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Heritage Ambivalences: The Aesthetics of Fictionalized Pasts in Roca Barea's *Imperiofobia*

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Roca Barea's *Imperiofobia y Leyenda Negra* (*Empirephobia and Black Legend*) has been a bestseller in Spain since it was published in 2016. However, this historical essay has also provoked intense controversy regarding the veracity of data presented and the ambivalence, or even incoherence, of its arguments. This article analyses *Imperiofobia* from a different point of view: as a *heritage product* with a strong narrative dimension. A heritage product can enable an individual story to be inserted into a collective mythological narrative, as in the case of this book. *Imperiofobia* encourages the reader to become involved in an epic war against the *enemies* of empires, as well as against the *enemies* of Spain (mainly the eurozone's most powerful countries and progressive or left-wing intellectuals). This *involvement* dimension is essential to understand how, in general, ambivalent and even incoherent narratives about the past can be functional in socio-political dynamics.

Keywords: Imperiofobia; aesthetics; narrative; Roca Barea; fantasy

Introduction

The book *Imperiofobia y Leyenda Negra: Roma, Rusia, Estados Unidos y el Imperio Español* (*Empirephobia and Black Legend: Rome, Russia, United States and the Spanish Empire*) by María Elvira Roca Barea has been a bestseller in Spain since it was published in 2016.¹ In 2022 a new, revised and extended (with new chapters) edition was published, as well as a German translation.² Despite the fact that other books dealing with similar subject matter had been published previously (for example, Vélez 2014), *Imperiofobia* generated great enthusiasm (Lucena Giraldo 2017; Vargas Llosa 2018).³ The following comment by Olmedo Checa (2020, 13) is a good example of those positive reactions:

Hardly four years ago a great impact shook the field of Spanish History. The cause was the publication of two extraordinary essays written by María Elvira Roca Barea. “Imperiofobia y leyenda negra” and “Fracasología” have enabled the truth to start making its way through all the falsehood and opprobrium spilled against the role of Spain in the world. With intelligence, work and tenacity Elvira Roca has revealed the true history of our great nation.⁴

The huge success of *Imperiofobia* led to the promotion of Roca Barea’s candidacy for the Princess of Asturias Award for Social Sciences (the most important in its field in Spain) and, although she did not receive this particular award, she has received a number of other prestigious awards such as the Medal of Andalucía (Decreto 55/2018). However, *Imperiofobia* has also generated bitter controversy and has been the target of extremely harsh criticism. Rodríguez Pardo (2018, 84-85) has critiqued the use of obscure and confusing concepts, nonsense, generalizations, psychologism, ‘lack of conceptual rigour’ and even ‘intellectual indigence’. Villacañas (2019, 42) goes as far as to define it as a ‘populist, sick and harmful libel’.

Imperiofobia is divided into three main parts. The first defines the concepts *black legend*, *empire* and *empirephobia* and deals with black legends against the Roman, American and Russian Empires. The second part focusses on hispanophobia in the imperial era and, in particular, the hispanophobia generated by Protestant countries. The third part is concerned with the impact of the black legend against Spain since the eighteenth century until the present-day.⁵

One of *Imperiofobia*’s aims is to highlight the black legend’s enormous importance, as put forward by Juderías in 1917: ‘an absurd and tragic legend’ according to which ‘we Spanish have to be, individually and collectively, cruel and intolerant, friends of barbaric spectacles and enemies of all manifestations of culture and progress’ (Juderías 1997, 17). According to Roca Barea, the black legend was constructed through

a series of propaganda campaigns against the Spanish Empire, the Roman Catholic Church and Spain itself, since the fifteenth century until the present-day. In this sense, humanist and Enlightenment thinkers and, mainly, Protestant intellectuals and politicians in England, the Netherlands and Germany, would have been responsible for elaborating very imaginative narratives where events such as the Inquisition or the consequences the arrival of the Spanish had on the American continent (amongst others) were portrayed in an extremely exaggerated negative light. Meanwhile, a past of great achievements would have been concealed, with the aim of ‘diminishing the greatness, the eminence a given people can achieve through the building up of an empire’ (Roca Barea 2017, 53).

In the introduction, *Imperiofobia* is presented as a historical essay which seeks to be objective: ‘In what follows, we will endeavour not to fall into slippery moral disquisitions but to record the facts’ (Roca Barea 2017, 15). Just like other authors, for example, Bueno (2000) (and despite the enormous differences between the two), one of Roca Barea’s goals is to praise the Spanish Empire’s actions and vindicate it as one of the most transforming and positive in history. However, Roca Barea does not just offer data to support her arguments, she also elaborates an *imperial fantasy* where empires are strongly defended and presented as political structures which are always beneficial. Any criticism against empires is defined as *empirephobia*: ‘This is a particular type of prejudice, of racist etiology, which can be defined as an indiscriminate aversion towards the people who become the backbone of an empire’ (Roca Barea 2017, 119).

