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CELIA SAIZ SANZ*

UNITING ACTION AND THOUGHT, JOURNALISM AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE CHASE OF CULTURAL RENOVATION**

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO THE LIFE OF ORTEGA Y GASSET
THROUGH JOURNALISM

BLANCO ALFONSO, I. 2023. *NACÍ SOBRE UNA ROTATIVA. LAS EMPRESAS CULTURALES DE JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET* [IN SPANISH]. MADRID: TECNOS

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This book is not simply a biography, but an insight into José Ortega y Gasset's life through his connection to journalism. Ignacio Blanco Alfonso has focused on this aspect of the philosopher's work throughout his academic career and continues to offer this fresh perspective on Ortega's personal and philosophical life. To choose a topic from which to interpret an entire lifetime is a decision that enables a deeper analysis and focus on it, since it can be challenging to present a common biography as a profound study on a person while maintaining its appeal to the reader. That is what Blanco Alfonso achieves when looking into Ortega's life through journalism, an innovative angle from which to continue broadening the understanding of this intellectual and his many endeavours.

A thinker such as José Ortega y Gasset deserves a book focused on his journalistic side, since he was connected to this discipline throughout his entire life for many different reasons. Firstly, he had a familial relationship with journalism, as the author of the book alludes to in the title. Secondly, he believed that this was the best and only style of writing for the introduction of his philosophical ideas to the Spanish audience, allowing for a cultural renovation of society. The bond to journalism through his family

*Celia Saiz Sanz, Student at the Complutense University of Madrid (Madrid, Spain), celiasai@ucm.es.

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is thoroughly explained in this book, with the first chapter containing the most detail. As described at the start of the work reviewed here, Ortega y Gasset was born inside the journalistic world, since his father was the director of an important newspaper known as *El Imparcial*, which also belonged to the family, specifically to the side of Ortega's mother. Blanco Alfonso presents José Ortega y Gasset's relationship with his father mainly through the letters they sent back and forth when the former was studying in Germany. Said correspondence allows the reader to understand the relationship between father and son, as well as to see how important journalism was for them both. Here we start to see the potential Ortega perceives in the journalistic media and style of writing for the Spanish audience. These letters and the many photos included in the book come from the Archivo de José Ortega y Gasset, part of the Fundación Ortega-Marañón in which the author participates as a director of the Centro de Estudios Orteguianos. This active research on the Archivo de José Ortega y Gasset is also worth mentioning in this review, since it is one of the primary methods used for the creation of the book. Including letters and images is definitely helpful in making a cohesive biography and in connecting the reader to the events in the life of the figure that is portrayed.

It could be easy to forget that such an important thinker also led an ordinary life, full of difficulties as well as blessings. In this book, the author makes an effort to connect both the mastery that characterises Ortega and the reality of his life as part of a complex world. Letters and pictures are used following that goal and the reader can also find explanations of the personal and emotional states of the thinker, the historical context and the journalistic and philosophical activities that he was involved in. This overview of Ortega's life as a whole, without separating his work from his context, is suggested by the philosopher himself. José Ortega y Gasset was an intellectual who defended the importance of the circumstance to the self, considering identity nonexistent without taking into account everything that surrounds the individual. That is why dividing life and theory would be unfair to Ortega, a comprehensive analysis of his work through the understanding of his circumstance is Blanco Alfonso's goal: "Se ha escrito sobre la significación de estas empresas orteguianas en relación con la época y con su producción intelectual, pero, puestas en perspectiva con el lado más humano de Ortega, adquieren un nuevo fulgor que nos permitirá conocer y comprender mejor al autor y su circunstancia" (Blanco Alfonso, 2023: 103). The choice of journalism made both by Ortega in his many works on newspapers and by Blanco Alfonso in his angle for this biography is

intensely connected to this idea of circumstance. As the author of this book states, journalism is a very human kind of discipline and it allows to understand Ortega's self and his circumstance all in one look. Continuing this effort to show the human complexity of José Ortega y Gasset's life, the book takes into account the emotional states of the thinker throughout the many different episodes that affected his life. In statements like this one from the sixth chapter of the book: "Estas emociones se apoderaron de su pensamiento" (Blanco Alfonso, 2023: 236), it becomes clear that sentiment plays a big part in his life and actions, as well as his more theoretical ideas.

