Language, Space, and Mobility in European History Writing

Ángel Alcalde

To understand European history today we need to engage with critical issues of spatiality, language, and mobility in historians’ professional practice. New scales and spaces of analysis, English as a "vehicular" language, and crossing intellectual and geographical borders have become key practices to advance historical knowledge. We can consider the internationalisation of European historiography as a result of the ‘interconnectedness of human history’. The converse, however, is also true: Professional internationalisation has pushed historians towards a transnational and global view of modern European history. In the last 20 years, I experienced this transformation through my formative, professional trajectory as an historian and in the specific fields of expertise which have been my foci. In this paper, I will reflect on writing European history from various vantage points: places and contexts, from the local to the global, where I conducted my work on twentieth-century Spain and the history of fascism.
The complex relations between European history, national histories, and the history of fascism deserve attention. Interestingly, most leading historians of fascism as a European phenomenon, at the outset of their careers, grappled with national histories rather than with the history of the continent as a whole. Robert Paxton, Zeev Sternhell, and Kevin Passmore started from France; Stanley Payne from Spain, while Antonio Costa-Pinto began his work from Portugal. Crucial insights into the history of fascism have also originated from scholars who excelled at writing national histories, like Emilio Gentile in Italy. Tellingly, the main promoter of a “generic” interpretation of fascism, Roger Griffin, was not trained as a historian but as a philologist and once defined himself as a ‘guest-worker in History’. As an ultra-nationalist form of politics and a movement in pursuit of state power, it has always made sense to write the history of fascism through the nation-state framework. Only recently, by undertaking transnational history, have scholars begun to unravel the tension between the exacerbated nationalism of fascism and its simultaneous internationalism. While historians of transnational fascism often wear European lenses, collective works on the subject often juxtapose case studies mostly framed within the “national container”. What I have dubbed ‘the transnational consensus in the historiography of fascism’ has amplified its perceived Europeanness. After the ambitious comparative works of the 1990s, fascism was no longer conventionally considered as a product of unique Italian and German trajectories, but rather as a quintessentially European phenomenon.

As with many colleagues, I became a historian of fascism through Spanish history. Situating twentieth-century Spain within European history was not an easy task. Transiting the history of fascism as a bridge between Spain and Europe has been even more challenging. For decades, an important part of Spanish historiography tended to emphasise the uniqueness of the national past in the bid to differentiate it from the fascist and Nazi experiences. This is paradoxical, if we consider the bloody record of fascism in Spain and the longevity of Franco’s regime. Inward-looking historians explained momentous events such as the Spanish Civil War through endogenous factors and longer-term developments in Spanish history. Certainly, the “national container” was the dominant analytical unit. Spanish history, like most other national histories, was written autonomously. Europe was a distant background and sometimes did not figure at all in texts of Spanish history.

