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IDEAS ORGANIZED**

FOUR STAGES IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF ORTEGA Y GASSET

TALTAVULL, J. B. 2023. *ESPAÑA COMO VOCACIÓN Y CIRCUNSTANCIA. LA IDEA DE NACIÓN EN EL PENSAMIENTO Y LA ACCIÓN POLÍTICA DE JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET* [IN SPANISH]. MADRID: DYKINSON

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In *Spain as Vocation and Circumstance: The Idea of Nation in the Thought and Political Action of José Ortega y Gasset*, Bagur Taltavull delves into the concept of nationhood that Ortega held, a factor that was central to his thinking from a very young age. The author elaborates on how Ortega understood philosophy as the very essence of his existence. Through his work, he demonstrated that life had no meaning outside of philosophy. By applying philosophy to Spanish politics and culture, he transformed his perspective on the circumstances of his country.

Ortega, raised in a family where liberalism and regenerationism instilled a strong civic notion of the nation, lived through the “Disaster of 1898”, an event that deeply influenced his work. He later confessed, and his writings attest to it, that this event was pivotal in shaping both his identity and his concept of nationhood.

Taltavull also examines Ortega’s German influences, noting that the ideas of Nietzsche and Kant left a strong impression on him during his studies in Leipzig and Berlin. However, nihilist thinking failed to fully persuade him, as Ortega consistently prioritized the power of reason. Indeed, he later advised Unamuno to avoid the author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Among the intellectual currents that sparked Ortega’s interest, regenerationism stands out. While authors like Morote and Picavea had already addressed the political and social problems of the nation, it was Joaquín Costa’s ideas that profoundly impacted Ortega. Specifically, Costa’s vision of Spain (and his proposals to address the nation’s decline) resonated

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deeply, as did his essential dualities: the elite and the masses as the sole components of the nation, and the contrast between de facto politics and politics grounded in principle.

The historian also explores Ortega's ties with certain members of the Generation of '98. Although he had productive discussions with Baroja, Unamuno, and Azorín, Ortega's ideas did not always align perfectly with those of these writers. In fact, he once accused Azorín of hypocrisy, as Azorín's actions within society seemed inconsistent with the ideals he espoused in his writings. It was during this period that Ortega declared the Europeanization of Spain to be a poor idea, arguing instead for a focus on the "Hispanization" of the country. However, the precise meaning of "Hispanizing" the nation remains ambiguous.

Taltavull meticulously explains how the works of other contemporary authors planted seeds in Ortega's mind. The texts he read in his youth provided foundational notions for developing his concept of Spain, such as the existing social divisions between masses and elites or the internal debate about reconciling individualism with belief in the national spirit.

Ortega moved to Germany in search of answers for his dream of national regeneration. He recognized that science, particularly through the University of Berlin, had been the key to Germany's own regeneration. He claimed that Germany was far more advanced culturally than Spain and quickly understood that German society was deeply committed to identifying and pursuing its ideals. Gradually, Ortega began to acknowledge Spain's inferiority compared to Germany.

He initially idolized German life, which he described as perfect, though he later criticized it for an excessive nationalism that brought negative consequences for the nation. What may seem like mere comparisons with his homeland was actually Ortega's way of gathering a set of tools to apply those same key factors in Spain. His fixation on German culture led him to advocate for educational reform in Spain, exemplified in his work *La Universidad española y alemana*, published in six installments in *El Imparcial*. Through this text, he denounced Spain's disregard for pedagogy, which he viewed not as a circumstantial issue but as the result of centuries of neglecting this vital task.

Regarding religion, Taltavull explains how Ortega advocated for secular education in Spain, following the French model. This stance drew him into Spain's heated debates, where he clarified that a secular school system did not mean excluding religious education. As he later elaborated, likely

influenced by Neo-Kantian thought, a secular nation did not equate to collective avoidance of religion but rather to the abandonment of ecclesiastical dominance.

Ortega's writings on Spain are inseparable from references to culture and science. He argued that Spain needed to be viewed from a European perspective — not by abandoning its own identity but by organizing the nation culturally and avoiding total imitation of other European countries. In fact, he maintained that Spain's regeneration through a focus on culture and science could significantly contribute to the European continent.

Another highlight of Taltavull's essay is the figure of Cervantes as a paradigm of the philosophy Ortega championed. In *Meditations on Quixote*, Ortega explores themes such as reason and love in Spanish society, united under the concept of *amor intellectualis*, which for him merges subject and object. He also addresses hatred, which he blames for the nation's disunity. Ortega firmly believed that Spain's "cancer" was the resentment and discord among its citizens, a topic he revisits and elaborates upon in *Invertebrate Spain*.

Following the influence of certain European models, Ortega also had the opportunity to visit Argentina on several occasions. The Argentina he encountered in 1916 closely resembled the political ideal he envisioned for Spain. This was the result of measures implemented by the Unión Cívica Nacional under Yrigoyen's leadership. Both Ortegases (his father accompanied him) leveraged their interest in Argentine politics to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries and highlight Spain's importance in South America.

The impact of the Great War also appears throughout Ortega's work, as it coincided with the publication of *Meditations on Quixote* in Spain. Ortega would later state, in 1918, that the Great War had been a missed opportunity to reorient Spain's politics toward becoming a more united nation. He lamented that failing to seize this moment led to a clear division. This division, as he described it, was between a right-wing Spain and a left-wing Spain, something that only served to hinder the nation's progress.

Taltavull also highlights the importance Ortega places on literature (*Don Quixote of La Mancha*), architecture (*El Escorial*), and the shaping of the landscape. Ortega argued that these elements together should be capable of rectifying the Spanish character. His idea of a nation was shaped through these cultural, artistic, and social elements, as detailed in *Meditations on Quixote*.

Turning to *Invertebrate Spain*, it is notable that Ortega was aware of the lack of written texts by historians about the nation's past, which he saw as essential for a better understanding of the present. In the prologue to the fourth edition of *Invertebrate Spain*, he asserted that true historians would eventually write such books. Although not a historian himself, Ortega dared to write a text about Spain's destiny, as he believed it was necessary for his personal life; he could not avoid feeling tied to the country in which he lived.

It is also important to note a turning point in Ortega's political life starting in 1930, when he became involved in pro-Republican activism. Although he supported these ideas, he was convinced that the Republic would require a disciplined party, capable of standing up to other political factions. Here, he introduces the concept of "excellent men," individuals who must be sought out and selected to excel in their fields and transform the nation's spirit on a political level.

Regarding what the dictatorship meant for Spain, Ortega highlights two essential personal factors: the rise of his pessimistic feelings toward Spain, which caused him real anguish, and the growing difficulty of acting from within. These circumstances led him to consider traveling to other places, such as Paris, Cuba, or Venezuela, where he could work on and disseminate his ideas.

We can affirm that Taltavull's text is comprehensive, as it meticulously examines Ortega's four stages: his youth, his works influenced by Neo-Kantian philosophy, his turn to phenomenology, and finally, the phase shaped by historical reason. While these stages cannot all be pinpointed to specific dates, there are texts that serve as markers of key transitions. Furthermore, it is not only Ortega's changing perspective on Spain that defines these stages, but also his shifting influences and the various experiences he underwent throughout his life.

Ultimately, the foundational vectors of Ortega's work are his theories about the idea of the nation, his vision of humanity, and his conviction that politics is in constant evolution. His books, writings, and interviews collectively embody these ideas. They describe the nation as a mass guided by a select few individuals. They stress the importance of having a compelling project for shared national life to ensure stability. Above all, they aim to bring a divided nation closer together. These are ideas that sought, above all else, to give Spain structure.

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