Criticism of *Imperiofobia* has focussed on fact-checking the countless historical data stated in the book (Villacañas 2019) or analysing the logic of the arguments put forward. Straehle (2019) has pointed out the lack of rigour in the use of information (for example, data with no contrasted sources), omission of data which contradict the author’s

arguments and the presence of ambivalences or even obvious contradictions. As a matter of fact, lack of coherence has also been criticized by some of the book's champions, for example, Martín Jiménez (2017). However, in this paper, I will analyse *Imperiofobia* from a different point of view: as a *heritage product* with a strong narrative dimension.

Imperiofobia can be considered a heritage product (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) or an example of *fabrication* of heritage (Lowenthal 1998). In order to meet the demands of each social group or society, creating heritage products involves reducing the complexity of the past to artefacts and/or stories that can be used in the creation and reinforcement of identities. From this viewpoint, lack of coherence and ambivalence are not necessarily a problem, in fact, they can actually increase the effectiveness of heritage (Lowenthal 2015). Žižek's (2008) and Eberle's (2019) theories can also help better understand how a narrative is constructed in *Imperiofobia*, offering ontological security, enjoyment and transgression, which strengthen its dimension as a heritage product, making *Imperiofobia*'s ambivalences and incoherences intrinsic to the text's functionality.

A heritage product can appear as a narrative (Lowenthal 2015) so, *Imperiofobia* can be analysed from that particular point of view. Following Somers (1994, 616), narrative's key characteristic is the connection (even if unstable) of different '*parts* to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable)'. The connection amongst different parts 'turns "events" into *episodes*, whether the sequence of episodes is presented or experienced in anything resembling chronological order. This is done through "emplotment." It is emplotment that gives significance to independent instances, not their chronological or categorical order' (Somers 1994, 616). *Imperiofobia*'s plot is the eternal struggle between those nations capable of raising empires and those who are opposed to it and/or fight against the

creation of empires (or even against the very idea of *empire*). All of *Imperiofobia*'s arguments are somehow linked to this core idea, although often in a very ambivalent or even contradictory fashion.

Besides considering *Imperiofobia* a narrative in the broad sense referred to by Somers (1994), Roca Barea has also made use of aesthetic resources characteristic of fiction literature. This aspect will be explored from the perspective of narrative theory (Gerrig 1998; Ryan 2001) and that of psychology of communication (Cohen 2006; Appel and Richter 2007; Green and Donahue 2011). The narrative character of *Imperiofobia* helps create links with the reader, placing him as another actor within the events as they unfold in the plot, and thereby reinforcing *Imperiofobia* even more as a heritage product. This *involvement dimension* has not been previously discussed regarding *Imperiofobia*, although it is essential to understanding how, in general, ambivalent and even incoherent narratives about the past can be functional in socio-political dynamics.

‘Fabricating heritage’

The concept of *heritage* can be defined as ‘a set of attitudes to, and relationships with, the past’ (Harrison 2013, 14). This includes both official as well as *unofficial* heritage, or, in other words, heritage which is meaningful for a given community or social group but is neither recognized by the state nor protected by legislation. According to Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) heritage is made up of an assemblage of a broad diversity of elements: ranging from material artefacts to memories, myths and literary associations. Creating heritage means constructing a *product* through ‘selection, assembly and integration’ of chosen resources ‘in an appropriate mix’ (1996, 8). Heritage has to satisfy ‘whatever expectations the consumer has of the past’ (1996, 10), which ‘is indelibly linked to messages which are not marginal accretions to the process, or a rare perversion of it, but form the essential binding medium, without which the

various components selected from the past could not be transformed into heritage products' (1996, 28). This does not imply that the coherence, veracity or authenticity of heritage cannot be analysed, but it must be borne in mind that these are not a requisite for the creation of heritage products. Tunbridge and Ashworth's (1996) approach allows even the fictionalization of the past to be accepted as part of heritage, as Harvey (2001) remarks.

