



## ¡Bienvenidos!

To mark six years of the Bulletin, we offer a new 'Index' tab at the top of the page. From this tab you can swiftly click your way to a range of articles grouped under 18 different headers, allowing you improved access to the fine writing we have been fortunate to publish over the years. Our thanks to Simon Butler of SDDC for this innovation.

This summer 2023 edition of the Bulletin coincides with the [last sitting of the Pre-U exam](#) that has enriched the Sixth Form Spanish experience in many schools over the past 15 years. We look at Pre-U's achievements – and the story of its decline and fall.



One stand-out text on the final Pre-U syllabus was García Márquez's *Del amor y otros demonios* (Of love and other demons). Using it as an example, we assess [why unsettling texts enrich our reading](#).

The sun may be setting on Pre-U in the UK, but [in China Spanish is surging](#) in keeping with the country's ever-greater engagement in Latin America. Our founding editor Stephen Hart reports from Changsha.

The Colombia-Panama border used to be an impenetrable barrier, but the flow of would-be [migrants to the USA through the Darien Gap](#) has now grown from a trickle to a torrent. How can the countries affected respond, and what kind of American Dream awaits those who reach their destination? [In Spanish]

Transnational integration is also part of the story of [Jorge Drexler](#), Montevidean medic turned internationally acclaimed musician. Find out what has made him such a phenomenon on the Latin music scene.



Why is Spain a tough place to be young – but a good place to be a politician? In his new book British hispanist Michael Reid assesses [Spain's trials and triumphs](#) in the democratic era. We highlight his key findings.

One very public trial that Spain faces is its response to bigotry. A notorious example of this is the emergence of sexism at [Spain's private schools](#). We look at what's gone wrong, and why. [In Spanish]

It never rains but it pours – as [Spain's spectacular drought of 2023](#) is proving. We look at what must be done to keep the taps on and the crops growing.

Alejandro Amenábar's film [Mar adentro](#) won numerous prizes, including the 2004 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. We look back at its wider impact. [In Spanish]



[Santa María del Mar](#) in Barcelona's La Ribera district encapsulates the history and lives of a whole community. Read the story here and be inspired.

The Bulletin of Advanced Spanish is a free resource, read on every continent, written by and for enthusiasts at all stages of their exploration of the language and culture of the Spanish-speaking world. Please see the Guidelines tab if you would like to write for us. The deadline for the next edition is the end of September.

Feliz verano a todos,

The BAS editorial team





UNCATEGORIZED

## Adiós, compañero: Pre-U comes full circle

June 9, 2023BAS

*BAS editor Robin Wallis bids farewell to the Hispanists' friend.*

The Pre-U syllabus, first taught in 2008, ends its 15-year run this summer.

“It’ll be missed in Modern Languages, above all else,” one headteacher laments. Those accustomed to the challenge and scope of Pre-U share his regret. “The new A-level is so much more boring – my own students have already said so, quite literally,” one head of department ruefully told us. “So we’ll continue teaching the Pre-U content, adding in A-level exam technique at the end of the course.”

And so the cycle begun in 2008 comes full circle. At that time I enrolled my students for Pre-U because it appeared to offer a continuation of the largely satisfactory pre-2008 A-level syllabus. It seemed to me that the 99.9% of ML departments that in 2008 signed up to the new A-level were the ones making the change, even if they told themselves otherwise. In terms of content, there was more continuity in the Pre-U, but most schools worried at the idea of a qualification not called A-level.





So what did the 2008 change in A-level syllabus entail? For many Modern Languages teachers, it represented a dramatic lowering of expectations about what students could achieve.

For example, the outgoing A-level syllabus had allowed students to choose any topic rooted in the Target Language (TL) culture for their speaking exam presentation and written coursework. By contrast, the new A-level required them to focus on general topics unrelated to the TL culture – infamously, in one sample speaking test, body piercings and tattoos.

The pre-2008 A-level's 1,500-word coursework assignment, which rewarded analytical skills, was replaced by a sub-section of the writing paper that required a 250-word answer to a general question along the lines of 'Write about a character in the novel/play/film you have studied'. (The decision to drop coursework was a Qualifications Agency directive to both A-level and Pre-U exam boards.)

Teachers speculated at the time that the change in A-level was an anti-elitist manoeuvre by the authorities that regulate exam boards. The message seemed to be that if students were lucky enough to have teachers with expertise in film/literature/history etc it gave them an unfair advantage. Likewise, if teachers had been privileged enough to spend time in the TL country, the exam content should ensure that their students did not gain an unfair advantage as a result.



The upshot was that the content of ML A-level courses was reduced to ‘social science-lite’, ie teachers and students discussing or writing about (in the target language) their general opinions on issues such as piercings, social media, bicycle lanes... without any specialist understanding of these phenomena. By contrast, Pre-U Spanish students were studying – according to their interests, and those of their teachers – topics such as the Colombian drugs trade, the films of Almodóvar, the Castro regime, Moorish architecture, Goya, etc.

Another attraction of the Pre-U was that, with its relatively small cohorts of candidates (never more than 300 a year in Spanish), the marking was widely seen as more reliable than that of A-level.

Although the original impetus for Pre-U came from academically ambitious schools wanting greater challenge for their students, the Cambridge exam board that took on the project was careful to ensure equivalence between A-level and the new qualification. Pre-U’s richer course content meant that at least 37.5% of the marks were awarded for cultural content, which gave weaker linguists a firmer foothold on the syllabus. The challenge for them was getting the right verb endings and adjective agreements. When it came to learning about, eg, ecotourism in Costa Rica or Spain’s Transition to democracy, the gap between weaker and stronger linguists narrowed. The result was often encouraging results for the ‘weaker’ pupils in their final exams. The most gifted pupils also benefitted from having their prowess more clearly recognised in the 9-tier Pre-U grade scale than was possible in A-level’s 6 tiers.

Herein, perhaps, lay the seeds of Pre-U's eventual downfall. Cambridge promoted the idea that the D1 grade allowed the very top tier of students to score higher than the highest grade available at A-level. However, university admissions tutors refused to allow students who happened to be at Pre-U schools to use this to their advantage. In admissions terms, the D1 fell flat.



So too did the notion of the 'Pre-U diploma', ie three subjects taken at either Pre-U or A-level, 'sandwiched' between the Pre-U novelties of an Independent Research Project (IRP) and a 'Global Perspectives' qualification. Although the latter caught on at a number of schools, its requirements were quirky, to the extent that, at some centres, it damaged confidence in the wider Pre-U qualification. The IRP likewise looked more convoluted than extended essay options offered at A-level and IB. Nor did it help that Pre-U's one-year 'Short Course' (AS equivalent) in ML was withdrawn after a few years, causing some schools to abandon Pre-U.

Then there was the marketing. During the early years of Pre-U it was common to hear discussion in the news media about the failings of the A-level syllabuses. Such perceptions created, you would think, a perfect opportunity for Cambridge to promote the Pre-U to appeal to a wider audience. Yet barely a peep was heard in the media about Pre-U, and the marketing effort to schools and teachers was far from convincing. (Cambridge's perceived lack of support for ML teachers was one reason for the creation of this Bulletin, which was partly intended to make up for the shortfall.)



Given this apparent timidity, Pre-U became a target for critics. Journalists questioned its fairness and *modus operandi*, not least when rogue teacher-examiners at a couple of schools abused their positions. The ensuing scandal forced Cambridge to introduce more involved and costlier security protocols, thus eroding Pre-U's financial viability.



No doubt these factors weighed heavily when decisions were made about Pre-U's future and the decision was taken to close it down. The official reason, however, was that the new A-level syllabus coming into force in the 2020s had restored many features of the pre-2008 A-level and Pre-U, such as a linear course with a good range of films and literary texts. With A-levels restored to their former pedigree, the theory went, there was no longer a need for Pre-U.

For ML, there remains a gap between the quality of Pre-U and that of the new A-level. Teachers have highlighted specific shortcomings of the A-level. One head of ML describes the speaking exam as “both prescriptive and vague, with teachers unable to offer any concrete assistance – the worst of both worlds”. Many also regret the abolition of the English-language essay on literature, which encouraged a more penetrating analysis of the texts and was strong preparation for university courses where essays are written in English. Another head of ML remarks that “Pre-U students found the comparative study of two or three works in Paper 4 intellectually motivating – a forerunner of the skills needed in higher education. Sadly, the new A-level lacks this.”

To my mind, Pre-U showed that the more confidence a syllabus places in the students' capacity to tackle mature themes, the more those students will raise their game. High expectations led to high scores. Schools with a cautious, conservative culture used the excuse that ‘our pupils couldn't cope with Pre-U’,

when they in fact meant 'our teachers don't think they're up to teaching it'. Fortunate the students and teachers who backed themselves to meet the challenge.

Perhaps the most telling endorsement of the Pre-U programme for me was that almost half my Year 13 Pre-U students chose to continue Spanish at university. Pre-U had made Spanish an integral part of their academic maturity and nourishment. We salute its founders. Long may the spirit of Pre-U live on in all who took part in the course.

And good luck to those sitting the last Pre-U exams this summer.



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## Del amor y otros demonios (Of Love and Other Demons): teaching literature in the 21st century

June 9, 2023BAS

*BAS editor Sander Berg*

It is January, the first lesson back after Christmas. At the start of the lesson a finger shoots up. 'Sir, when are we going to talk about paedophilia?'

Before the Christmas holidays I had asked my Year 13 to read closely the last two chapters of *Del amor y otros demonios* by Gabriel García Márquez. They had all ostensibly read the novel in English over the summer, so in theory this should have been a second reading, in Spanish this time. Ostensibly. In theory. I had mentioned the problematic relationship between Delaura and Sierva María before and I had given them a 'trigger warning', but it was not until they (some of them at least) had studied the text in detail that they cottoned on to the fact that Delaura is a 36-year old priest who falls in love (lust) with the 12-year old Sierva María. Yes, he is three times her age and she is barely pubescent. Cringeworthy doesn't come close. Two of the girls in the class described how they found reading it more uncomfortable (even) than some scenes in Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*. Given the discomfort, it is legitimate to raise the



question whether we should read such novels with our students. Short answer: yes.



We live in interesting times. Not as in the purported Chinese curse — “May you live in interesting times” — would have it, but perhaps not entirely unlike it either. In the past five years or so, secondary school students have, like their contemporaries at university, become much more agitated and assertive.

More questioning and critical, but also less tolerant – ironically – and more sensitive, more easily outraged. Questions around race and gender in particular are real tinderboxes and potentially toxic. To a large extent this critical engagement is to be welcomed as long as it reflects a serious desire to question things and everyone involved is sincerely open to dialogue.

To understand what is happening in the awkward scenes in Márquez’s novel we need to take two steps back. For Márquez, writing in Colombia in the second half of the 20th century, a grown man falling in lust with a teenage girl would have been less toe-curling than it is for us. Even today the legal age of consent in Colombia is only 14.