In Spanish universities, history programs were articulated through two primary sets of subjects: histories of Spain on one hand and universal or world histories on the other; both sub-divided in ancient, medieval, early modern, and contemporary. Universal history was seen as largely independent with few explicit crossovers with the national storyline. While European processes and events clearly dominated the so-called...
universal history subjects, Europe was not particularly emphasised as a “container” of history. Distinctively, an episodic understanding of the past dominated the narratives of both world and European histories. Key episodes, often connected to national storylines, were singled out and emphasised as turning points that created new contexts: the French revolution, the Russian revolution, the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. If we focus on the twentieth century, it is interesting to observe that the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship were narrated with limited reference to non-Spanish history. In striking contrast, today we primarily see them as part of the global and transnational processes of the time. It was not until the 1990s, however, that Europe emerged in Spanish historiography as the most relevant spatial context in the study and teaching of history.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were a time of European optimism and high expectations regarding the single market, Schengen, the European Union, and the Euro. As with other countries, the research and teaching of history transformed in Spain during this period. The growing tendency emphasised the importance of the “European context”. The 1930s’ destruction of the democratic experience of the Spanish Second Republic needed to be resituated in the broader context of decline of liberalism and rise of fascism in the continent. Often this engagement with the European context just meant a heightened awareness of historical developments beyond the borders of the Spanish nation-state: that is, the episodes occurring in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the democracies of France and the United Kingdom. Some scholars used diplomatic archives to analyse international relations between Spain and the European powers. In Spanish historiography however, there was no empirical analysis of the multiple transnational contacts, cultural transfers, entanglements, influences or networks. At most, comparative history was hailed as the most illuminating, yet challenging, exercise. Yet, this was about comparing Spain to other nation-states. Certainly, transnational perspectives were slowly developing, mostly on US, French and German campuses. Here it is noteworthy to interject that Spanish historiography has very often been affected by what I call the “Iberian lag”: the lateness and paucity with which international intellectual innovations tend to be discussed and adopted in Spain. In 1991, historian Julián Casanova compared the practice of social history in Spanish historiography to “dry farming” (secano). In the early 2000s methodological innovation usually came not from transnational historians, but from the introduction of the culturalist perspectives advanced in the anglophone and francophone academic literature of the 1990s. Furthermore, Spanish history writing was highly fragmented by the massive predominance of regional and local histories—a product of the system of regional autonomous government and scarce resources for scientific research.
Heated debates in Spanish historiography between proponents of a Marxist-inspired social history and a post-modern cultural history were only settled, if at all, with the syncretic adoption of sociocultural history.

In the 2000s, renewing the historiography of the Civil War and dictatorship involved embracing cultural factors; citing the works of Emilio Gentile, Roger Griffin, and later, George L. Mosse signalled not only openness to historiographical innovation but also to international influences. During this decade it became increasingly common for Spanish modern historians to hold visiting fellowships abroad, usually in research centres in Paris, Rome and London (for example, Paul Preston's Cañada Blanch Centre at LSE). Some scholars also had the privilege of studying at the European University Institute in Florence. Along with these cross-border activities, access to the internet and the increasing digitalisation of the historical profession also facilitated the development of foreign language skills. This period, arguably, demarcated the Europeanisation of Spanish historiography and history, with more intense exchanges and participation in debates at a European level, although the large majority of Spanish historians still primarily work within national intellectual and institutional contexts.

Trained in Spanish academia in the 2000s, my early work on the history of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's regime reflected this changing context. Whereas my initial studies of wartime mobilisation and Spanish fascism were social histories situated in local and regional frameworks, my second monograph *Los excombatientes franquistas*, employed culturalist concepts borrowed from French historiography of the First World War. I adapted the notion of *culture de guerre* to interpret the nation-wide political culture of Francoist war veterans as a form of European fascism. In these years, the reading of historiography in both French and English, as well as an enriching period of research in Paris allowed me to make innovative interpositions in existing debates in Spanish historiography. Answering historical questions in the national framework of Spain — What was the relationship between war veterans and the Franco regime? — led me to interrogate the European framework — What was the relationship between veterans and fascism in interwar Europe? From 2011 to 2015, I took the opportunity to explore this European-wide historical question as a doctoral researcher at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. It is worth observing the institutional and intellectual context of the EUI and its impact on various generations of historians.
Institutions matter: the transformative impact of the European University Institute

Since its creation, the EUI History Department has had a strong emphasis on comparative, transnational, and global histories of Europe. It is difficult to overstate how the exceptional intellectual and institutional context of the EUI can be transformative for a historian’s work. There, doctoral researchers from all EU member countries are supported to learn additional European languages to research proficiency, to develop the capacity of writing in academic English at a nearly “native” level, to conduct multi-archival research on various countries, to spend time as a visiting researcher in other European universities, and to participate in international English-speaking conferences, seminars, and workshops. Along with a wider and more diverse cohort of doctoral researchers and fellows, I experienced this training at a time of high societal anxieties about Europe and the crisis of its Union.