Bonacchi, Altaweel, and Krzyzanska (2018, 176) have shown, regarding Brexit, 'how heritage is produced through the act of political activism performed on Facebook', particularly how narratives of origin, resistance and collapse are elaborated. For example, in some pro-leave narratives, the European Union is equalled to the Roman Empire and the pre-Roman origins of Britain are emphasized. This is an example of heritage in the process of being *fabricated* to strengthen/weaken identities, social groups or political dynamics (it is also an example of how the resources to do so and the channels for its dissemination can be very diverse) as put forward by Lowenthal (1998).

Heritage differs from history as it is, for the most part, constructed through fantasies and is exclusive, an idea which Lowenthal (1998, 8) summarizes in this forceful statement: 'History is for all, heritage for us alone'. A shared fantasy is a particularly strong means of uniting people as well as a way of excluding non-believers: 'From childhood on, social bonding and dread of ostracism induce adhesion to group norms – the more nonsensical and irrational the better – to reflect group values, to demonstrate shared commitments, and to exclude others who fail to imitate that behaviour' (Lowenthal 2015, 508). A fictionalized past can contribute to the construction of identity and can help insert an individual history within a collective mythological narrative (Bouchard 2017).

Lowenthal (1998, 12) describes some ways of *fabricating* heritage through fictionalization of the past: *upgrading* (making the past better –or, in some cases, worse– than it was), *updating* (‘anachronistically reading back from the present qualities we want to see in past icons and heroes’), *jumbling* (mixing things ‘in a synchronic undifferentiated Dumpster’), selectively *forgetting*, *contriving genealogies*, and *claiming precedence* ‘as a bona fide of possession, superiority or virtue’.⁶ It is quite easy to identify these techniques in *Imperiofobia*. For example, a genealogical fantasy is constructed suggesting the Spanish Empire would have been the heir of the Roman Empire, whereas the United States would be the ‘New Empire’, heir of the ‘Old Empire’ (that is, the Spanish Empire).⁷ Rome, Spain and the United States are constantly linked: ‘The Romans, just like the Americans now, had an acute sense of their defects, especially regarding foreign policy’ (Roca Barea 2017, 55) and ‘the United States has assumed its black legend in such a way as can only be compared with Spain’ (2017, 77).

This genealogy forms part of an *imperial fantasy* where she claims empires ‘are chiefly meritocracies’ (Roca Barea 2017, 57), that ‘practice self-criticism in a more or less pitiless manner’ (2017, 113) and have not even developed propaganda campaigns to defend their history and legitimacy, leaving them unprotected and at the mercy of critics. Empires are described as political dynamics or structures that always increase people’s freedom and social opportunities. According to Roca Barea, not only have empires not committed any action for which they could be condemned, but they have exercised their legitimate power not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of others.

Empires, by the mere fact of being so, pay a tribute in blood which sometimes can be quite high, in order to resolve their problems and also those of others. Roman blood, like American blood in the last century and now (both World Wars, for instance), was generously shed throughout the known world. (2017, 63)⁸

However, fictionalization is not always carried out by reinterpreting events of the past in a more or less fantastic manner, but by establishing that a country's future must necessarily follow the path marked by a given event. The idea that the identity of Spain must be linked to its imperial history is part of a long intellectual tradition concerned with an *imperial nostalgia* (Straehle 2022). This *nostalgia* has more to do with the construction of a heritage to be proud of than with an attempt at narrating events accurately. Proof of this can be found in the review of *Imperiofobia* by Martín Jiménez (2017, 97) where, despite criticising its serious incoherencies, the conclusion reached is that 'as Spaniards we agree with [Roca Barea] in pointing out the urgent need that makes the defence of the Spanish Empire a matter of State, in Spain and in Spanish America, that is, where our power springs from'.

Villacañas (2019, 48) summarizes one of Roca Barea's aims: she is 'interested in spreading the idea that a historical actor runs in our veins, which she calls the Spanish empire, who always did what was proper and correct and that we should feel proud and exalted for it'. Straehle (2020; 2022) notes the benefits this *recovery* of the empire can have for some social groups and political actors. For example, it offers a political frame opposed to that of the European Union and orientated instead towards the 'constitution of a Hispanic or Ibero-American Confederation' in the case of Bueno (2000, 388) or directed, in a very ambivalent manner, towards the United States (as a *Christian empire*) in the case of Roca Barea (2017). Other important advantages of these narratives, focused on the black legend and the imperial past, is that they provide resources to confront the Catalanian and Basque nationalist narratives, as well as focussing on a past detached from the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship. As with all heritage, it is a matter which has more to do with the present and future than with the past (Lowenthal 2015), an idea which Roca Barea explicitly highlights in the last sentence of

Imperiofobia: ‘it is to help clarify not the past, but the future, this book has been written’ (2017, 476).