A further step back takes us to the late 18th century and the Spanish colonialelite, where the age difference might have been even less of a problem. Still, even with those provisos, there is no need to assume that Márquez is condoning Delaura’s obsession with Sierva María, much less excusing it, let alone promoting paedophilia. Delaura’s falling in lust works on a few narrative levels.



On a personal level, he blames his sudden onrush of amorous feelings on the devil; it is a demonic force that takes hold of him. Initially, he does not believe that Sierva María is possessed by the devil and wants to save her. Perhaps he suffers from saviour syndrome. But when he suddenly feels sexually aroused, he convinces himself that it is the work of the devil. Etymologically, this makes sense: Sierva is possessed by the devil (the devil has taken ownership of her) and the devil in her attacks Delaura and besieges him (the origin of the word 'obsession').

In fact, quite a few of our terms related to (falling in) love are taken from demonology. We say we are bewitched, bothered and bewildered, or that someone has put a spell on us, or encourage someone to go do that voodoo that you do so well. We also speak of someone's charms, say we are enchanted when we meet someone attractive and speak of being fascinated, originally a reference to the evil eye. Delaura, then, takes literally what we have come to see as a commonplace metaphor. As the title of the novel has it, love is just another demon.

On a more thematic level Delaura's obsession with Sierva María works, too. The novel is steeped in images of decay and decadence. It paints a picture of the

dying days of the Spanish empire, with a wheezing bishop, a nymphomaniac marquesa, a feckless marqués putrefying away in his hammock, and crumbling buildings on every street corner. Delaura's moral turpitude can be read as a symbol of the corrosion and corruption of Empire and Church.



It is also possible that Márquez, hardly a friend of the Catholic Church, by describing a priest's obsession with a pubescent girl, might be referring to the institution's moral bankruptcy due to its many sex scandals.

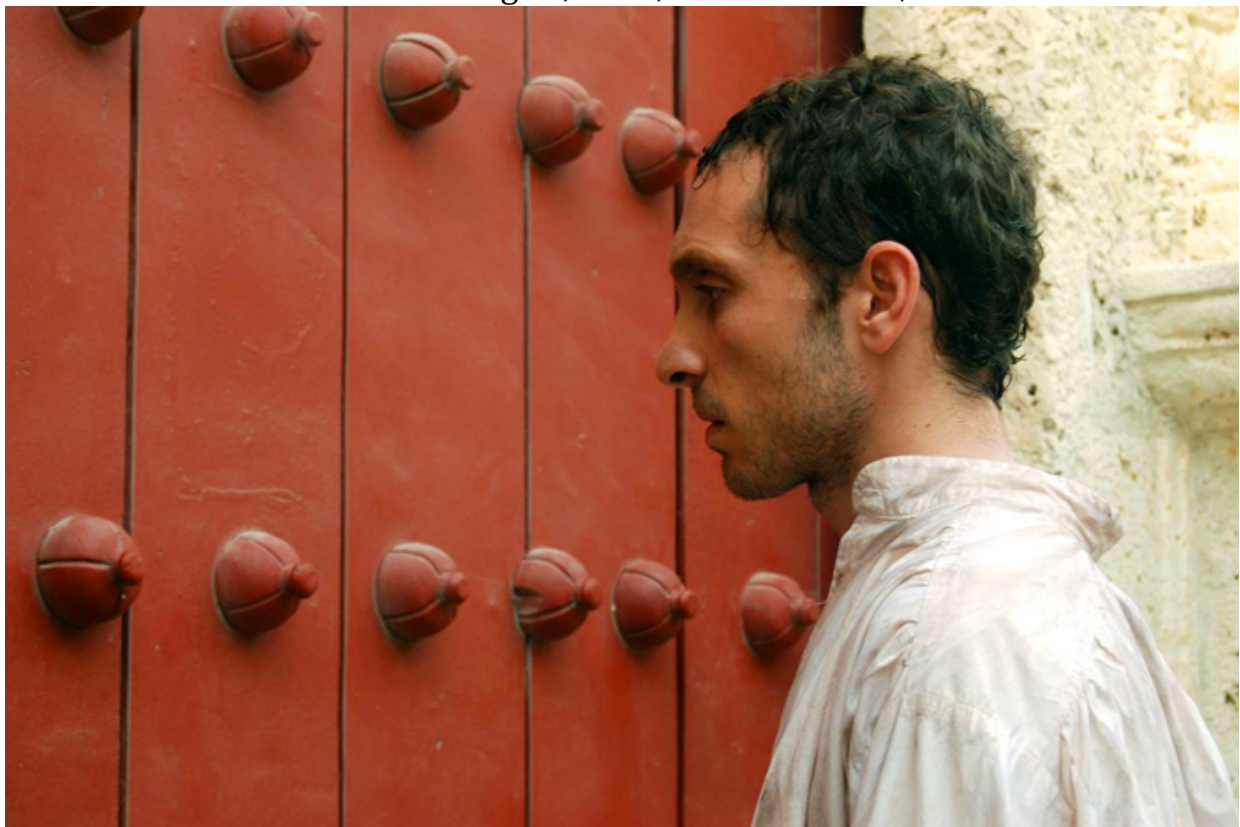
Mark Twain once reportedly quipped that the rumours about his death had been greatly exaggerated. The same is true about the assumption that Delaura has sex with Sierva María. Sure, there is hanky-panky, and kisses and cuddles, and lots of poetry reading, but Delaura vows to remain a virgin until the day he can elope with Sierva María and marry her. This hardly improves matters, of course, although I find it interesting that the same students who first glossed over the age difference on a second reading make the false assumption that the two have sex. They went from not seeing the egregious nature of the relationship to seeing things that aren't there.

A further complication is that Sierva María, after much-spirited resistance, seems to accept Delaura. Maybe it is because, apart from a short spell with her father just before she enters the convent, he is the first white person to pay any



attention to her. Maybe she is under the spell of Garcilaso's love poetry. Perhaps she sees him as a kind of older brother or a surrogate father. Or perhaps she suffers from Stockholm syndrome. Who knows?

These are all nuanced questions, but then again, in the world as in good literature, things are always more nuanced, never black and white. And that is why we need to read novels like *Del amor y otros demonios* with our students. What better lesson in the value of close reading and asking challenging questions and coming up with nuanced and sometimes uncomfortable answers? What better way to get into a different, even alien, mindset? We must also guide them and teach them how to channel their immediate reactions, make them go beyond their initial discomfort and cringe to take a step back and ask: what is this scene doing here? What does it mean? What are some of its potential explanations and interpretations? But equally: to what extent is the scene problematic? What prejudices does it show? What does that tell us about the time and place in which the novel was set or written? If we cannot read works that challenge us and offer us a vision of the world or a description of events that we find difficult to digest, what, one should ask, are we left with?



In these fractious times, these challenging times, it behoves us teachers to continue to read and discuss 'difficult' texts. These can be Canonical, but there are plenty of other works out there that are worth reading, and it is important to hear different voices and learn about a wide variety of experiences. Except that we should not expect these works to be plain sailing, unproblematic and in complete agreement with what we already think and believe. We should leave

our echo chambers and bubbles and zones of comfort sometimes and venture out into the wide and wonderful world called literature.



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## Spain prays for rain on the plain

June 9, 2023BAS

*BAS editor William Chislett*

Spain is suffering a prolonged drought. Depleted reservoirs have sparked water rationing in parts of the country. The wildfire season started months earlier than usual, destroying crops or deterring farmers from planting them. Olive oil production –Spain accounts for 45% of the world’s supply– could be worse than halved this year. Food price inflation – 13% in April – could rise still further.

April was abnormally hot. The state meteorological agency Aemet said temperatures were between 7°C and 11°C above the average, making that month the hottest since records began in 1961. The temperature at one point in Andalusia reached an unprecedented 38.8°C in Córdoba, underscoring Spain’s vulnerability to [climate change](#). The temperature cooled considerably in May and there was torrential rain in some parts of the country. Yet at the end of the month reservoirs remained at only 47.5% of capacity, well below the five-year average of 61.6% for that time of the year.

Spain’s dramatic situation came as the World Meteorological Organisation predicted that annual average temperatures will most probably break [records](#) again in the next five years.





So desperate are people for rain that parishioners in the Andalusian city of Jaén held a procession this month, bearing aloft a statute of Christ known as *El Abuelo* and calling for the first time since 1949 for the Lord to open the heavens and bring rain.

The Socialist-led coalition government announced an unprecedented €2.2 billion package of measures, including increasing the availability of water by building desalination plants and doubling the proportion of water reused in urban areas.

The government also announced legislation that will ban outdoor work when the meteorological office issues high-temperature alerts. This followed the death of a Madrid street sweeper during last July's heatwave.

Drought is not a new phenomenon in Spain, but this one is something extraordinary. Spain has not had 'normal' levels of rain for three years. Just one-quarter of the normal amount of rain fell in the first three weeks of April. In early May, 27% of Spanish territory was in either the drought 'emergency' or 'alert' category, creating a tinderbox. Blazes ravaged 54,000 hectares of land in the first four months of the year, three times the amount in the same period of 2022, according to the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS).



Spain's last severe drought was in 1993-96 when around one-quarter of the population was subject to water restrictions. Some towns in Andalusia had supplies cut off for more than 15 hours a day. In 2008 a prolonged drought forced the authorities to supply water to Barcelona via boat to guarantee domestic use. Catalonia is again one of the most affected regions. Restrictions in many areas have been in force since March, including limiting showers to five minutes, banning the cleaning of cars and the watering of gardens. At the town of L'Espluga de Francolí (population 3,600), water supplies are turned off for nine hours during the night. The Sau reservoir, a key drinking water source, is so low that a medieval village, flooded when the reservoir was created in the 1960s, has re-emerged.

Rain is very unevenly distributed in Spain. The areas with the highest water abundance per surface unit are in the north and Galicia (known as the 'wet' Spain), much more sparsely populated than in the south, in particular, with values higher than 700 mm/year. A popular saying among Galician farmers –*la lluvia es arte* ('rain is art')– was once turned into a tourism slogan.

In the rest of the country (the 'dry' Spain), water availability does not exceed 250 mm/year. The lowest water availability in Spain occurs in the Segura basin, where it does not reach 50 mm/year (around 20 times less than in Galicia and five times lower than the national average).

In the late 1970s, the Spanish government turned Murcia, Alicante and Almería in the south-east –an area where water is minimal and none of the major rivers flow– into ‘Europe’s market garden’ by transferring water from the Tagus through the 300km *Tajo-Segura Trasmase*, a system of pipelines and an aqueduct. This feat of hydraulic engineering was originally planned during the Second Republic in 1931, built during the Franco dictatorship and put into service after the dictator’s death.



In a country with 17 regional governments of different political colours, as of the 1978 Constitution, water management is a sensitive issue that crosses boundaries and inflames sentiments. One of the major providers of water for the *trasmase* is the vast reservoir at Buendía in the region of Castilla-La Mancha, where I have long had a house. Farmers there feel aggrieved when they are restricted in using ‘their’ water because it is needed elsewhere. The *trasmase* has long been embroiled in disputes over how much water should or should not be transferred through it.