Throughout six chapters one can grasp how his passion grows and shrinks depending on the circumstance surrounding Ortega, and it is definitely taken seriously in the book, since it shaped the works he would create in different periods of his life. The reader can see how enthusiastic the young Ortega is about the powers of journalism in renovating the Spanish cultural condition, even with his father's initial objection to this thought. However, the general pessimism installed in Europe in the context of the First World War overwhelms him and places him in an introspective state, evident in his personal journal *El Espectador*. For some time he moved away from the more active political life he was leading through projects such as the *Liga de Educación Política* and its newspaper *España*. The emotional cycle begins again when, as can be gained from the third chapter, Ortega recovers his vitality and passion for political action upon coming back from Argentina and gets himself into shared endeavours with Urgoiti, such as the failed purchase of *El Imparcial* and the foundation of *El Sol*, which came to be a very important journal. However, an emotional plummet happened once more with the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and the death of his father. In the recovery from these hardships, the biggest of Ortega's cultural endeavours was born, *Revista de Occidente*; as well as his collaboration with *La Nación*, his first access to an American audience. Lastly, we can see how he slowly left the political world for good, focusing on his philosophical and personal projects on what he called his second navigation. During his last decades he came to a silent attitude through his experiences as an exile after the Spanish Civil War and his comeback to Madrid, where he was not recognised as professor at the university. The feeling of failure in the cultural renovation of Spain was manifest, the power first associated with philosophical and political journalism had not found the transformation Ortega wished for, and this kept him in a taciturn sentiment and far from politics. Even his death ended up being a journalistic question and political event, since the publishing of articles to inform of his passing was censored by

Franco's dictatorship, from fear that it would reopen Ortega's transformative thoughts to the public, which it did actually end up doing, to some extent. All this goes to show how important the emotional state of the thinker was throughout his life, how it affected his actions as it would for every human being, how the political and personal context shaped his feelings, how his circumstance and his self always went hand in hand.

To understand this final feeling of failure upon his realising that in Franco's dictatorship Spain was far from being culturally renovated in the sense that Ortega wished for, it is necessary to grasp how important this goal was for the thinker. José Ortega y Gasset had a main objective, which was the modernization of the Spanish cultural state, a transformation that could only be achieved through journalism. This is the philosophical and political side of his connection to the journalistic world, his belief in the need to Europeanize Spain and push it forward in a cultural sense through this type of writing. In Ortega's philosophy we can find the conviction that every generation has a goal of its own, and he was sure that in his time this cultural renovation was the most necessary shift. However, this purpose was not easy to achieve since the Spanish audience did not take much interest in strict philosophical works, which contained the new cultural condition in Ortega's belief. The need for a cultural evolution through new and critical thinking is what led the philosopher to lean on journalism as his form of political action. The Spanish masses were not ready for European philosophical texts, but still needed this revolution in thought, in culture, which could be accomplished through the journalistic writing style and way of distribution. He actually viewed journalism as an opportunity to make philosophy accessible: "La claridad se debe a que sus escritos fueron, antes que libros, artículos de periódico. [...] favorecieron una auténtica democratización de la filosofía" (Blanco Alfonso, 2023: 20). For that reason, Ortega founded and wrote in many different newspapers throughout his life, since he believed it was the most direct path to Spanish audiences. This idea is the essence of Blanco Alfonso's book, not only this thinker's familial relationship to journalism, but his connection to it as a way of transforming his society. Ortega thought of his journalistic endeavours as political actions, as the place where it was transparent how theory and praxis were one and the same thing, where his philosophy came to life in the renovation of the public opinion and thought structure in Spain.

Ortega y Gasset's profound interest in the development of Spanish culture is what leads Blanco Alfonso to structure his book following the philosopher's many cultural endeavours. All the projects that Ortega worked on

throughout his life were connected to this aspiration to revive the culture in Spain and bring it closer to the European manner. At some points he believed passionately in this transformational force, while at other times he felt far from achieving such a revolution. As the author explains, he ended his life closer to this last impression, since the modernised culture in Spain seemed farther from reality than ever. However, in this book the reader can grasp how profound Ortega's impact on the Spanish cultural context actually was, how even his death allowed for some movement towards this progress, and how his philosophy still resonates and produces renovation to this day. A clear portrayal of all the above is what Blanco Alfonso achieves in depicting Ortega's life through his cultural and, specifically, journalistic projects such as *España*, *Europa*, *El Sol* or *Crisol*, as well as *El Espectador*, *Pliego de Cordel* or *Revista de Occidente*. José Ortega y Gasset did not always have an easy relationship with journalism, he went back and forth in his thought of himself as a journalist, frustrated at having to refrain from more strict philosophy while also encountering many challenges in the cultural transformation he hoped to achieve through this style of writing. However, he was undeniably a philosopher who wrote for the Spanish audience, with an enormous part of his work published through newspapers since he could not help but try to fulfil the need of his time, the cultural renovation. This is made clear in his own quote with which the book opens: “[D]ócil a la circunstancia, he hecho que mi obra brote en la plazuela intelectual que es el periódico” (Blanco Alfonso, 2023: 7). Ortega could not resist it, he was a journalist as much as he was a philosopher, action and thought were unified in his philosophy and that is what Blanco Alfonso shows in his book.

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