Heritagisation implies reducing the past’s complexity to artefacts or narratives, with certain aesthetic characteristics according to the needs of each social group or community (Lowenthal 2015). However, aesthetics does not merely refer to the formal properties of the artefact or text, but also to the relationships created (or attempted to create) through those formal properties. Gell (1998), Bourriaud (2002) and Rancière (2011) situate the aesthetic dimension not just in the object itself, but also in the multiple forms of conjunction between objects (or, as in this case, texts) and subjects. It is important to consider what kind of relationships any aesthetic work will enable you to create: ‘Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?’ (Bourriaud 2002, 109). This conjunction between text and subjects becomes clear if we analyze *Imperiofobia* as a narrative world⁹ where readers can become involved.

Narrative and involvement

A striking aspect regarding the text of *Imperiofobia* is its combination of writing styles: some parts are written in an academic manner, others are more informal, like personal thoughts (‘I have always found it difficult to decide whether I am left-wing or right-wing’ [Roca Barea 2017, 17]) whereas still others have a clearly narrative style, for example, the description of the *Counter Armada*’s attack. However, what is really interesting is the fact that the book, as a whole, follows a narrative dynamic, as suggested by Vargas Llosa (2018): ‘It is hardened, profound, controversial and it reads without a pause, like a detective novel where the reader flies through the pages in order to find out who the murderer is’.

A narrative frame is also obvious in the presentation of historical and contemporary socio-political actors, often described as Manichean characters typical of

a melodrama. The actors who defend empires or support Roca Barea's line of argument are described as cultivated, tenacious, righteous and brave, like, for example, Julián Juderías ('an exemplary civil servant who never obtained any outstanding position, but who served his country with all his talent and capacity' [2017, 27]) or Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada ('[i]ntelligent and lucid don Gonzalo, who anticipated from such a distance the ghosts that would live forever amongst his compatriots' [2017, 154]). On the contrary, those who collude against empires or criticize their actions are portrayed as deceitful and mediocre, or cruel and brutal, like Martin Luther, Voltaire or Diderot. She also harshly attacks contemporary intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky ('great American Jew father of anti-Americanism' [2017, 75]) or Henry Kamen (he is not 'too embarrassed to sacrifice objective truth whenever necessary on other gods' altars' [2017, 31-32]).

Roca Barea even provides psychological aspects of some of her *characters* such as, for example, Francis Drake ('[h]e convinced himself', 'he was sure' [2017, 217]) or William of Orange ('aware of his importance and his incapacity' [2017, 251]). All of this contributes to develop an emotional response (of admiration or contempt) toward the characters, which in turn helps readers feel 'as participants in the evolving plot' (Cohen 2006, 192).

Another resource used to implicate the reader consists in addressing him directly, thus making him a participant in the argumentative process: 'Do you think, my reader friend, that our lives now would be better or worse if the Romans had not set foot on this peninsula?' (Roca Barea 2017, 51) or 'that is a task of ascertainment which I leave up to the reader, who by now is either a friend [...] or an irreconcilable enemy' (2017, 475). The aim is to find a tone of complicity, sharing opinions or personal memories ('that memorable scene comes to mind with McArthur crossing his legs and

putting his boots on the Emperor of Japan's tea table' [2017, 56]) or ironic comments ('European wars have always had that resemblance to a neighbours' courtyard, where it is just as usual to fight over the clothesline as it is to lend a broom' [2017, 104]).

According to Gerrig (1998), in order for the reader to become involved in a narrative world, it is not necessary for the text to be of great literary quality. The intensity of the involvement will depend on the type of relationships the reader establishes with the aesthetic features of the text (plot, narrative presentation, images, and style) and what the reader himself contributes, regarding his own interests, values and beliefs (Cohen 2006). However, it is important to emphasize the efforts made in *Imperiofobia* to transport (Gerrig 1998) the reader into a narrative world, which helps favour acceptance of the information offered in the text. If the reader 'feels as if he or she has been part of narrative events, the lessons implied by those events may seem more powerful' (Green, Garst, and Brock 2004, 169).

But, in order to better understand the relationship which can be established between readers and *Imperiofobia*, it is useful to turn to the concept of *fantasy* as defined by Eberle (2019, 254) and Žižek's theories: 'a particular type of narrative which provides subjects with ontological security by offering 'objects' which arouse and reproduce desire more successfully than other narratives due to their reliance on the transgressive aspect'. Roca Barea argues that, although the Spanish no longer have an empire, they did have the strength to build one, and, consequently, they are still (and will continue to be) attacked for it. A *fantasy* shows us what obstacles and, above all, which antagonists have hindered us from achieving whatever it is we need to reach fulfilment.