Farmers in the south-east produce around 70% of Spain’s vegetables and a quarter of its fruit exports. They are up in arms over the plans of the Socialist-led minority national government to raise the minimum level of the Tagus at source, as this will result in less excess water being transferred. The level needs to be increased in order to remain in line with EU regulations on river water levels, following court rulings. Ecologists say the Tagus is at risk from overexploitation by agriculture and climate change. The Government plans to increase the river’s flow from 6 cubic metres per second to 8.6 cubic metres by 2027.

Without sufficient water, 100,000 jobs are at risk, according to the farming association SCRATS. The father of the novelist Antonio Muñoz Molina, who had a market garden in Úbeda, Andalusia, used to greet ecstatically the year’s first rain with the following words: *Es lo mismo que si estuvieran cayendo*



*billetes verdes* ('It's as if it were raining green banknotes', in reference to the 1,000 peseta notes at the time).

The politics of the *trasvase* are complicated. The Socialists control the region of Castilla-La Mancha and back the national government; Valencia, which Alicante forms part of, opposes the plan, despite being also governed by the Socialists until a new government is formed, as does Andalusia, where Almería is located, and Murcia, both of them regions run by the conservative Popular Party (PP).



Farmland surrounding the Doñana national park, Europe's most important wetland and a UNESCO World Heritage site, has been particularly prone to illegal wells. The authorities have long turned a blind eye. Virginijus Sinkevičius, the EU's environmental chief, [attacked](#) a plan last month by the government of Andalusia to increase the amount of irrigable land around Doñana by 800 hectares. This would be tantamount to an amnesty for the strawberry farmers who have already sunk illegal wells there. He said the bloc would use 'all the means available' to make sure Spain complied with a 2021 European Court of Justice ruling condemning it for breaking EU rules on excessive water extraction in Doñana.

Farmers switched some years ago from olives to strawberries and other berries, which consume more water. Close to half of Spain's aquifers are already in poor condition. Before 1985, groundwater was treated as private property and thus not subject to any regulations.

In early May, in another part of Andalusia near the city of Malaga, the Civil Guard arrested 26 people in raids on illegal wells. The Guard's environmental crimes division identified 250 infractions by fruit farmers. Spain is Europe's biggest producer of tropical fruit.



Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called the drought ‘one of the central political and territorial debates of our country over the coming years’. Resolving the water problem will require a national political consensus, something that is woefully lacking in so many other areas.

*Adapted from the version first published by the Elcano Royal Institute on 23 May.*



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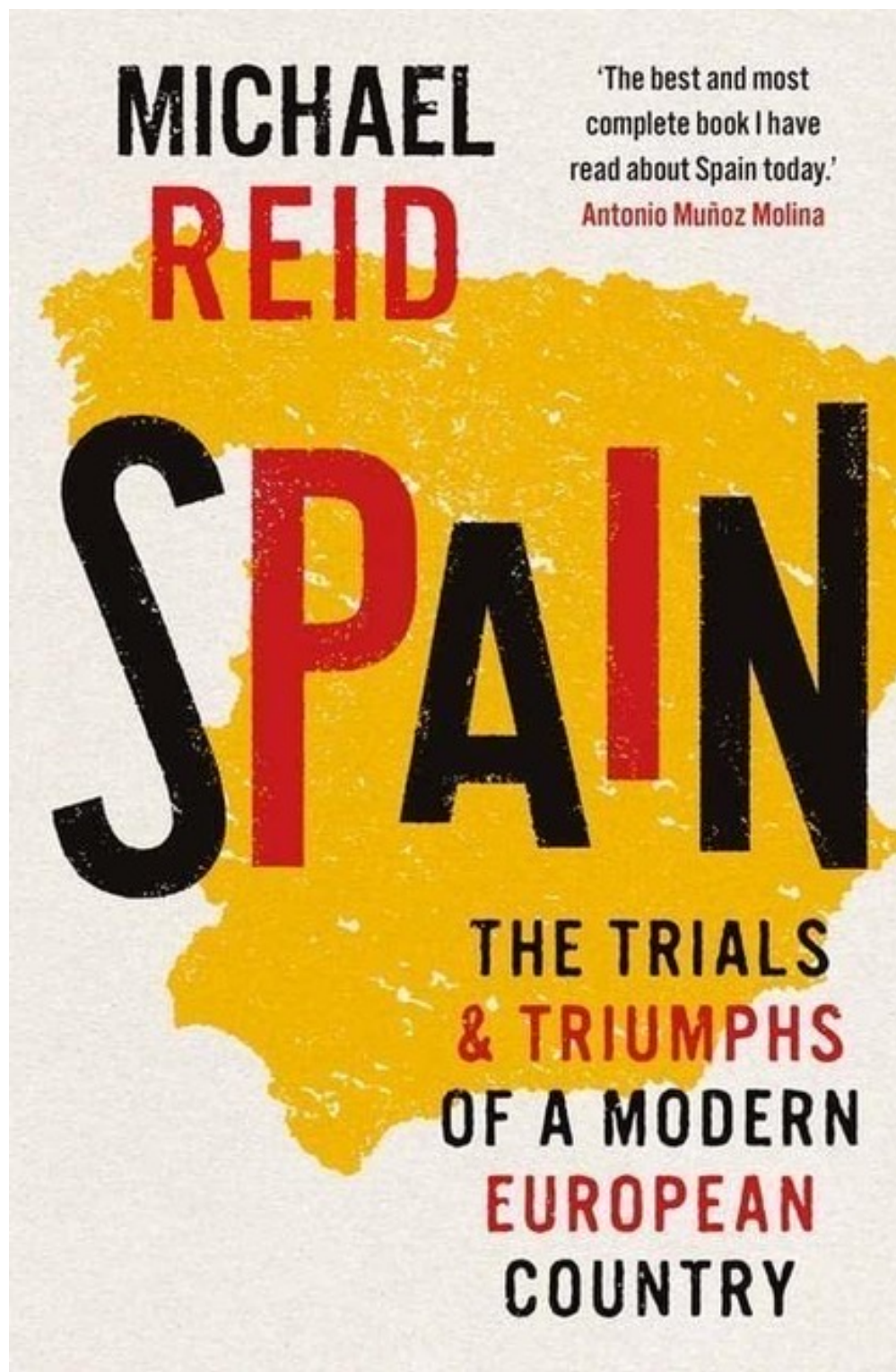
## Time for a change in Spain

June 5, 2023BAS

*BAS editor William Chislett*

Spain's transition to democracy after dictator Franco's death in 1975 and the country's profound political, economic, social and demographic transformation are widely regarded as a model of their kind. However, the country today does not function as it should or could, argues Michael Reid cogently in his recent book, *Spain: The Trials and Triumphs of a Modern European Country* (Yale University Press).

As befits a long-time writer and editor at *The Economist*, including a recent stint as the Spain correspondent (2016-21) and for many more years author of the Bello column on Latin America, the book is tightly and elegantly written, insightful, wide-ranging, and with a deep sense of history. Reid first came to Spain in 1971 as an Oxford University student and either directly or from afar has been a close observer of the country ever since.



In some aspects, such as same-sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia and, most recently, menstrual leave, Spain has been in the vanguard. In other areas the country has stood still for the past decade, hampered by deep political polarisation and fragmentation. As Reid points out, Spain is not alone among democracies (the UK is a prime case) in suffering from 'hubris, austerity, populism, polarisation, poor leadership and the struggle to adapt to a rapidly changing world of globalisation and technological change'. Spain's ills, he says,



are not ‘principally due to any original sin surrounding the birth of its democracy’ and it is not ‘burdened by an atavistic exceptionalism nor by Franco’s ghost’.

Spain’s unravelling can be dated to 2008 (some put it further back) with the bursting of a massive property bubble, followed by a major banking crisis, years of recession, a new mould of politics, as of 2015, with the emergence of disruptive parties on the hard right (VOX) and hard left (Unidas Podemos) which eroded the essentially two-party system of the Popular Party and the Socialists of the previous 33 years, and the unconstitutional referendum on Catalan independence in 2017.

It used to be said *ad nauseam*, particularly by liberals during the Franco regime (1939-75), that the answer to Spain’s ills lay in José Ortega y Gasset’s famous dictum of 1910: ‘Spain is the problem, Europe is the solution’. But this is no longer so: Spain joined the EEC in 1986, which anchored democracy, and has done very well from membership, notably in the field of funds that have transformed the infrastructure.

The solution to today’s ills lies squarely with a political class that is sadly far more polarised than society as a whole (the admirable consensus spirit of the transition years is long gone). The deep partisan divide prevents even minimum agreements on issues for the good of the country, such as education (eight reforms in 40 years and none of them based on consensus) and likewise on the pay-as-you-go pensions system. Spain needs ongoing reform and not a tearing up of the 1978 Constitution, which in 2025 will be the oldest in Spain’s history, surpassing the one between 1876 and 1923.



Two of the book’s 10 chapters are devoted to Catalonia. One charts how the illegal referendum came about in 2017 and the other looks at the region’s history and its false claims to statehood. Reid is good at contextualising. For example, he reminds us that Spain’s constitutional protection of the nation’s

territorial integrity is the norm in continental Europe (the US, also, does not allow secession), while Article 155 of the constitution activated by Mariano Rajoy, the Popular Party Prime Minister at the time of the referendum, to suspend Catalan autonomy and impose direct rule is similar to Article 37 of Germany's Basic Law.

The book has some telling personal anecdotes. When covering Catalonia's independence movement, Reid found it hard to keep a straight face when hearing officials from the regional government 'solemnly compare Catalonia with war-ravaged Kosovo or Lithuania as it emerged from Soviet totalitarianism'. Nevertheless, he recognises that for several centuries Catalonia was treated in 'heavy-handed and oppressive ways' by successive governments, including the excessively violent police response to those who voted in the illegal referendum. 'The rest of Spain needs to accept that Catalanism is a valid sentiment, and not inherently subversive'. The pardons for the jailed secessionists were necessary.

The Catalan government's control over education (subjects are predominantly taught in Catalan) fosters an atmosphere sympathetic to secession, as does the biased coverage of the nationalist cause by TV3, a public television channel in Catalan. Catalonia, with its own language, has a good claim, however, to be a cultural nation, but as Reid points out the world has some 6,000 languages but only around 200 nation-states.



A truly federal system in Spain, not the re-centralisation sought by VOX, by clearly demarking powers and rules for resolving disputes would go a long way toward ending the permanent tug-of-war over powers between some regions and the national government. For this to happen, the Senate, a largely

purposeless and toothless body and a retirement home for midlevel politicians, needs to be turned into a chamber representing the regions.

Another toothless body that needs to be reformed, and which Reid does not mention, is the *Tribunal de Cuentas*, the body responsible for auditing public sector accounts and scrutinising those of political parties. Its 12 members are appointed by parliament with a majority of 3/5 for nine years, effectively enabling politicians to colonise it. Given that a lot of Spain's corruption is related in one way or another to the financing of political parties, a much more effective, proactive and independent tribunal would go some way toward mitigating this problem.