My resulting thesis was a study of European history and fascism that departed from earlier interpretations. Methodologically, I forsook both the obsession with a culturalist interpretation of fascism (Mosse’s 'brutalization') and simplistic comparisons between nation-state experiences. Somewhat reflecting my own experience as a scholar across borders, I instead focused on ideological transfers, transnational contacts, and networks to re-interpret the development and expansion of fascism in Italy, Germany, Spain and France between 1919 and 1940. Furthermore, my empirical exploration was not constrained to the boundaries of these countries. My analytical framework was what I called a “transnational space,” a space not determined by borders of nation-state cases, but by research questions and the spatially complex circulation of fascist ideas. Retrospectively, now I believe my work would have been further enhanced had I transcended Europe as a spatial framework and included, for instance, the United States, where veterans’ organisations such as the American Legion were inspired by fascism to radicalise their right-wing politics.

From European to global scales of analysis

My opinion will be better understood with a commentary on my post-doctoral experience. After my time at the EUI, I started a side-project on the global and
international history of veterans’ organisations in the Cold War. This brought me to spend time as a researcher not just in Europe, in Germany, but also outside the EU umbrella: in the United States, China, and “international” Geneva. Thematically and spatially my work broadened, and I read voraciously on matters of global history.

Sebastian Conrad’s synthesis What is global history? was published in 2016 signalling again an intertwining of the contemporary context with intellectual developments. Since 2016, the global rise of far-right political movements on the one hand, and the global impact of new progressive social movements such as #metoo and Black Lives Matter on the other hand have transformed the way historians construct questions about the past.

I experienced these changes in my professional life. In early 2016, when my Hindi/Urdu teacher in a Delhi language school asked my opinion of whether Trump is a fascist, I was not surprised at his concern. After all, he was a progressive Muslim in Narendra Modi’s India. Still, it made me question the alleged Europeanness of fascism. In late 2017, following the news of the Catalan nationalist’s attempt at independence through the lens of Chinese media in Shanghai, I could not help but relativise transcontinental distance in the era of nationalism and internationalism. In the same years, new publications on the transnational and global history of fascism and Nazism dictated a new research agenda. Themes such as global empires and alliances, and the impact and influence of fascism in Asia and the Americas, have unleashed the study of fascism from the narrower horizon of writing the history of Europe. “Mobilities”, in fact, have been hailed as a new revealing theme. Global history has challenged European histories as normative or unique models and blurred established chronologies.

If we have relativised the nation-state as a self-evident unit of analysis and embraced instead transnational perspectives of European history, the same methodological reasons that motivated this change can, in turn, make us relativise “Europe” as a meaningful container for history and thus adopt global understandings of the past. Transnational history can equally invite us to interpret European local experiences in intimate relation to extra-European phenomena. Topics such as the violent process of decolonisation—for instance, the French wars in present-day Vietnam and Algeria—should remind us of the persisting relations between continental Europe and the rest of the world. These cases also present strong links with the history of the European and extra-European far right. After the Second World War, there were global continuities in different parts of the world, in Latin America for example, of fascist ideas that emerged in inter-war European societies. If the argument that fascism was a “European phenomenon” no longer has the same purchase, neither has the claim that the history of fascism ended in 1945.
Once again, I have become vividly aware of the inconsistency of such presumed spatiotemporal boundaries for the history of fascism through my own professional trajectory and context. In 2019, I joined the University of Melbourne, Australia, as Lecturer in Twentieth-Century European History. Before arriving to the antipodes for the first time in late 2018, I had limited knowledge about the society and history of Australia. However, working in Australia as a historian of Europe has underscored to me the global character of the European past in even starker hues. For context, Australia, as a historically Anglo settler society, for a long time perceived itself as a European, more precisely British, fragment moored in the Pacific.