In other words, someone is not only portrayed as a threat, an enemy or the antagonistic other, since all of this can be done through ostensibly 'rational' narration. What is

crucial is the desire factor, in which someone is depicted as stealing our enjoyment by blocking our achievement of a whole identity—and as enjoying herself in doing so. (Eberle 2019, 255)

The world Roca Barea wants us to be linked to has some manifest enemies (Protestant countries and progressive and left-wing intellectuals) who take pleasure in our losses and in front of which we as readers must clearly position ourselves, either in favour or against. For Žižek (2008, 9), a fantasy ‘is an attempt to provide an answer to ‘What does society want from me?’, to unearth the meaning of the murky events in which I am forced to participate’. *Imperiofobia* places the reader as a privileged actor in a plot (the attacks on Spain throughout the ages) and points out to him the possibility (if he is willing and capable) of becoming involved in events. The reader can become part of a historical struggle, both against the enemies of empires and against the enemies of Spain who enjoy her weakening.

It must be noted that Roca Barea is perfectly aware of how important it is that the reader become involved in a narrative world. A whole section is dedicated to dealing with the confusion between history and literature, and to explaining that political myths are built and reinforced very effectively through literature: ‘The «historical» novel is a great business and its anachronisms and fantasies become part of popular culture’ (2017, 414). In 2018 the course *La novela al rescate de la historia de España* (*The novel to the rescue of Spanish history*), organized by the Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, was held, and one of the participants was Roca Barea herself. The aim was to show the importance of constructing narratives which highlighted the positive aspects of Spanish history and connected effectively with the audience (Alonso 2018). That very year, Roca Barea (2018) published a book containing six short stories which develop topics dealt with in *Imperiofobia*. In 2023, she published a novel, *Las*

Brujas y el Inquisidor (*The Witches and the Inquisitor*), also related to topics which appear in *Imperiofobia*.

Excess and enjoyment

A simple list of facts about the past would not provide the epic nor the sense of treachery and loss, so necessary in order to captivate readers and make them feel ashamed for not being worthy of a glorious and unjustly forgotten past. Therefore, Roca Barea creates a narrative world where the reader does become involved, due to a style which is, partly, based on excess and furnished with transgressive elements for the reader's enjoyment.

Reading the book is an overwhelming experience given the enormous number of facts and statements offered by the author: many are interesting and thought-provoking, others doubtful, while yet others are pure fantasy, but they are always expressed in a firm and passionate style. *Imperiofobia* presents an eternal combat between the Catholic world and the Protestant one; a defence of the benevolence of empires; an attack against progressive intellectuals, the Enlightenment and liberalism; an attempt at creating a theory of *empirephobia*; a caustic criticism of nationalism; a discussion regarding antisemitism and racism; an analysis of the use of political propaganda and a defence of the Catholic Church. All of this and much more can be found in *Imperiofobia*, in a maelstrom of opinions and data. In the foreword, Arcadi Espada describes the style as 'tempestuous writing, passionate, like an endless discussion which, at times, is violent' (Roca Barea 2017, 14). Villacañas is much less kind in his description of Roca Barea's style ('impressionist method of accumulating motley details' [2019, 60-61]) and her way of arguing ('direct, brutal, unashamedly, hammering, compulsive' [2019, 22]). Strachle (2019: 122) describes Roca Barea's style as 'vehement and sententious, with the continuous introduction of value and intention judgements, anachronisms,

teleologisms, strange associations, [...] surprising overinterpretations [...], strange counterfactuals [...], very personal judgements [...] or abrupt leaps in time [...].

But excess is also evident in other aspects. According to Žižek (2008, 63) ‘Every ideology attaches itself to some kernel of *jouissance* which, however, retains the status of an ambiguous excess’. Given that a merely descriptive discourse based on facts can be quite unattractive, Roca Barea enriches it with elements of transgression and enjoyment, such as, for example, the ridiculing of intellectuals worshipped by progressive political groups (like Marx, the Enlightenment thinkers or Chomsky) and the continuous mockery of the most powerful countries in the European Union (EU) for their inability to create empires, always according to her, as historically transcendental as the Spanish one. *Imperiofobia* offers an experience of defiance and provocation against leftist politicians and intellectuals and, in particular, against the EU: ‘if we deprive Europe of its hispanophobia and anti-Catholicism, its modern history becomes nonsense’ (Roca Barea 2017, 475). Many of these arguments have also been developed in her following book *Fracasología*¹⁰ (2019).