The tribunal's reports on parties' financial statements are published with considerable delays of up to five years, which makes it difficult for the judicial system to conduct any monitoring since most infractions of the regulations discovered are by then prescribed under the statute of limitations (five years for very serious offences, three for serious and two for minor ones). The report covering 2017 was published in February 2022.

Spain has far too many politicians. Estimates puts the number at between 300,000 and 400,000 based on the four levels of government (unique in the EU): central, regional, municipal and the provincial *diputaciones*. Up to 20,000 public service jobs are discretionary political appointments who can be hired or got rid of at the whim of political masters. Spain is one of the very few OECD countries where all or a high proportion of positions change systematically in the top two echelons of senior civil servants (D1 and D2 levels) after the election of a new government.





More internal democracy in political parties, something accentuated by the 'closed' as opposed to the 'open' list electoral system in which voters can only choose a party as a whole rather than a particular candidate (political leaders decide where to place candidates on the list) would reduce the disconnect between the political class and the public. The higher up a person is on the list, the better the chances of being elected. Closed party lists give excessive power to a party's apparatus at the expense of accountability, stifle independent and minority opinion within the party's ranks and tend to make MPs sycophantic. As Alfonso Guerra, a former Socialist Deputy Prime Minister (1982-91) who kept an iron grip on the party, said, quoting the Mexican labour leader Fidel Velázquez: 'Move and you're out of the photograph'.

Reid sees the plight of young adults as perhaps the biggest problem facing the country. The intergenerational gap is particularly acute in Spain. Unemployment among those aged 15 to 24 in the dysfunctional labour market is still stubbornly high at close to 30% (it peaked at 57% in 2013) and without substantial family support getting on the property ladder, in a country where most people are owner-occupiers, is a largely unfulfilled dream for many. But for the thankfully still strong Spanish family network, the bedrock of society, the patience of these people might already have snapped.



Older generations, in comparison, are relatively well looked after by the welfare state. The state pension system, however, looks unsustainable in its current form. Life expectancy is one of the highest in the world, pensions are relatively generous (well above the OECD average based on the percentage of average earnings). The baby boom happened later in Spain (between the late 1950s and the late 1970s) and will swell the number of pensioners. It remains to be seen whether the reforms announced this month will make the system more sustainable.

Reid's book deserves to last as long as his favourite tree in Madrid's Retiro park (one of the book's dedicatees): a Mexican conifer (*ahuehuete*).

*This article is an abridged version of the one published on 28 March 2023 by the Elcano Royal Institute.*





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## Sexismo en la educación privada española

June 9, 2023BAS

*Raúl Sánchez Saura, BAS editor*

“Putas, salid de vuestras madrigueras como conejas, sois unas putas ninfómanas, os prometo que vais a follar todas en la capea, ¡vamos Ahuja!”

A principios del presente curso académico, un centenar de estudiantes varones del colegio mayor Elías Ahuja, no mixto, dedicaron estos insultos desde las ventanas de sus cuartos al colegio vecino, Santa Monica, de chicas.

El escándalo llegó a toda España en menos de 24 horas, con un juicio unánime. Desde el presidente de Gobierno hasta el líder de la oposición, se condenaba activamente esta agresión machista proveniente de algunos de los estudiantes más privilegiados del país. Antiguas estudiantes del Santa Mónica denunciaron que durante años habían recibido insultos así a diario sin que nadie hiciera nada. Las consecuencias se sucedieron rápidamente, con la Fiscalía de Madrid iniciando investigaciones contra el Elías Ahuja, el propio colegio expulsando a uno de los estudiantes involucrados, y forzando a un reducido número de otros a tomar un curso sobre relaciones de género. También se ha iniciado una



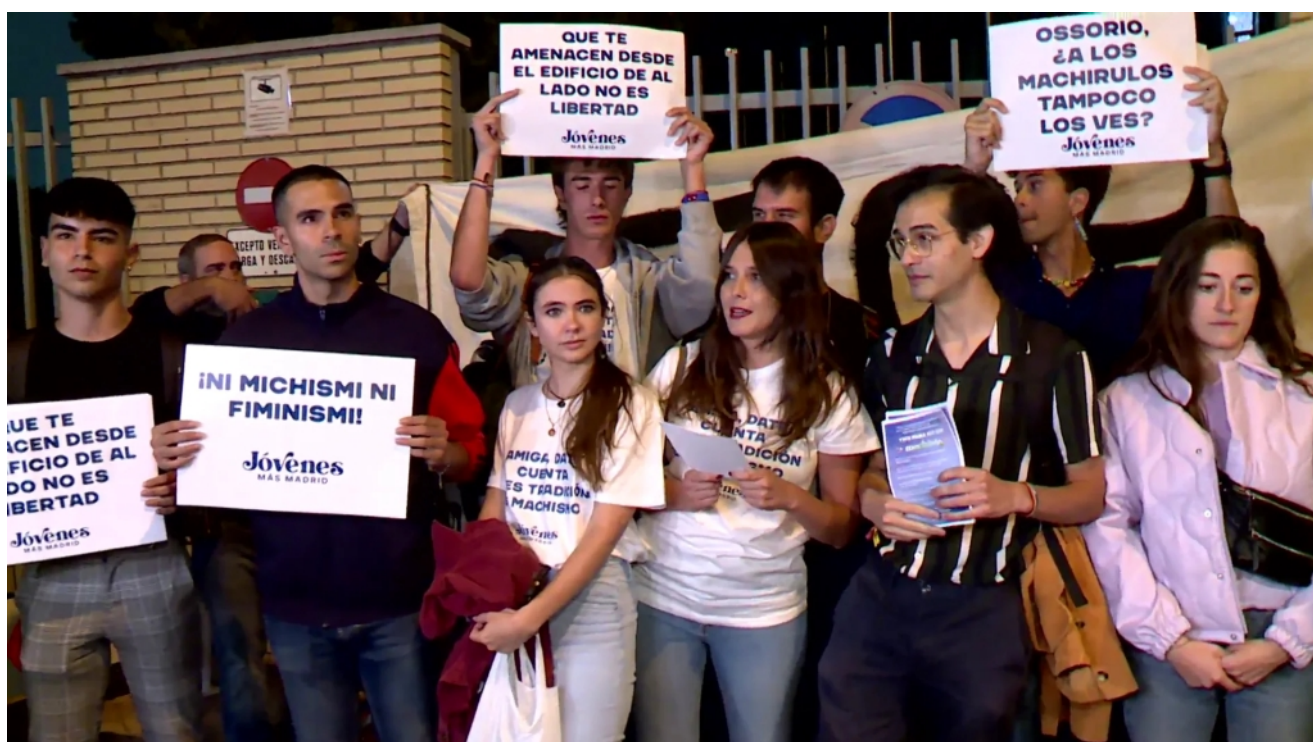
discusion nacional sobre el extraño estatus de los colegios mayores en la sociedad universitaria española.



De gestión privada, los colegios mayores acogen a estudiantes de clases altas, cuyas familias pagan aproximadamente 1200 euros mensuales por su estancia allí. Esta cifra está alejada de las posibilidades económicas del común de las familias, y la imagen de privilegio se refuerza cuando se comprueba la lista de antiguos estudiantes del Elías Ahuja, consistente de empresarios y políticos conservadores.

No sorprende entonces que se haya evidenciado una fuerte distancia entre el escándalo nacional y la reacción por parte de ambos colegios. Desde el Elías Ahuja se ha asegurado que el abuso unánime les ha sorprendido y no han contado con capacidad de respuesta para pararlo. Los estudiantes de ambos colegios han desmentido que esto fuera posible, al tratarse de una tradición. Al mismo tiempo, algunas estudiantes del Santa Mónica incluso han defendido públicamente esta actuación, argumentando que no se puede condenar una costumbre.

La defensa de los agresores por parte de sus víctimas contrasta con la batería de propuestas feministas del actual gobierno. Estas incluyen la llamada ley Sí es sí, que prohíbe cualquier actividad sexual sin el consentimiento explícito de ambas partes. Sin embargo, estos colegios mayores no se hacen eco del actual clima político.



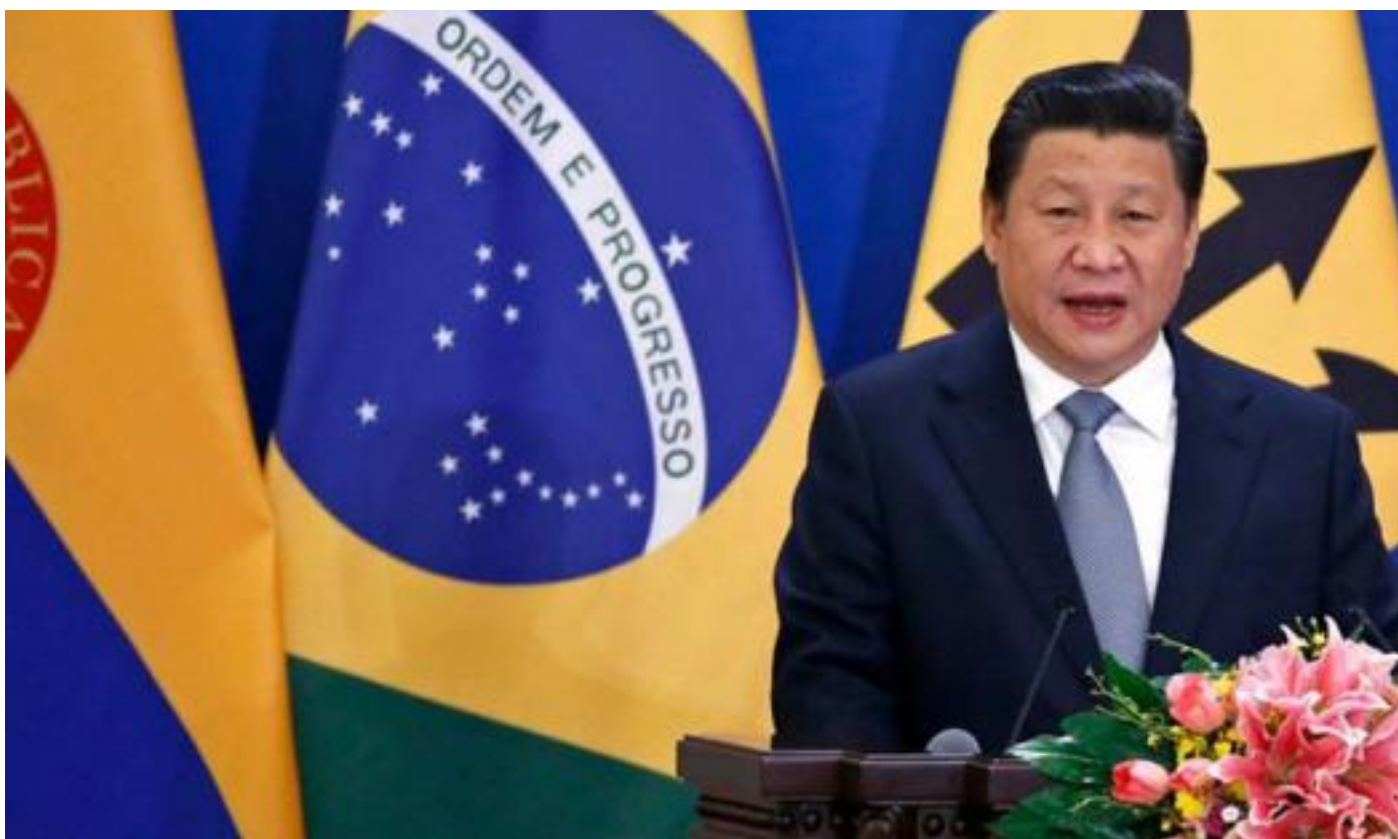
Por ejemplo, la educación privada española suele caracterizarse por su adherencia a órdenes católicas. Tanto el Elías Ahuja como el Santa Mónica están gestionados por la Orden de San Agustín, por ejemplo, aunque estén asociados a la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, pública.

