

Δαίμων. *Revista Internacional de Filosofía*, nº 58, 2013, 179-184
ISSN: 1130-0507

When Can You Think Something?

¿Cuándo se puede pensar en algo?

JOHN CHRISTIAN LAURSEN*

This is an essay on how a certain amount of empirical knowledge can help us understand the rise and spread of philosophical ideas. It is a response to the claim that is sometimes made that it was impossible or nearly so to think certain things in eighteenth-century Spain. We shall start with two authors who make assertions to that effect. Then we shall turn to the work of a philosophical historian as the source of the empirical knowledge that will help us critique the two authors. The book that supplies the empirical knowledge is Martín González Fernández's *El Idioma de la Razón: Ilustración e Inquisición en Galicia (1700-1808)*.¹

The first author to be examined is Javier Fernández Sebastián, whose recent chapter on «The Crisis of the Hispanic World» is a valuable review of the limits on freedom of religion and of speech in Spain and its colonies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.² It starts from the point that «Catholicism was truly the very center of the system, on account of its capacity to inform, shape, and determine the behavior of its adherents», and observes that «even the most enlightened and reformist groups moved within the coordinates of a Catholic dogma that was very rarely questioned» (104). It goes on to remark that «certain general characteristics of the Catholic worldview were shared by nearly everybody» (119). We are all aware that the Inquisition and government censorship did their best to suppress unorthodox and subversive thinking and expression, but Fernández Sebastián asserts that it is more than that: «what led early Hispanic constitutionalists – whether liberals or republicans – solemnly and almost unanimously to proclaim the centrality of Catholicism [e.g. in Article 12 of the Constitution of Cádiz] was neither fear, prudence, nor opportunism, but a more profound yet simpler fact: most of the agents who took part in these events shared a Catholic culture that was so deeply embedded in their societies that an acknowledgement of freedom of conscience was ruled out in advance» (122). The argument seems to be that one could not even think some things at these times and places.

* Department of Political Science, University of California at Riverside (johnl@ucr.edu).

1 Martín González Fernández, *El Idioma de la Razón: Ilustración e Inquisición en Galicia (1700-1808)* (Vigo: Nigratrea, 2008).

2 Javier Fernández Sebastián, «The Crisis of the Hispanic World: Tolerance and the Limits of Freedom of Expression in a Catholic Society» in Elizabeth Powers, ed., *Freedom of Speech: The History of an Idea* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 103-131; and see his «Toleration and Freedom of Expression in the Hispanic World Between Enlightenment and Liberalism», *Past and Present* 211, 2011, 159-197.

The second author is Miguel Benítez, who has observed that «There is no radical movement in the realm of ideas in Spain of this period, no true Enlightenment. There are, nevertheless, scattered traces of radicalism».³ He supports this point with the observation that «the apologists of the second half of the century refer to a growing critical literature, but among the materialists, pantheists, atheists, deists or unbelievers in general that they attempt to refute there appears no author born and raised in our territory» (195). Elsewhere, Benítez goes further. Because of its Inquisition, Spain was «the country of the living dead».⁴ The result of repressive censorship of several kinds was «dead bodies still containing a great deal of life... and victims that should be counted, without any exaggeration, among the dead, although they are counted in the census» (495). This is dramatic language for saying that many people had been mentally deadened by the oppressive regime. Whatever value this metaphoric language may have in provoking thought, it is probably not helpful in understanding the conditions for independent and heterodox thought. It implies that Spanish people in this period just could not, or at least did not, think in a certain way. The more dramatically stated, the more it implies the near-total success of inquisitorial and state censorship, and the more it implies a certain essential inability shared by the people of an entire empire. But maybe the evidence will show that many people in this empire could and did think differently.

My project is to evaluate the foregoing types of assessment of Spanish intellectual culture in the eighteenth century from two points of view. One is the analytical: what does it mean to be able to have certain thoughts, and what can we know about what people can and cannot think? The second is the empirical: what do the archives of the Inquisition in Galicia, as interpreted by Martín González Fernández, add to our ability to answer the first question? I am going to concentrate on the period before 1789, because the events of that year released a flood of what were seen as subversive materials and ideas, even into Spain, and it became much easier to think in so-called enlightened ways.