According to Eberle (2019), fantasies are more effective when there is a certain degree of transgression. This is further enhanced by Roca Barea’s vigorous, ironic style, which reaches *political incorrectness*. Villacañas (2019, 22) sums up very well that tone: ‘she shows no inhibitions whatsoever regarding her opinions and expresses all of them, correct or nonsensical, with the same unconcern, an almost defiant shamelessness’. For example, when referring to peoples *reluctant* to form part of an empire, Roca Barea says that ‘there are not a few occasions in life where people must be given a little push to make them do what they really want to and is in their best interests. It is like the ritual resistance put up by women in the period before the sexual revolution’ (2017, 43). Another example is her particular and provocative use of the

concept *racism*: ‘empirephobia is a type of *upwards* racist prejudice, essentially identical to *downwards* racism, but much better disguised’ (2017, 31). *Imperiofobia*’s tone of defiance aims to provide a fair amount of ontological security, but it is also an invitation to take action or even participate in conflict in front of a group of enemies from which it is necessary to defend oneself.

[...] in order to encourage us a little to go into combat, Roca Barea focusses on one of those consequences and alleged defeats: the risk premium crisis which followed the financial bubble bursting in 2008. It is here that the book’s clear political aspiration lets itself be felt. (Villacañas 2019, 227)

The tone of defiance and *excessiveness* is also very evident in the titles of other books, which, like *Imperiofobia*, have put forward an aggressive defence of Spain’s history. For example, *La Leyenda Negra: Historia del odio a España (The Black Legend: A History of the Hatred of Spain)* (Ibañez 2018) or *Nada por lo que pedir perdón: La importancia del legado español frente a las atrocidades cometidas por los enemigos de España (Nothing to apologize for: The importance of Spain’s legacy in the face of atrocities committed by Spain’s enemies)* (Gullo Omodeo 2022).

Ambivalence and incoherence

Eco (1985, 4), in his famous text on *Casablanca*, pointed out that ‘[t]o become cult, a movie should not display a central idea but many. It should not exhibit a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on in and because of its glorious incoherence’. Obvious differences between *Imperiofobia* and *Casablanca* apart, Eco provides two ideas which allow us to much better understand how it is possible for a text that is not coherent to be actually functional. Firstly, the endless flow of arguments, characters, concepts and opinions in *Imperiofobia* generates an assemblage which can hardly provoke indifference: ‘[w]hen all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach

Homeric depths. Two cliches make us laugh, but a hundred cliches move us because we sense dimly that the cliches are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion' (1985, 11). Secondly, that vast assemblage of elements includes resources which can be used by the reader who becomes involved in the narrative world.

It must provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own, a world about which one can play puzzle games and trivia contests, and whose adepts recognize each other through a common competence. (1985, 3)

Lack of coherence can facilitate the *extraction* of those elements needed by the reader, depending on his requirements: 'one must be able to unhinge it, to break it up or take it apart so that one then may remember only parts of it, regardless of their original relationship to the whole' (Eco 1985, 4). In *Imperiofobia* the reader has, at his disposal, a vast world from which to choose those ideas or arguments that can be useful and ignore those that are of no use or could contradict the reader's beliefs. For example, Strachle (2022) has pointed out how the champions of Roca Barea's works omit many of the most controversial ideas, such as the harsh criticism of the Bourbon Dynasty (to which the current Head of State of the Kingdom of Spain belongs).

Polletta et al. (2011, 122) note how ambiguity in a narrative can indicate incompetence while making it impossible to believe, but also that 'stories may be powerful insofar as they seem to hang together while pointing in quite different normative directions. They cover the bases, as it were'. Coherence is not only not necessary, but, often, lack of it can be more effective in order to achieve the desired result. Bouchard (2017) includes *polysemy* (the capacity to generate diverse, or even contradictory, messages) and *polyvalence* (to serve different, or even contradictory, causes) among the conditions necessary for a social myth to be effective. These

conditions can help make a given myth relevant for or useful to a greater variety of people.