A diferencia de la educación privada británica, la española, aunque busca su distanciamiento con respecto a la pública, tiende a poner el énfasis en los valores religiosos, sin contar con los mismos logros académicos. En España, las mejores notas de acceso a la universidad a nivel nacional pertenecen, con amplio margen, a estudiantes de la pública.

Esto se debe a que la educación privada española responde a valores extra-académicos basados en el catolicismo. Aquí se evidencia el legado de siglos de monopolio educativo por parte de la Iglesia. Aunque el Estado ya no financie la educación privada española, esta enfatiza el privilegio y exclusividad de sus miembros, en un entorno caracterizado por la casi total ausencia de estudiantado extranjero y de familia humilde. Así, los colegios privados siguen el curriculum estatal en un entorno muy distinto a la realidad demográfica del país, incluso más que en el caso británico. Sin embargo, esta apuesta educativa no conlleva necesariamente unos mejores resultados académicos que los encontrados en la educación pública.



La educación privada española, mientras tanto, continúa con una endeble revisión de su proyecto educativo ante esta nueva polémica del Elías Ahuja, que se suma a la de hace pocos años, cuando se descubrió una grabación de sus estudiantes realizando el saludo fascista al grito de 'Sieg Hiel'.



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## The Dragon, the Eagle and the Condor

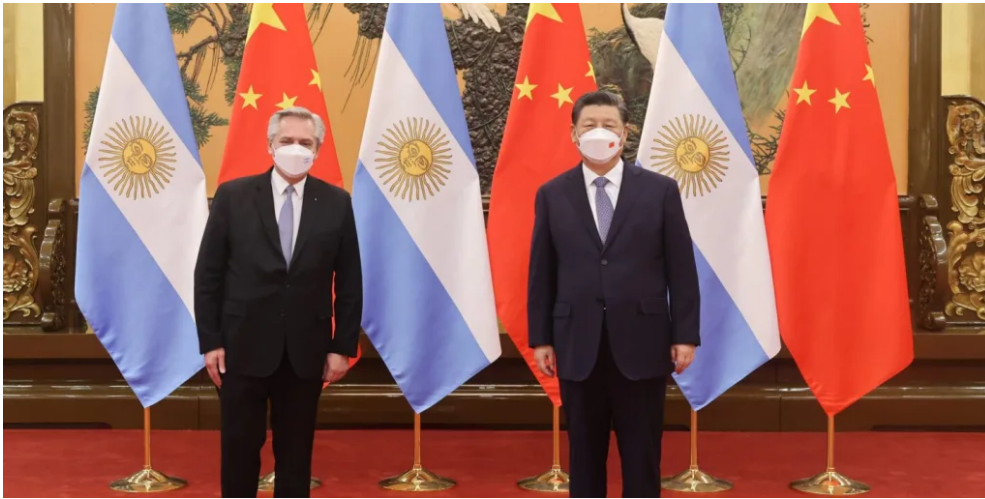
June 9, 2023BAS

*Stephen M. Hart, BAS editor*

For many years now the first foreign language of China has been English. Messages on the metro as well as road signs have an accompanying English translation. I have an app on my Chinese phone that allows me to photograph a text in Chinese and have it translated within seconds into English. But, as a result of the very warm overtures made recently by the Chinese government to various Latin American countries, Spanish, as China's second foreign language, is rapidly catching up.

Though the original connection between China and Latin America was via the Maritime Silk Route, initiated by Emperor Wan Li of the Ming Dynasty (1572–1620), it was only in the 21st century that it really took off. In just five years during the period 2013–2018 President Xi Jinping visited Latin American and Caribbean countries no less than thirteen times. China is now the main trading partner of Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, and the second-largest trading partner of several other countries in Latin America. It has free trade agreements with Chile, Costa Rica, Peru and Ecuador (the latter signed just recently on 11 May 2023).[\[1\]](#)





Between 2005 and 2020, Chinese banks dished out more than \$137 billion in loans to the region. Most of the countries of Latin America have now joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global strategy centred on developing infrastructure projects around the world. An example of this scheme is the impressive "Kise" hydropower station being built jointly by China and Argentina.

According to China's General Administration of Customs, the trade volume between China and Latin America and the Caribbean exceeded \$450 billion in 2021, and increased by 12.5% in 2022. China's direct investment in Mexico alone has amounted to almost US\$1bn in the last four years.<sup>[2]</sup> The Puerto de Chancay project in Peru, with an investment of US\$4bn, is funded by Chinese companies; no surprise, therefore, that Peru will be hosting the Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in 2024.<sup>[3]</sup> And China has recently signed a massive trade agreement with Brazil, which includes the inaugural introduction of China's mature wind turbine equipment in Latin America; the LDB Wind Power Expansion Project is helping the two countries to work together in the field of green and low-carbon economic construction.<sup>[4]</sup> As a result of this project China and Brazil have decided to ditch the US dollar as an intermediary currency.<sup>[5]</sup>

This growing rapport between China and Latin America means that Spanish is more trendy now in China than it ever was. Lu Jingsheng, the Chinese government's National Coordinator for Spanish, has pointed out that in the last fifteen years, the demand for Spanish language education in China has "increased 30 fold".<sup>[6]</sup> It was given a further big boost in 2018 when China's Ministry of Education included Spanish language instruction as an optional foreign language in high school, alongside French and German.

Chinese university students nowadays are also finding that knowing Spanish is a big plus in the job market. Yang Jiaming, a recent graduate from the Spanish program at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, Hubei Province, was offered a job straight out of college because the company he applied to "has business in Latin America".<sup>[7]</sup>



This rapprochement between China and Latin America has a cultural dimension as well. In November 2014 the National Museum of China in Beijing organised one of the country's biggest ever exhibitions on Latin America's cultural history entitled "Mayas: The Language of Beauty" ("Mayas: El lenguaje de la belleza)". The exhibition gave rise to new questions about the possible links between the Ancient Chinese Shu culture and the Mayas; the two cultures, after all, have a number of characteristics in common – including cultural icons and the calendar – and they may be historically linked.<sup>[8]</sup>

I am currently teaching two undergraduate courses at Hunan Normal University in Changsha, one on Latin American literature and the other on Latin American culture. I am impressed by the linguistic level of the students, as well as their enthusiasm and interest in the course materials. My first assumption was that they were studying Spanish in addition to English, but this was proved wrong when I found that – for their presentation assignments summarising a work of secondary criticism – they wanted to summarise an article in Spanish rather than English. Indeed, the departmental policy is to give all lectures and seminars in Spanish, given that it is their second language and that their linguistic proficiency is excellent.

I decided to tweak the course content a little and draw out the Chinese connection, e.g. by comparing maps of the Chinese seas with what Christopher Columbus thought he had discovered when he was actually in the Caribbean, by discussing the hypothesis of the close connections between the Ancient Shu culture and the Mayas, by focussing on the Philippines as well as Cuba and Puerto Rico during the analysis of the Spanish-American War of 1898, and by including Latin American novelists with Chinese roots in my overview of the

modern Latin American novel, eg Siu Kam Wen and Carlos Francisco Changmarín. The success – or lack thereof – of this more inclusive strategy will be borne out by the essays that the students submit at the end of this term!

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[1] <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202305/11/WS645c842aa310b6054fad268d.html>

[2] [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2023-03/11/content\\_85161207.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2023-03/11/content_85161207.htm)

[3] <https://andina.pe/Ingles/noticia-peru-to-host-apec-2024-summit-our-country-will-deepen-position-in-asiapacific-880512.aspx>

[4] <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-01-25/China-Latin-America-ties-to-enter-new-era-of-equality-mutual-benefit-1gSmJFPqi52/index.html>

[5] See [China, Brazil reach agreement to ditch intermediary US dollar – Chinadaily.com.cn](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn) Chinadaily, 30 March 2023.

[6] <https://www.languagemagazine.com/chinas-demand-for-spanish-speakers/>

[7] <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202208/03/WS62e9d064a310fd2b29e6ff71.html>

[8] [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2014-11/18/content\\_18931764.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2014-11/18/content_18931764.htm)



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## El sueño americano a través del Darién y los rostros de la inmigración ilegal

June 9, 2023BAS

*Clara Riveros*

La selva del Darién, situada entre Colombia y Panamá, fue definida en un documental de [BBC](#) como la región “más intransitable y peligrosa de América Latina”. Esta vasta zona se ha convertido en el paso de cientos de latinoamericanos (venezolanos, ecuatorianos, colombianos, peruanos, cubanos, haitianos, etc.), pero también de personas provenientes de destinos remotos (Bangladesh, Somalia, Yemen, China, India, Afganistán, entre otros países). El objetivo de todos es llegar a Estados Unidos, como sea y a cualquier precio. Es la apuesta al todo o nada. Se juegan literalmente la vida en esa carrera que para algunos termina de manera trágica.

### **Del Mediterráneo a la jungla**

Si en Europa las imágenes de cadáveres flotando en el Mediterráneo estremecen, de este lado del mundo, los registros no son menos desgarradores. No solo hay adultos poniendo en riesgo sus vidas, también exponen las de sus hijos (niños y bebés) a quienes tratan de distraer y tranquilizar prometiéndoles un viaje lleno de aventuras y emociones.



Décadas atrás, la emigración era principalmente de hombres adultos que buscaban entrar por la frontera sur de Estados Unidos. Esa tendencia se ha modificado drásticamente. Ahora no solo se ha diversificado la procedencia de los emigrantes (cada vez hay más provenientes de [China, Ucrania, Haití, Rusia y otros destinos distantes de América Latina](#)), sino que también viajan familias completas y muchos niños viajan solos constituyendo una proporción cada vez mayor en términos de inmigración irregular.