Let us start with the point that the only way we know if people thought in a certain way is if they left some sort of record, either in their own writing, or in the written reports of other people. So we cannot know if hundreds or even thousands of people were thinking in a certain way if they left no record. And records are not made or kept of many people and places and times. So all we can know about what people could think is what we can glean from surviving records. That means that we are not entitled to think people could not think in any other way just because we do not have documentation of it, nor can we assume that they were the living dead.

Written evidence from the past comes in various categories. One is books, which have often been subject to prior censorship such that some things are just never printed. Some books are published and circulated, but then collected and burned. Some disappear, but some get through this process and are even more sought-after because of it. Some are published in one place and confiscated in another. We learn in *El Idioma de la Razón* of some fascinating

3 Miguel Benítez, «Trazas de pensamiento radical en el mundo hispánico en los tiempos modernos» in E. Bello and A. Rivera, eds., *La actitud ilustrada* (Valencia: Biblioteca Valenciana, 2002), 196.

4 Miguel Benítez, «Epílogo» to Concha Varela Orol and Martín González Fernández, *Heterodoxos e malditos: Lecturas prohibidas na Universidade de Santiago* (Santiago: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2002), 495.

cases such as that of a book that was published with approval, but nevertheless led to the imprisonment by the Inquisition of its author, Consul Jove (272ff).

Another point worth keeping in mind is that books that religious or state authorities think are subversive might not be in actual effect. Other evidence from Spanish intellectual history indicates that figures such as Pedro de Valencia, a court intellectual of the early seventeenth century, could have intimate knowledge of the ancient skeptics without feeling that it undermined his Catholicism in any way, and early eighteenth century Royal Physician Martín Martínez could relay the ideas of ancient skeptics, Descartes, and Gassendi without thinking that they implied any threat to religion or the state.⁵ Everything depends on how these texts are interpreted. So the mere existence and reading of books does not tell us how they are read.

Another form of written evidence comes in the form of letters. When they have not disappeared or been deliberately destroyed, they can provide insight into the thinking of another century. In this volume, González Fernández quotes such letters, when they have been found, for insight into the thinking of their authors, both in support of and in trouble with the Inquisition.

A third and special form of written evidence is that of the archives of the Inquisition. This is a valuable filter: it contains what the censoring authorities of the church thought was some of the worst thinking, whether expressed in writing or orally. Thanks to these materials, we have reports of what people were saying in cafes, bars, the streets, tertulias, and other social gatherings in Galicia. It is also true that the archives of the Inquisition are incomplete: much has been lost or destroyed. But at least we get some record of what people were thinking. Exploration of these records is the main contribution of this book for our purposes.

So, what were people thinking in the Galicia of the eighteenth century, according to these archives? First, there is indeed evidence of a «scattered traces», as Benítez put it, of materialism, atheism, deism, and so forth. Let us note that Fernández Sebastián recognizes in passing that works of the French *philosophes* circulated despite the Inquisition (119). But *El Idioma de la Razón* contains much more information about the details of this circulation, enough to change our view of how important it was. There are references to Spinoza here and there in the files (96-8, 170, 206-7).⁶ And many more to Voltaire, who may have been the arch-fiend of the Inquisition because of his anti-clericalism (97, 211, 213, 219, 231, 237, 252, 265-267, 275, etc.). It is technically possible, but hard to believe, that most or all references to Voltaire were based only on rumors of his evilness. The books had to be circulating. Locke, Bayle, Mandeville, D'Argens, and William Robertson were some of the other names mentioned for subversive and heretical ideas in the papers of the Inquisition (220, 231, 253, 265, 267, 275, etc.). Knowledge of ancient skepticism and its subversive

5 See J. C. Laursen, «Los Académicos de Pedro de Valencia y el escepticismo en el tardo-Renacimiento», *Fragmentos de filosofía* 7, 2009, 31-47 and J. C. Laursen, «Medicine and skepticism: Martín Martínez (1684-1734)» in Gianni Paganini, ed., *The Return of Scepticism: From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), 305-325.