Žižek (2008, 96) has argued that an ideological construction, ‘in order to be ‘effective’ as a social bond, [...] *always has to combine* a series of ‘inconsistent’ attitudes’. Further on, we find his definition of ideology: ‘a symbolic field which contains such a filler holding the place of some structural impossibility, while simultaneously disavowing this impossibility’ (2008, 98). The ‘structural impossibility’, of which *Imperiofobia* is notorious proof, is that any construction of a political narrative that claims to have an ontological dimension or to function as a ‘master narrative’ (Somers 1994) cannot be based only on facts, but inevitably also on fantasies (Bouchard 2017). In *Imperiofobia*, Roca Barea puts forward that it is actually possible to tell a history of Spain, which the Spanish can feel completely proud of, with objective data only, and harshly criticizes those countries that have needed to create political myths in order to construct their identity. However, despite denying the need for these mythological narratives, she herself builds a striking *imperial fantasy*. In order to better understand the contradictory nature of fantasies, the following is an example mentioned by Eberle (2019, 255):

This is the case of the fantasy of ‘Schrödinger’s immigrant’, who is both stealing our jobs and receiving unemployment benefits. While it makes no logical sense, such a fantasy presents the immigrant as a particularly strong ‘object’, since it constructs her in a way that attracts our desires to both ‘protect our jobs’ and ‘make them work’.

Imperiofobia is full of incoherent or ambivalent arguments to reinforce Roca Barea’s imperial fantasy, such as, for example, the definition of the United States as an empire or her assessments regarding the British Empire. In fact, just as Rodríguez Pardo (2018) has indicated, even her definition of *empire* changes throughout the book

depending on needs, adapting it to each new argument. Another of the more noteworthy ambivalences is that while she underlines the importance of their imperial past for the modern-day Spaniard, she also states that the Spanish today have no longer any relationship with those of the imperial period: ‘we the people of the peninsula should have a different name to clearly separate us from those Spanish. It seems the Spanish still exist, when neither the Hispanic nor those now known by this name are no longer those Spanish’ (Roca Barea 2017, 473).¹¹

Lowenthal (2015, 508) has pointed out that although some elements of heritage may indeed be ‘nonsensical and irrational’, this feature can actually help strengthen a group’s identity: ‘Shared *misinformation* bans those whose own legacy encodes different catechisms. ‘Correct’ history could not so serve, because it is open to all, alien and domestic alike; only a distorted past can be a gauge of exclusion’. This idea implies that the construction of socio-political dynamics involves, among other processes, a war between competing (and even contradictory) fantasies, and that these fantasies can hardly be overthrown by facts and data alone.

Fantasies at war

Edelman, taking up again Goodman’s (1978) theories, underlines that all kinds of artefacts and stories with an aesthetic dimension (‘novels, paintings, stories, film, dramas, television sitcoms, striking rumours, even memorable jokes’ [1995, 1]) can influence socio-political life in multiple ways, for example, by generating ‘the ideas about leadership, bravery, cowardice, altruism, dangers, authority, and fantasies about the future that people typically assume to be reflections of their own observations and reasoning’ (1995, 2-3). Images and narratives can contribute cognitive and emotional elements, behaviour models or certain points of view concerning past and future, amongst many other resources which are used in socio-political life.

Several decades of research have shown that it is perfectly possible to accept ideas and assertions regarding the real world, but originating from narratives, even when they are undoubtedly perceived to be fiction or when they are proven to be deceptive. Green and Donahue (2011, 315) have pointed out that ‘individuals frequently retain newly created beliefs even if they are informed that the initial information on which those beliefs were based was incorrect, particularly if they have integrated those beliefs into their knowledge structures’. If it is possible to *transport* readers to a narrative world where they identify with the characters, they ‘may be less motivated or able to correct even if a story is revealed to be deceptive’ (Green and Donahue 2011, 326). Appel and Richter (2007, 129) have also shown that ‘fictional narratives can have a persistent implicit influence on the way we view the world, and that these effects may last longer than the effects of typical explicit attempts to change beliefs by presenting claims and arguments’. From a very different perspective, Lowenthal (2015) has also observed that when they contribute to creating a given identity (when they become heritage), fantasies regarding the past cannot be fought just with historical arguments based on factual data. All of the above research proves that Roca Barea’s affirmations regarding how literary narratives or other works of fiction can influence socio-political life are correct. It also enables us to understand the reason why criticism of *Imperiofobia*, based solely on scrutiny of the veracity of facts presented and the logical coherence of its arguments, has not significantly altered the book’s prestige, despite its being crammed with fantasy, ambivalence and incoherence.

In relation to the *culture wars* in the United Kingdom, Malik (2021), has remarked that the ‘error here is to believe that the culture war consists of a debate about the “real England”, one that can be resolved by facts and data – rather than a battle between manufactured narratives that seek to mould an England in their own image’. In

a war for building political identities, the best fantasy-maker has the advantage.