Cientos de hombres y de mujeres se lanzan en esa aventura selvática y desesperada por el Darién. Ellos se aferran a su fe y a sus creencias religiosas, invocan a Dios, sueñan con una vida mejor, desean tocar el paraíso, pisar la tierra prometida, o sea, Estados Unidos. Y para hacerlo han optado por las vías irregulares, están expuestos a mafias y a criminales, a las inclemencias de la naturaleza e incluso a ser devorados por animales salvajes en medio de la jungla. Eso es "[Darién, el infierno de los migrantes](#)", como ilustró recientemente el excelente trabajo realizado por un equipo de periodistas chilenos, quienes hicieron ese trayecto que inicia en Medellín. Mediante su reportaje le fueron mostrando al mundo la crudeza de la inmigración ilegal, aunque también dejaron constancia de esa faceta humana y dolorosa, la de los rostros cansados, agobiados y esperanzados de esas personas de carne y hueso, con nombres y apellidos, que no son solo estadísticas y números.



Si los emigrantes logran cruzar la selva del Darién y llegar a Panamá, continuarán ese tránsito infernal durante varias semanas o meses por Centroamérica. La cantidad de tiempo invertido en el viaje dependerá de cuánto dinero llevan consigo y de cuánto puedan llegar a pagar. Después cruzarán México que viene a ser lo que es Turquía o Marruecos para Europa, es decir, el “Estado gendarme” encargado de contener la invasión, la avalancha, esas oleadas humanas tratando de llegar y de entrar a Estados Unidos de cualquier forma.

Los vídeos que circularon hace pocas semanas, dando cuenta del incendio en un [centro de detención migratorio de Ciudad Juárez](#), en México, y que dejó como saldo 40 inmigrantes calcinados y otras decenas de heridos, ante la indiferencia de los guardias, expuso de manera muy nítida la deshumanización de la inmigración ilegal. La mayoría de las víctimas provenían de Guatemala, Venezuela, Honduras y El Salvador. A menudo se señala a Europa y a Estados Unidos por su política restrictiva en materia migratoria, se cuestiona la falta de empatía y de compasión con los miles de emigrantes que tuvieron que dejar su tierra, su casa y salir con lo puesto huyendo de la violencia, de la miseria o de ambas. Pero, más allá de las consideraciones, juicios de valor o convicciones humanitarias a este respecto, tampoco hay que perder de vista que una política migratoria de puertas abiertas es imposible, no es realista y no es funcional.



¿Por qué desmerecer u olvidar que el primer responsable en las crisis migratorias es el país de origen del emigrante? Muchas veces los países de origen son cárceles a cielo abierto: mantienen regímenes de corte autocrático y gobiernos corruptos cuyos líderes gobiernan para beneficio propio y se han dedicado al saqueo de la riqueza y al sometimiento de sus pueblos, mientras que los ciudadanos pasan hambre, se hunden en la miseria y maquinan las formas posibles de darse a la fuga.

### **Las cifras y las medidas para contener y enfrentar la inmigración irregular**

En 2022, hubo 350 personas fallecidas y decenas de desaparecidos en la selva del Darién. Eran emigrantes. Solo en los tres primeros meses de 2023, unos 87.390 migrantes irregulares cruzaron el Darién, la cifra es siete veces mayor a la del primer trimestre de 2022. Se calcula que este año unas 400.000 personas cruzarán esta selva, eso significa casi el doble de los más de 248.000 emigrantes que lo hicieron en 2022.





El creciente flujo migratorio hacia Estados Unidos, por esta vía, preocupa enormemente a Washington. Funcionarios estadounidenses han mantenido reuniones a lo largo del año con los gobiernos de los dos países implicados, Panamá y Colombia, para tratar la alarmante crisis migratoria que exhibe América Latina. Entre las acciones y compromisos alcanzados por las partes, se acordó “iniciar diálogos entre autoridades migratorias de Panamá y Colombia; dialogar con los países de origen de los migrantes, y fortalecer los intercambios de información judicial y labores de inteligencia”. Adicionalmente, los gobiernos de España y Canadá trabajarán mancomunadamente con Estados Unidos para facilitar que los solicitantes de asilo latinoamericanos puedan postularse —para ir a estos países— en centros de procesamiento de migrantes establecidos en sus países de origen. En ese sentido, se establecerán centros de procesamiento de migrantes, tanto en Colombia como en Guatemala, además de la apertura de otros 100 centros en diferentes países para que los inmigrantes tramiten permisos migratorios y puedan dirigirse hacia Estados Unidos, Canadá y España. Los países mencionados precisan trabajadores, mano de obra, en este periodo de recuperación económica tras la pandemia y, en principio, esa situación podría coadyuvar a la flexibilización para la recepción de inmigrantes procedentes de América Latina. El hecho de que Canadá y España apoyen al gobierno Biden en esta iniciativa podría redundar, en alguna medida, en aliviar la presión migratoria en la frontera sur de Estados Unidos.

Por su parte, el gobierno colombiano ha insistido a sus nacionales en que el levantamiento del Título 42 no implica la apertura de fronteras de Estados Unidos, la exención de visados, la flexibilización de los procesos de regularización o nuevas medidas de reunificación familiar. Destaca que todo intento de emigrar irregularmente hacia Estados Unidos constituye ya no solo



riesgos para la vida, sino procesamientos y deportaciones a los países de origen. La expulsión viene acompañada de la prohibición de entrada a Estados Unidos por cinco años y/o procesos penales si se es reincidente.

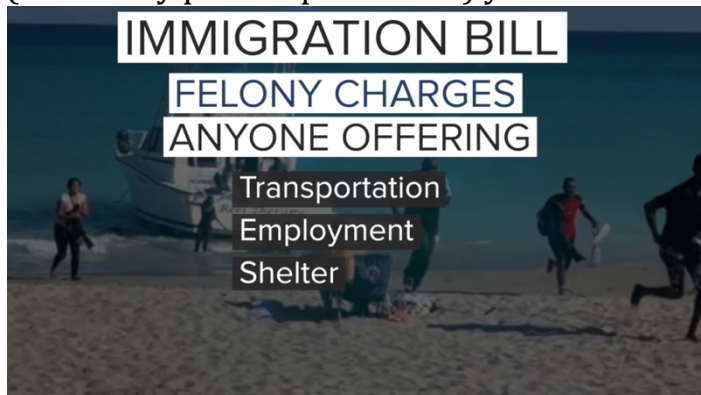


Más allá de las advertencias del gobierno colombiano, las cifras muestran el deseo de muchos colombianos de dejar su país inmerso en la inestabilidad propiciada por el nuevo gobierno. “El número de colombianos que cruzan la frontera ha alcanzado en los últimos seis meses cifras que nunca antes se habían visto, superando en ocasiones a los venezolanos. Además, los colombianos han desplazado a los argentinos en la compra de propiedades de bienes raíces (‘real estate’) en los últimos cinco meses. Esto demuestra que algo está pasando en Colombia”, puntualizó [Tomás Regalado](#), exalcalde de Miami, durante un foro del Interamerican Institute for Democracy celebrado hace pocos días en Miami.

Tras la sustitución del Título 42 —activado en marzo de 2020 como medida sanitaria temporal para contener la propagación de la pandemia—, por el restablecimiento del Título 8 —que es el que históricamente gestiona el tratamiento de inmigrantes y autoriza a la Oficina de Aduanas y Protección Fronteriza (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, CBP por sus siglas en inglés) a expulsar a cualquier persona que intente ingresar al país en condición de irregularidad—, Estados Unidos buscar endurecer las medidas contra la inmigración ilegal, a la vez que facilitará la apertura de canales para la inmigración ordenada y regular.

A esas medidas del gobierno federal se suman las disposiciones propias de los estados. De hecho, hay algunos estados que han promovido normativas para frenar y sancionar severamente la inmigración ilegal, el más reciente es el ‘Estado del Sol’. No hay que perder de vista que, en Florida, entrará en vigor el

próximo 1 de julio, la polémica ley que criminaliza la inmigración ilegal. Una de las medidas más cuestionadas de la ley es la relativa a transportar a un inmigrante ilegal hacia este estado y que puede acarrear sanciones penales (condena y prisión por 5 años) y económicas (multa de 5.000 dólares).



La normativa de Florida busca sentar precedentes, desestimular el tráfico de personas y, en cierto modo, aterrorizar a los inmigrantes ilegales que ya contemplan con preocupación e incertidumbre la necesidad de moverse a otros estados habida cuenta de la ley que limitará su libre movimiento, el acceso al empleo, a los servicios médicos y que incentivará la denuncia y la delación de su condición y/o estatus migratorio. No obstante, en los días siguientes a la promulgación de la nueva ley de inmigración, el senador republicano Blaise Ingoglia matizó el alcance de la normativa. Dijo, entre otras cosas, que los hospitales tienen que preguntar a los pacientes por el estatus migratorio para calcular la cantidad de recursos que se gastan en indocumentados en el Medicaid, pero que ello no significa que los hospitales entregarán información a las autoridades migratorias.

El proyecto de ley fue respaldado y la ley firmada por el gobernador del estado Ron DeSantis quien mantiene un sólido respaldo a su gestión. Algunos sugieren que DeSantis ha experimentado un proceso de radicalización en sus posiciones de cara a las primarias republicanas. El veterano de guerra, egresado de Harvard y Yale, de ascendencia italiana, deberá enfrentar y vencer al carismático expresidente Donald Trump de 76 años para hacerse con la candidatura republicana y participar en la próxima elección presidencial.

De momento, la opción preferida de los electores republicanos sigue siendo Trump, quien aventaja en las encuestas a DeSantis por más de 30 puntos. Trump a menudo es recordado por sus posiciones inflexibles y comentarios despectivos sobre los inmigrantes ilegales e indocumentados. El gobernador de Florida es una joven figura política en ascenso. A sus 44 años, el político conservador defiende que está cumpliendo todo aquello que prometió en campaña.