Decentering European history from the Antipodes

Furthermore, this Eurocentric mentality was reflected in the configuration of the humanities, including history, in Australia. Modern Australia was always shaped by its distance from the European continent, but this distance affected Australian society in material ways, rather than in the realm of ideas. Intellectually, there is little that differentiates the tradition of writing European history in Australia from the European Anglophone one. There are many notable historians of Europe in Australia and, since the 1970s, a Australasian Association for European History. Yet in the past there has been a certain tension between European historians and Australian historians in Australia, with a perception among the latter that the former group’s ‘devotion to the study of the world outside Australia is really only a cultural cringe, self-indulgent, irrelevant and somehow unpatriotic,’ as RJB Bosworth described.

Another fact is that most influential European historians in Australia are historians of specific nation-states, with a focus on the great powers. Thus, Sheila Fitzpatrick is a well-known historian of Russia; Peter McPhee of France; John Moses of Germany; Bosworth of Italy. Tellingly, Bosworth is an expert known by his insistence on the Italian uniqueness of fascism. Becoming a transnational historian of Europe in Australia presents particular difficulties. The reason again is not only distance and the practicalities of mobility, but also issues of language. Whereas established historians deal with the problem of distance by spending long periods of research leave travelling abroad, it is still uncommon to come across Australian history students who, apart from a keen curiosity about the European past, also possess language skills in European languages other than English to conduct independent original historical research. Despite digitalisation, such research from Australia is particularly costly. In recent
times, neither the extremely marketised Australian higher education system, nor a centralised and very competitive system for the allocation of research funding, centred around an Australian Research Council (that has been subject to political interference by a neo-liberal and nationalist government) benefit the practice of European history from the antipodes.

In the last twenty years, however, transnational and global perspectives have also intertwined Australian history with European and world history in extremely interesting ways. No longer can we perceive the same level of distinction between Europeanists and Australianists that Bosworth described in the 1980s for the historical profession. These changes are also true for the historiography of the far right. For instance, my graduate students have been investigating Australian fascism and anti-fascism from transnational perspectives that straddle the inter-war and the post-war period. Their findings show the substantial level of interrelation between Australian and European ideologies in the age of fascism. Observing how extremism operated in the historical context of settler colonialism enriches our understanding of fascism and enlarges our mental maps of “Europe”.

There are also recent notable contributions to a transnational and global history of Europe by Australian historians. In fact, the vantage point of Australia allows historians to observe European history in a different light and facilitates thinking outside the European box. In my own research, distance has had no negative impact when I have revisited specifically Spanish themes from Australia. If anything, such remoteness of my point of observation has facilitated me taking a healthy distance from the dominant Spanish historiographical discourses and arriving at new fresh angles to look at the past. In general, geographical distance has benefits for the thinking of historians in similar ways to how temporal distance allows for a better understanding of the past.

Yet innovation in a globalised history of Europe, from Australia and elsewhere, does not come without challenges related to space, mobility, and language, which have been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. There is an ongoing, albeit muted, discussion about the problems that the empire of English as a “vehicular” language represents for academe, particularly in the humanities and history. The careers for European historians who are non-native English speakers increasingly depend on mastering English, often to the unjust devaluation of other skills and expertise. Monolingualism can only impoverish our understanding of the past. But there is a glass ceiling for most European historians whose mother tongue is not English when it comes to publishing their work in high-impact academic journals and presses. A task of the historical
profession at a European level should be to open a critical debate about language use and language training for historians. It is still early to see how the current global health situation and geopolitical conflict in the continent will impact the writing of European history, particularly in regard to mobility, but as in earlier periods, historians will need to adapt their practice to the problems, spaces, languages, and mobilities of their times.

Download as PDF


8. Ángel Alcalde, Los excombatientes franquistas. La cultura de guerra del fascismo español y la Delegación Nacional de Excombatientes (1936-1965), Zaragoza 2014.


13. To understand this, there is an important classic in Australian historiography: Geoffrey Blainey, The Tyranny of Distance. How Distance Shaped Australia’s History, Sydney 2010, 1st ed. 1966).