According to Pérez Viejo (2003, 86), one of the main mistakes made in Spain during the transition to democracy was to consider that there was no need to (re)construct national identity ‘through the recreation of the past and the invention of shared symbolic universes’. This mistake was not made by the Catalanian and Basque nationalists who clearly understood the need for this construction (Pérez Viejo 2003). *Imperiofobia* must be understood within the context of this confrontation (where political fantasies have a key role) between Spanish nationalism and the so-called ‘peripheral nationalisms’.

One of the most controversial ideas in *Imperiofobia* (Villacañas 2019) is that it does not suffice to put the truth up against political fantasies, constructed by means of images and narratives, in order to undo their effect, instead it is necessary to create other, more powerful ones: ‘They thought that lies could be counteracted by showing the truth honestly uprightly honourably [...]. Nobody thought that in order to defend oneself from this propaganda it would require attacking with the very same weapons used to offend’ (Roca Barea 2017, 311). *Imperiofobia* is a fine example of creating ties between the audience and a narrative world (incoherent from the point of view of logic and even with clearly deceptive arguments) through aesthetic resources, so that that *world* can function as a heritage product. This product offers the reader a past to be proud of, a source of ontological security and a repository of resources to act on in the present, for example, to confront other fantasies, such as those elaborated by the secessionist movement in Catalonia.¹²

As Ezrahi (2012, 307) has highlighted, ‘conflicts between competing approaches to the political order are usually carried out by wars of political imaginaries rather than by cogent propositions’. National identity is not a starting point, it can only be the result of an enormous effort, where a huge number of resources are employed, including

fantasies about imagined pasts. It must be borne in mind that although the search for truth is a key objective in how we act, socio-political life is not built just with objective facts, it is also built with fantasies.

Conclusion

Imperiofobia has been analysed as a historical essay which presents notorious ambivalences, incoherences and falsehoods. I believe it can also prove useful to consider *Imperiofobia* as a heritage product with a marked narrative dimension. From this point of view, it is more clearly understood that the aim of Roca Barea's book is not actually to convince the academic community of its theories, but rather to provide given sociopolitical actors and actions with ontological security, enjoyment and transgression, as well as diverse resources, particularly in order to confront competing political fantasies. *Imperiofobia* encourages the reader to become involved in an epic struggle against the *enemies* of empires and against the alleged enemies of Spain who enjoy the country's enfeeblement. The text places the reader in a position which allows him to be an actor in an epic history where he will have to take sides.

As this involvement is achieved, the arguments employed, no matter how ambivalent, contradictory or deceptive, can be more easily accepted. Readers can also ignore those arguments they do not find useful or that are in contradiction to their beliefs, provided that there is a sufficient degree of involvement in the world Roca Barea offers. This *involvement dimension* is essential to understanding how, in general, ambivalent and even incoherent narratives about the past can be functional in socio-political dynamics. The success of *Imperiofobia* also serves to remind us that a socio-political world needs fantasies just as much as hard facts. This does not mean we must accept fantasies as necessarily being positive (they can have catastrophic consequences) or having supremacy over facts (the search for truth remains a primary objective), but it

does imply the need to recognize that fantasies are ever-present in socio-political life, often in the form of heritage products. We need a place in the world and, consequently, we need a world in which we can have a place. Heritage products offer us a world (albeit a narrative one) and a place in it or, at the very least, a point of view that we can consider privileged.

Notes

1. By 2021, 30 editions of the book had been published (<https://www.siruela.com>).
2. *Imperiophobie. Rom, Russland, die Vereinigten Staaten und das Spanische Imperium*. Translated by Christine Merz and published by Westend. <https://www.westendverlag.de/buch/imperiophobie/>
3. Following the success of *Imperiofobia*, a significant number of books have been published on black legend or as a defence of Spain and its history. See, for example, Landaluce (2018), Insua (2018, with a foreword by Roca Barea) and Esparza (2021).
4. Quotations from Spanish texts have been translated by the author.
5. This structure and the quotations included in this article are from the sixth edition (March 2017). Although the structure of the book has changed in the 2022 edition, all quotations also appear in this latest edition.
6. Although Lowenthal develops these modes of fabrication more broadly in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, for the purposes of this article they are more appropriate as formulated in his 'Fabricating Heritage'.
7. In order to define the United States as an empire, Roca Barea very loosely takes Dandeleit's (2001) concept of 'informal empire'.
8. In later editions, Roca Barea has removed 'and now' from this text.
9. On the concept *narrative world* see Gerrig (1998) and Ryan (2001).
10. The title is a neologism, which could be translated as *Failureology*.
11. On the disconcerting nature of these assertions, see Rodríguez Pardo (2018).
12. Concerning the construction of the past and Catalan identity see Vargas (2018).

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