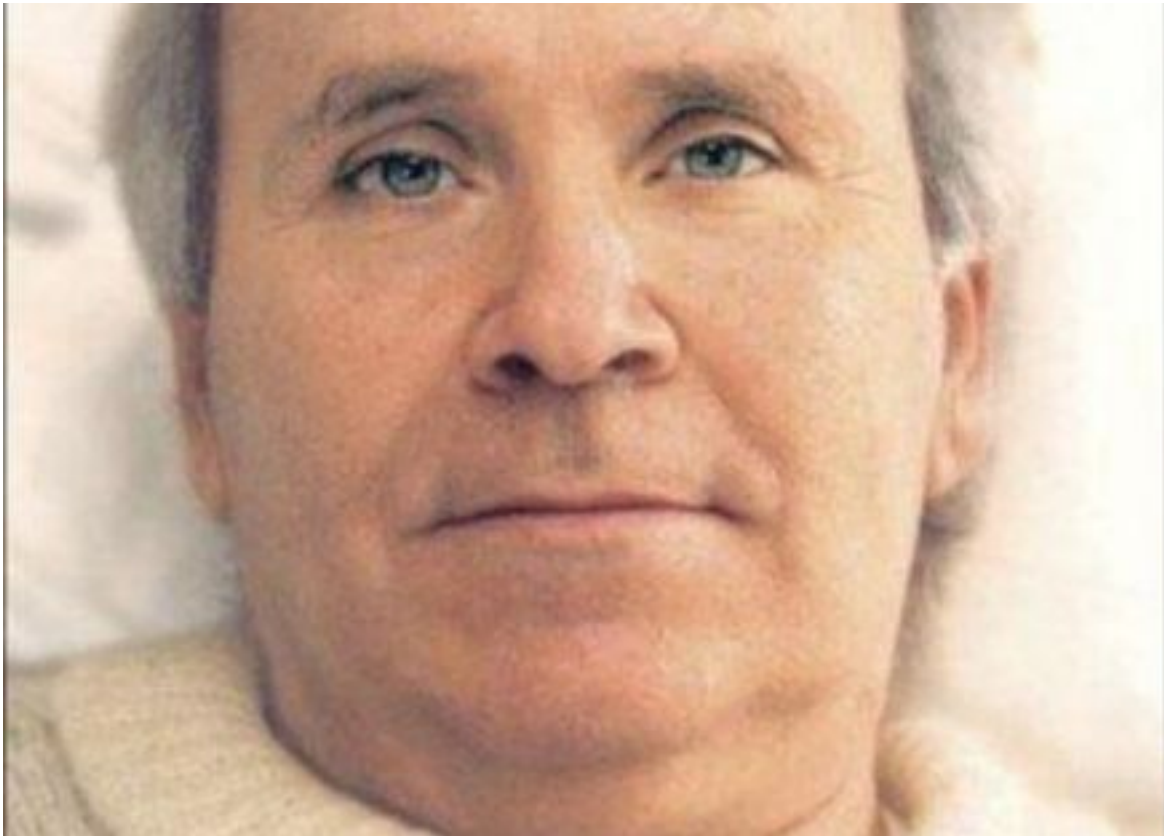
Trump, por su parte, ha afirmado que si gana las elecciones en 2024 buscará que le sea negada la ciudadanía automática a los hijos de inmigrantes indocumentados nacidos en tierra americana y que ordenaría a las agencias federales que exijan que al menos uno de los padres sea ciudadano o residente permanente legal en Estados Unidos.

La inmigración ilegal, sin duda, será uno de los temas que marque la agenda y la exposición pública y mediática de cara a las primarias y, desde luego, la próxima contienda presidencial en Estados Unidos.

*Clara Riveros es politóloga, analista política y autora. Sus libros más recientes son Autocracia, democracia y constantes vitales en el reino magrebí (Alhulia, 2023) y Sexo, pudor y poder. Debates del siglo XXI en el norte de África (Alhulia, 2021).*

*En Twitter: @CLARARIVEROS*





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## Mar adentro

June 9, 2023BAS

*BAS editor Francisco Compán*

Avalada por una larga lista de premios como el Globo de Oro o el Óscar a la mejor película de habla no inglesa, *Mar adentro* es una de esas obras que no deja indiferente a la audiencia por sus grandes dosis de humanidad. En palabras del propio Amenábar, director de la película: “Se trata de un viaje, un viaje a la vida y a la muerte, un viaje a Galicia, al mar y al mundo interior de Ramón Sampedro”.

El estreno de *Mar adentro* hace ya dieciocho años reactivó el debate sobre la eutanasia para los que ya se habían olvidado de la muerte de Ramón Sampedro en 1998, e introdujo a aquellos que no conocían su trágica historia a un debate socio-político que parece haber sido legitimado por la aprobación de la Ley Orgánica sobre la eutanasia que entró en vigor en junio de 2021. La aprobación de la ley con 202 votos a favor, 141 en contra y dos abstenciones, y promovida por el gobierno de coalición, convirtió a España en el quinto país del mundo en regular la eutanasia.

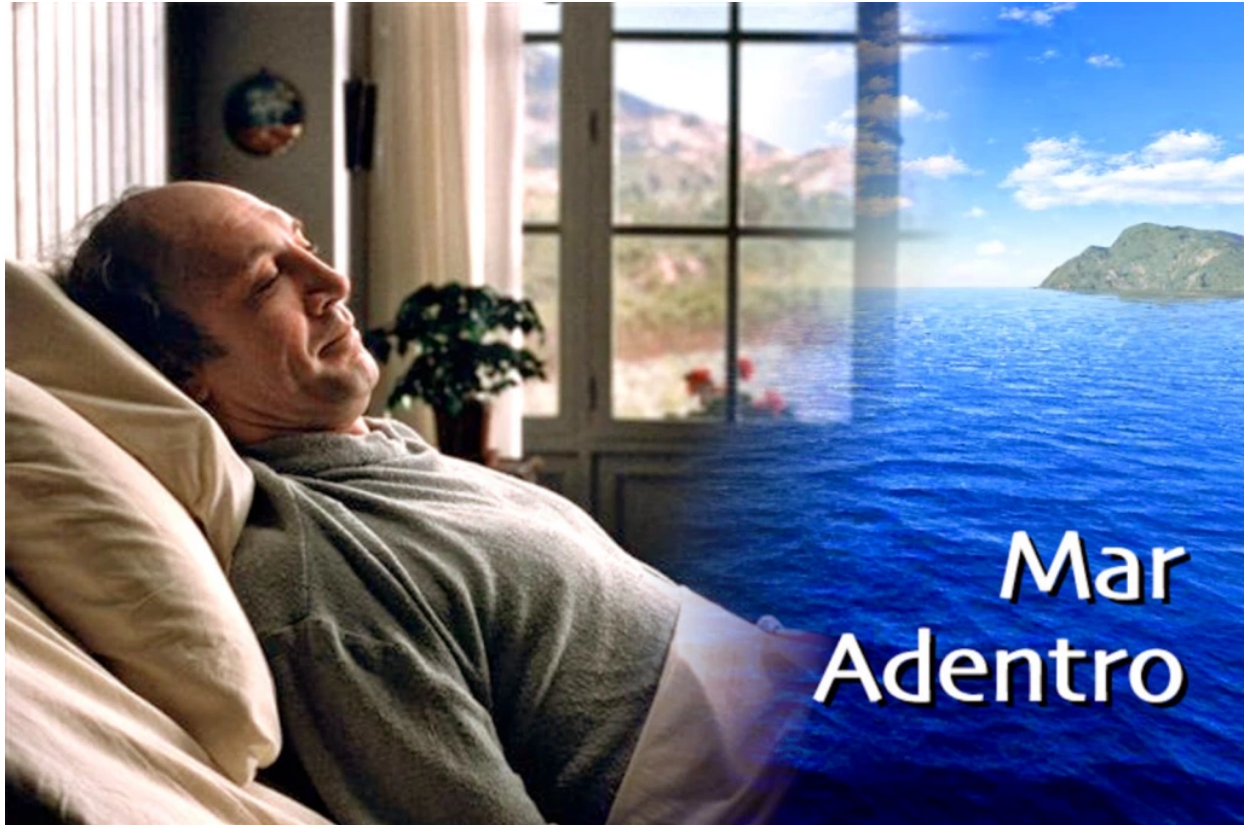


El guión de la película está basado en la vida de Ramón Sampederro, marino y escritor gallego que se quedó tetrapléjico al tirarse de cabeza al agua en la playa de As Fumas, Galicia, en 1968, al chocar contra una roca, rompiéndose la séptima vértebra. El argumento se centra en la lucha de Ramón para terminar con su vida de una manera digna e incluye, como es de esperar, elementos y personajes ficticios para proteger la identidad de las personas que le ayudaron a conseguir su meta.

A los 55 años y tras haber pasado casi 30 postrado en una cama, Ramón ya había solicitado la eutanasia a los tribunales, siendo el primer ciudadano español en hacerlo. Es en este momento en el que Amenábar retoma la historia, recurriendo a numerosas escenas retrospectivas para ilustrar el conflicto personal de un Ramón Sampederro que había sido abandonado por las autoridades. Sin embargo, el apoyo de su entorno de amigos y familiares le llevó a aparecer en reportajes de televisión y otros medios, creando así un debate social y político sobre las implicaciones de vivir con minusvalías, además de cuestionar las leyes que prohibían la eutanasia en un país laico pero todavía con fuertes influencias de la Iglesia Católica.

La película se centra esencialmente en dos espacios, ambos significativos para Ramón. Su habitación en una humilde casa rural gallega es un espacio interior íntimo que representa su minusvalía y su frustración física, que contrasta con

los espectaculares espacios abiertos que combinan mar y montaña, y que la cámara nos muestra a vista de pájaro. Estos espacios exteriores representan la memoria del pasado de Ramón antes del accidente y la liberación después su muerte.



La ventana de la habitación de Ramón se convierte así en un símbolo esencial en la película al representar la frontera entre su minusvalía y su mente liberada. Amenábar omite hacer excesiva referencia a las dificultades físicas que Ramón experimenta y se enfoca en las frustraciones producidas por su familia, amigos e incluso por los jueces, en aquellos momentos en los que sus deseos no pueden hacerse realidad.

Quizá una de las escenas más memorables del largometraje sea el momento en el que la imaginación de Ramón viaja hasta la mar sobrevolando valles y montañas cuando Gené, trabajadora social y amiga de Ramón, le invita a recordar su pasado previo al accidente como parte de su terapia. Sin embargo, el único camino hacia la redención pasa por la muerte y la eliminación del cuerpo en el que vive atrapado. Sin duda, este es el aspecto más controvertido de la película ya que el protagonista rechaza explorar estrategias que le lleven a aceptar su estado físico y extender su vida, y opta por buscar la manera de terminarla dignamente.



El Ramón real lo intentó todo y se le negó la eutanasia una y otra vez. Exhausto por las batallas legales decidió tomar las riendas y quitarse la vida, lo que logró el 12 de enero de 1998. La complejidad de la tarea involucró hasta un total de once personas, cada una de las cuales tenía una labor concreta. Todas las tareas eran perfectamente legales por separado, pero en conjunto facilitaron la eutanasia de Ramón. Cuando los forenses encontraron rastros de cianuro potásico en su cuerpo, la policía detuvo a Ramona Maneiro, Rosa en la película, pero el meticuloso plan evitó que las pruebas la incriminaran.

Lo que no reflejó el excepcional filme de Amenábar fue la posterior campaña de firmas recogidas durante el mismo año 1998 y que fueron entregadas en el juzgado de Ribeira, en las que gente de toda España aseguraba haber ayudado a morir a Ramón Sampedro. El secretario de la organización Derecho a Morir Dignamente en Galicia, calificó las 14.000 firmas recogidas como un “legado histórico” y sin duda contribuyeron a fomentar el debate social a nivel nacional. A pesar de esto, siete años después, una vez el delito ya había prescrito, fue la misma Ramona la que admitió haber suministrado el cianuro y haber realizado la grabación en la que Ramón ingirió el veneno.



