that state of the perpetual after-dinner nap, from which Valencian society never seems to wake up **||**