6 There is also indirect evidence of his influence in the lists from 1801 and 1800/1804-5 of prohibited books kept in the library at the University of Santiago, including books by and about him, by his follower Adriaan Beverland, and by his opponent but disseminator, Pierre Bayle. See Varela Orol and González Fernández, *Heterodoxos e malditos*, 432, 436, 440-1, 446, 451, 458.

implications was available in Galicia by the end of the century in the form of Thomas Stanley's *Historia philosophiae* (311).

And some of the people who read and wrote texts in these and other frowned-upon traditions were indeed born and raised in Spain. Andrés Nicolás Serantes de Andrade, rector de Fonseca, defended the legitimacy of usury on natural law grounds and found himself in trouble with the Inquisition in 1768 (156ff). Ignacio Durán y Horta, translator of Voltaire and d'Argens, was born in Gerona (219-20). He was a surgeon, and had lived in Montpellier for a time: medicine and exposure to foreign, especially French, ideas played an important role here. Strangely enough, he denounced himself to the Inquisition in 1778 and again in 1780. Francisco Consul Jove was born and raised in Asturias, and wrote a book in 1788 on farming hydraulics that contained anti-clerical introductory remarks (290ff.). He was also imprisoned by the Inquisition and kept quiet afterward. *El Idioma de la Razón* contains many more references to native Spaniards who read and wrote very heterodox things. A lot will depend upon how we define «scattered traces», but the case can be made from this book that there was widespread knowledge of forbidden books and ideas, and widespread original use of them in manuscripts and published writings.

Fernández Sebastián is probably right that most members of committees of influential elites, such as those who would later draft the Constitution of Cádiz, could not even think of publicly supporting religious tolerance. One wonders where the limits of freedom of thought of other elites may be found, such as academic elites today who live well as long as they stay within established norms of radicalness. But in any event, this book documents at least one original thinker who lived most of his life within the court, and may be considered an Enlightenment thinker: Vicente do Seixo. His book on toleration of the the Greek Orthodox Church by the Roman Catholic Church of 1788 got him in trouble for supporting toleration in any form, but he retracted and turned in his remaining copies of the book (262-270 and 735-741). He continued to publish, including in defense of women's rights, presumably avoiding topics that could provoke the Inquisition (262-270 and 735-741).

The evidence from this book, however, is that heterodoxy might have been more common among people with fewer attachments to church and state. A stand-out feature of the archives is that many of the people processed were not particularly wealthy, educated, or influential. A miller brought before the Inquisition for blasphemy in 1773 (207-208) reminds a little of Menocchio, the Friulian miller brought to life for us by Carlo Ginzburg in *Il formaggio e i vermi* (1976). Neither of these millers needed sophisticated philosophy in order to doubt of the truths of the church. Another technique of the Inquisition was to make exemplary punishment of lesser people in order to intimidate more influential people, such as the case of Pablo de Olavide, when Campomanes, Jovellanos, and many more of the leading citizens were invited to watch as he was humiliated and condemned by the Inquisition in Madrid in 1778 (276). It is very believable that fear based on this and other exemplary punishments did indeed motivate people to keep quiet about their thoughts about things that could provoke the Inquisition. Then it was not, as Fernández Sebastián says, that they could not think these things, but that –which he denies– they kept quiet out of fear.

Who were these lesser people who both thought freely and expressed it enough to be caught, and what made that possible? The sociology of the circulation of ideas suggests that big cities can be expected to play a role, and sure enough, they did in Spain. Madrid and

Valencia are often mentioned as places where people could gather and read the subversive texts. The authorities have more difficulty controlling movement and conversation in bigger cities than in smaller towns. Some of the people who were later snared by the Inquisition in Galicia had spent some time in these bigger cities and may have been introduced to subversive circles.

It is also sobering, and a bit sad, to see that in many cases discussed in this volume those who spoke too much seem to have been simply reckless or foolish. One wonders if the people who we think of today as reckless or foolish are the ones who are saying something original and valuable. And another sobering aspect is the sheer number of denunciations of people for what they said, brought forward by people who claimed that their consciences required them to tattle. Those who did so to avoid paying debts are in some ways easier to understand than those who had really been so indoctrinated that their consciences required them to meddle in other people's business.