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## Jorge Drexler: music, medicine and mestizaje

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*BAS editor Helen Laurenson*

May 2023 saw a veritable double whammy of Spanish and Latin American *cantautores* in London, with the Uruguayan Jorge Drexler appearing at the Barbican Hall eight years after the success of his performance at the Union Chapel, Islington, and *el flaco* himself, Joaquín Sabina, back in the Royal Albert Hall after a six-year interval.

Drexler's links with Sabina run deep. It was the Spanish *cantautor* who saw the then medical doctor perform in a dive in Montevideo almost thirty years ago, and who subsequently encouraged him to try his luck in Madrid in 1995. Despite being introduced to an illustrious musical circle, including Víctor Manuel, Ana Belén and Ketama, Drexler started from zero in Spain – ‘recorrí el país con mi Renault Clio y dos músicos uruguayos, tocaba en salas de 60 personas’.



His latest appearance in London came at a very different stage of his career, as he rode the success of his 14<sup>th</sup> studio album, *Tinta y Tiempo*, which in 2022 won seven Latin Grammy Awards – a healthy crop in comparison with the four awarded to Rosalía.

Drexler is perhaps best known for his song ‘Al otro lado del río’ from the 2004 film *Diarios de motocicleta*. Walter Salles, the film’s director, commissioned him to write the music. Drexler says ‘leí el guión a las ocho de la noche. Me fui a dormir temprano y soñé con la canción. Me desperté y la escribí prácticamente desde la cama’.

In an interview in *La Nación*, he attributes its success to the scene in the film where Ernesto (aka Che) Guevara crosses the river to the Leper Colony: ‘sentí que esa escena donde Ernesto cruzaba el río sintetizaba el leitmotif de la película y del personaje histórico. Que no todo está perdido. De remar en conjunto hacia un mundo utópico, que es el del otro lado’.

The lyrics are simple but present a clear sense of universal solidarity and hope:

Clavo mi remo en el agua,

Llevo tu remo en el mío,

Creo que he visto una luz,

Al otro lado del río.



...

Yo muy serio voy remando

Muy adentro sonrío

Creo que he visto una luz

Al otro lado del río.

...

Sobre todo creo que

No todo está perdido

Tanta lágrima, tanta lágrima

Y yo, soy un vaso vacío



Son of a German Jewish doctor who fled to Uruguay in 1939 and a lapsed Catholic mother, Drexler has always considered himself, if not an outsider, a fluid mix of cultures and influences. 'Yo soy un híbrido [y] cuando eres un híbrido te cuesta mucho más aceptar las categorías [...] y la realidad es infinitamente densa cuanto más te acercas a una persona'.

He recoils from being labelled *un cantautor* (singer-songwriter): ‘no me gusta [el término]. Para mí, que vivo de las palabras, cantautor es una conjunción, como choripán, que nunca entendí muy bien’. His 2017 Ted Talk, ‘Poetry, Music and Identity’, reveals the evident literary process in his composition. Despite his protestations to the contrary – ‘pero eso no quiere decir que no me guste la canción de autor. Me gusta más cancionista, que es el que hace canciones’ – there is a clear intertextuality present in his works, and a poetic rigour. In May 2022, on his return to the Gran Rex Theatre Buenos Aires after a long absence, he revealed in an interview with *La Nación*, ‘Estoy en dos o tres chats de decimistas. Gente que escribe décimas con mucha capacidad y erudición. Escribimos sonetos, décimas, sextinas y villanelas. Más culto no puede ser.’ Challenged by ‘su maestro y amigo’ Joaquín Sabina in 2002 to write lyrics in ‘décimas’, starting with the lines written by Chicho Sánchez Ferlosio, ‘Yo soy un moro judío, / que vive con los cristianos, / no sé qué Dios es el mío, / ni cuáles son mis hermanos’, Drexler’s eventual song, ‘La Milonga del Moro Judío’, epitomises his approach to interculturality. He recently sang it with a Palestinian singer in Mexico and is in the process of recording a version with an Israeli singer.



As well as shying away from the term *cantautor*, Drexler is reluctant to be labelled a ‘Latin singer’, given the diverse nuances of musical production across South America. ‘I love the extrovert and happy music of Colombia and Panama,’ he remarks. ‘In Uruguay and Argentina we are melancholic and intellectual’. He describes his 2014 album *Bailar en la Cueva* as ‘an attempt to kill what Uruguay’s dictatorship left in me 30 years earlier. What I couldn’t do in my youth, dance and be happy, I’m doing now’.

Drexler started his professional life practising medicine, like his father, an ear, nose and throat specialist. Music was initially what Drexler did on the side after clinic, until eventually dismaying his father by taking it up full time. In an interview with *Latinolife*, Drexler states, 'working in a hospital, dealing with situations of healing and suffering, joy and pain, power and impotence, taught me a lot about relationships and people, and influenced my lyrics and my performances'.

Whilst his switch to music was not entirely unsuccessful in Spain, the 1990s scene, with the Spice Girls and the Back Street Boys, was not immediately propitious. His third album, *Frontera*, did not sell well in Spain, but was an immediate hit in Argentina and Uruguay, 'y ahí de golpe me volví una especie de símbolo de una generación, el tipo que mezcla folklore tipo Atahualpa Yupanqui con Beck'.

In the interim, Drexler co-wrote music for Rosario Flores, Pablo Milanés and Ana Torroja. In 2005, 'Al otro lado del río' won the Oscar for Best Song. Drexler himself was not allowed to perform the song at the ceremony as he was relatively unknown: Antonio Banderas and Carlos Santana were chosen instead.





Winning an Oscar at the age of 41 – the first ever for a song not sung in English – exemplifies the long road taken by Drexler, who remains philosophical and sanguine in his approach to both music and life: ‘a mí lo que me interesan son los procesos...’.

Find out more about Jorge Drexler:

Jorge Drexler: la crisis que lo paralizó, la neofobia y las dos “revoluciones” que tuvo en su vida – LA NACION

Jorge Drexler: Grammy Preview 2023 – Rolling Stone

Jorge Drexler: Poetry, music and identity (with English subtitles) | TED – YouTube



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## Santa María del Mar: a people's church in Barcelona

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*Oliver Hutton, reading Law and Spanish at Oxford*

During my year abroad in Barcelona I have lived next to the *Basílica de Santa María del Mar*. The fascinating story of this grand church, which I cannot help but glance at every time I walk past, was popularised by the lawyer and author *barcelonés*, Ildefonso Falcones, in his 2006 bestseller *La catedral del mar*. And I think it is a story that bears knowing.

Santa María stands in the neighbourhood of La Ribera, which began life beyond the city walls as a humble *barrio* for fishermen. In the early days of Christianity, the inhabitants built a small chapel reportedly on the site where Eulalia, co-patron saint of Barcelona, was martyred in the year 303. La Ribera, of course, means 'the shore', and that was where it lay. What is now the seafront neighbourhood, Barceloneta, remained underwater until centuries later.





By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Barcelona's burgeoning merchant class was growing too big for the original Roman precinct. La Ribera's enviable position between the port and the old city made it an attractive candidate for expansion. The explosion of commercial activity in the neighbourhood is reflected in the street names which today still refer to money changers, mirror-makers, silversmiths and other craftsmen who built Barcelona's medieval prosperity on the back of Mediterranean trade.



La Ribera's maritime success soon caught the attention of the nobility, who lined *carrer de montcada* with grand mansions that stand to this day. La Ribera now needed a church that could match its material wealth, and thus began in 1329 the construction of Santa María del Mar.

What is distinctive about Santa María, Falcones tells us, is that it was built by and for the common people of La Ribera, not the elites. Its creation owed to the *vecinos'* desire for a spiritual monument of their own which, unlike the city's cathedral whose construction began in 1298, did not depend on the nobility's backing. This truth was chiselled onto the very first stone, laid beneath the main altar, which bore only the shield of the parish of La Ribera, to whom Santa María would exclusively belong.

With the help of Bernat Llull, the canon who would become Santa María del Mar's first archdeacon, permission to build was swiftly obtained from the church authorities. At the same time, wealthy merchants in the neighbourhood were quick to offer financing. All parishioners helped in the building process, while stone was obtained from the quarries on the mountain of Montjuïc, almost three miles away. The arduous task of transporting the giant stones was assumed by the *bastaixos*, the city's stevedores. They did so on their backs, and for free – not as slaves but out of devotion to the Virgin Mary, wishing to do what they could to honour her. Thus the people of La Ribera built Santa María, with either their money or their labour.

Construction finished in what was then a record time of 54 years, halted only once by the arrival of the Black Death in 1348. Barcelona cathedral, financed by the king and the church, took twice as long to materialise. And it is because of Santa Maria's short construction period, avoiding changes in architectural style, that it is the only surviving church built in the pure Catalan Gothic style. Berenguer de Montagut and Ramón Despuig were the architects from beginning to end, masterminding the distinctive features that continue to mesmerise visitors: the two octagonal towers; the equal height of the three naves, making the interior seem larger from the inside than from without; the countless stained glass windows, flooding the interior with natural light; the vast rose window, in the middle of which Mary is being crowned; and, above all, the exquisite harmony of its proportions.



Besides the plague, Santa María has endured many challenges since its construction. An earthquake killed over thirty worshippers in 1428 and caused the rose window to be replaced. Further damage was inflicted by the War of the Spanish Succession, when in 1714 La Ribera was the last neighbourhood to fall to the forces of Philip V. Just beside Santa María, the memorial of the *Fossar de les Morreres* and its flame that never stops burning commemorate those who died defending the city. Later on, during the Civil War, a fire destroyed the interior furnishings. Various restorations were necessary in the following years, including in the 1960s when funds were raised from various entities including FC Barcelona, explaining the presence of the football club's crest on one of the restored stained glass windows.

Santa María's resilience is complemented by its capacity to inspire. It is said to be here, after all, that Antoni Gaudí was moved to create the Sagrada Família. And as well as the work of Falcones, Santa María has also appeared in Carlos Ruiz Zafon's bestsellers *La sombra del viento* and *El juego del ángel*. It even has its own Netflix series.

Set against the other themes of *La catedral del mar*, the construction of Santa María takes on added meaning. Falcones' novel lays bare the horrors of feudalism, opening with a harrowing illustration of the medieval lord's *droit du seigneur*. The novel's protagonist, Arnau Estanyol, escapes with his father from serfdom in the Catalan countryside only to become servants of the nobility in

Barcelona. Many die as pawns of war or at the hands of the plague. The city's Jewish population, housed in the *call*, is attacked and stigmatised.



Yet alongside this, the construction of Santa María embodies the best of human nature – a story of one neighbourhood's industriousness and devotion, of what the common people could achieve with a vocation of their own, of their selflessness to donate and sweat for the beauty we now admire. For the art critic Robert Hughes – and doubtless many *barceloneses* and visitors alike over the centuries – Santa María del Mar is the most magnificent and solemn place in all of Spain. Despite its beauty, however, one is perhaps moved more by the simple figures of two *bastaixos* carved on the door of the main entrance, straining under their colossal loads.