The archives of the Inquisition also bring out the role of soldiers, officers, and physicians. We are perhaps not accustomed to thinking of soldiers as intellectuals, but in fact they have been - one could mention Wittgenstein in World Wars I and II, and Paul Ricoeur in prison camp in World War II. In any case, the records indicate that the Inquisition occasionally processed officers and soldiers who had picked up subversive ideas and spoke or wrote too freely about them. They had often travelled a lot and been exposed to ideas circulating in the larger world. And the training of physicians often inclined them to empiricism, materialism, and irreligion.

The ports were a recognized source of entry of ideas, and of course Galicia contains many of them. The Office of Sea Mail (Correos Marítimos) of La Coruña was seen as a «hotbed of heterodoxy» in 1767 (216; also see 382f.). In 1776 a Dominican priest complained that books from «infested ships arrived on our coasts with contraband books» and called for burning them (242). The ports also brought foreigners to Spain, and another priest reported in 1779 that they bring dangerous books with them (242). The coast of Galicia was far too long to police against this poison, just as it is for drugs today (341ff).

So at this point we are ready to conclude that sometimes people can think more than they have been given credit for. After all, does it make sense to conceive of nations as essences that can or cannot, as a whole, do something like think differently? Ideas that are shared by nearly everyone can nevertheless be contradicted by those few who do not share them. You can think something that others do not think if there are ports and cities and circulation of books and ideas. You can think something that others do not if you are not among the elite that depend so much on the establishment that it is obvious that any independent thinking might cost them their position and their freedom. Therefore, it seems that the sense in which ideas like religious tolerance were ruled out in advance is not as absolute and exclusive as Fernández Sebastian implies; there was no essential morality or religion shared by everyone. And the «scattered traces» of subversive publications that Benítez observes are also accompanied by native Spaniards who have thought and written on such themes. So if the Constitution of Cádiz had to enshrine Catholicism as the state religion, it was not for lack of the ability to think of alternatives. Presumably, it was for prudential reasons.

A parallel case is the protection of the slave trade in the Constitution of the United States. Anti-slavery supporters of the Constitution knew that they could not get the support of the

pro-slavery states for a blanket abolition or prohibition of the importation of slaves. So they set a sunset clause, to the effect that the importation of slaves must remain legal until at least 1808. This did not represent an inability to think of the end of slavery, but rather a desire to reach an understanding about the main features of the Constitution now, and fight for changes in slavery later. Maybe some of the framers and supporters of the Constitution of Cádiz had similar thoughts: we will accept Catholicism as the official religion now, and maybe that will be changed in the future. The key point is that rather than being unable to think anything different, they were making prudential political calculations in order to achieve a compromise and working consensus. This is not necessarily the fear that Fernández Sebastián rejects as a motivation, but it may be close to the prudence and opportunism that he also rejects as an explanation. The evidence from *El Idioma de la Razón* suggests that religious toleration may have been more thinkable and that prudence and politics may have been more important in official policy than many historians have thought.

This essay is not offered in the spirit of an apology for the Inquisition or any sort of implication that it was gentler than the Black Legend made it out to be. It is offered in the spirit of suggesting that it is hard to believe that in the conditions of eighteenth-century Spain a whole nation could be so indoctrinated that it could not believe a wide range of things, and amount to a nation of the living dead. It is offered in the spirit of admiration for the variety and independence of thought achieved even under difficult circumstances, and of respect for the resilience of human ingenuity in the face of powerful propaganda and repression. It thus provides hope about the future of independent thought.

There can be no doubt that independent, heterodox thinking in Spain as a whole and Galicia in particular was under a great deal of pressure from the authorities of church and state throughout the eighteenth century. But that makes it interesting to explore when and how it could nevertheless work its way through here and there. Rather than dismiss it as a virtual impossibility, or relegate it to the status of nothing more than scattered traces with no true Enlightenment, it is more productive to find and sift through the evidence we have for enlightened thinking in Spain. And that is one of the roles of *El Idioma de la Razón*. There is more here than some will have us believe. Let this review essay be an invitation to further debate on the issue. Was it that Spaniards simply were so effectively repressed and propagandized that they could not think some things, or was independent thought emerging here and there all of the time?