We Have Confused Thinking with Certificates of Belonging Long Enough

An interview with the Spanish philosopher Ernesto Castro

Ernesto Castro

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Introduction

In Spain, Ernesto Castro is something of an anomaly: an academic philosopher who fills lecture halls, who has turned his classes into one of the most-watched philosophy channels in the Spanish-speaking world, and who despite this (or perhaps because of it) remains wary of his own popularity. Born in Madrid in 1990, he teaches Aesthetics at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, where for years he has been building a philosophical system of his own, which he has named "generic naturalism." He has not yet been translated into Italian, and that gap is worth filling.

His bibliography has a range that in Italy would seem almost suspicious. There are books of ontology, such as *Realismo poscontinental*, in which he tries to end the old trench war between analytic and continental philosophy. There is *El trap. Filosofía millennial para la crisis en España* (2019), which used a musical genre despised by highbrow critics to read the forms of life, desires and contradictions of the generation that grew up inside the 2008 crisis. There are the political essays, from *Ética, estética y política. Ensayos (y errores) de un metaindignado* (2020) to *Memorias y libelos del 15M*, an unsparing reckoning with a movement Castro lived from the inside, at twenty, in the squares of the *indignados*. And there is a Platonic trilogy of philosophical novels, opened by *Jantipa o Del morir* (2022) and continued with *Perictione o De la libertad* (2023), an epistolary novel set in Paris in 1968.

Why talk about him now, and why in Italy? Because the squares are full again. From France to Spain, from Portugal to Belgium and all the way to Milan, a new wave of protest, driven by the cost of living, low wages and the housing crisis, has brought back onto the streets a generation that waves One Piece flags alongside red and Palestinian ones, that is rediscovering the communist vocabulary, and that at the same time lives in countries where the ballot box rewards the radical right. Castro is one of the few European thinkers who has already been through all of this: he has watched a street movement be born, become a party, enter institutions and disappoint many of its promises. He talks about it without nostalgia and without cynicism, and with a quality rare in public debate: a willingness to contradict even those who consider him one of their own.

There is also a more intimate, distinctly Italian reason. The radical thought our struggles produced, from Tronti's *operaismo* to Negri's autonomism, has been read, debated and often mythologized elsewhere. Hearing how it is judged by a Spanish philosopher trained on Manuel Sacristán, one who refuses to "inherit the obligation to always prove it right," is a good way of looking at ourselves in the mirror. The answers that follow are an exercise in what Castro calls the training of attention, as opposed to the management of indignation: drawing distinctions where everyone else generalizes, and thinking precisely when it would be most comfortable to stop.

The Interview

1. From 15M to 2026.

You took part in the *indignados* movement and wrote about it in *Memorias y libelos del 15M*. Today protests have spread to France, Italy, Belgium, Portugal and Spain, driven by the cost of living, low wages and the housing crisis. Is this a return of 15M or something different? And

what should these squares learn from 15M's passage from the street to the institutions, with its promises and its disappointments?

It's best not to turn 15M into a generic name for any discontent that takes to the streets. I took part in it at twenty, and precisely for that reason I distrust its retrospective canonization. The most valuable thing about those squares was that you could argue with someone who didn't share your premises and leave the conversation thinking something else. When a movement turns into an identity to be defended, that possibility begins to disappear. We had come together to talk, and we ended up fighting over who got to speak on behalf of everyone.

Nor do I accept, just like that, on trust, that Podemos was 15M come of age. Assembly democracy and electoral competition follow different logics. Many demands for institutional transformation were lost along the way, while the initial plurality narrowed until it became a new division into friends and enemies. We left the two-party system without leaving binary thinking.

To today's protests I would say: don't confuse the success of your spokespeople with the satisfaction of your demands. That someone moves from the banner to the parliamentary seat may be wonderful for their CV. For those who still can't pay the rent, it all remains to be proven. And I would also say: don't turn defeat into a comfortable identity. Being right against the whole world is not the same as having changed something.

2. The aesthetics of protest.

In *El trap* you read millennial precarity through a musical form. Today in Paris you see One Piece flags in the marches, next to red and Palestinian ones. Has pop culture become Gen Z's political grammar? Is it a sign of powerlessness or a new form of collective imagination?

Popular culture has been supplying protest with images for a long time. The interesting thing would be to understand what that flag allows people to say that the others don't. A shared image can bring together people who agree on almost nothing else. That is a power, but also an ambiguity: recognizing yourself in a symbol doesn't mean you have agreed on what to do together.

When I studied trap, what interested me was its condition as the metamusic of the crisis: the forms of life, desires and contradictions that found expression around the songs. It would be a mistake to deduce an ideology from a musical taste; it would be just as much of one to deduce it from a manga. Capitalism produces a good part of the materials with which we imagine our opposition to capitalism. We don't have a spare imagination, sealed off and free from market contamination.

That said, the circulation of an image and the organization of a struggle are different things. You can share a meme in two seconds; sustaining a strike takes quite a bit more. The question is what remains once the image stops circulating. If ties, commitments and the capacity to act remain, it served a purpose. If all that remains is another T-shirt, we'll have expanded the catalogue of rebellion on offer.

3. The return of the communist vocabulary.

One commentator wrote that in these squares communism is no longer a specter but a poltergeist. Is it nostalgia, identity posturing, or a sign that capitalist realism is coming to an end? And where do you stand on this return?

The poltergeist metaphor is witty, but the fact that the furniture is moving doesn't prove the house is about to change owners. The reappearance of the communist vocabulary can express a desire for equality, a search for belonging or a provocation aimed at one's parents. What it means will have to be seen case by case. No word comes with its own program of government already built in.

My relationship with this tradition goes through critique, and through authors such as Manuel Sacristán, who knew how to revise their own premises. I'm interested in a way of thinking that can learn from the sciences and correct its own expectations, in particular the expectation of an unlimited growth in production. A finite planet cannot sustain an emancipation conceived as infinite consumption. I'm also interested in equality and freedom being judged by their effects, without granting moral immunity to those who invoke them.

That's why I wouldn't identify this return of the vocabulary with the end of capitalist realism. To contest the supposed absence of alternatives, you have to make them thinkable and practicable. The fact that the present is unbearable doesn't make just any future habitable. We can discuss property, work and needs very seriously without organizing yet another contest of revolutionary purity. We have confused thinking with certificates of belonging long enough.

4. Violence and looting.

In France some 2,400 people were arrested, and in Milan more than 200 in two days, amid fires and looted shops. From Sorel to Benjamin, philosophy has thought about political violence. Where do you draw the line between reappropriation and consumerist nihilism? Is looting a shop an anticapitalist gesture or the desire for commodities in its purest form?

There is no political meaning that can be read directly off broken glass. You would need to know who is acting, against whom, to what end and with what consequences. Stealing food to eat, taking goods to resell them and destroying your neighbor's shop are different actions. Lumping them all together lets you condemn them or celebrate them wholesale without having taken the trouble to understand any of them.

Looting, after all, doesn't stop belonging to the universe of consumption just because you skip the checkout. The desire to own a commodity can survive perfectly well the violation of the rules that govern its purchase. But it would be just as convenient to reduce all violence to consumerist whim and lose interest in the conditions that make it possible.

I distrust the intellectual's fascination with violence that others commit and others suffer. Quoting Sorel or Benjamin doesn't turn a fire into a doctoral thesis, nor its victims into footnotes. My criterion would start from the harm, the ends and the responsibility for the means employed. Understanding a riot requires making distinctions; justifying anything because it happens within one means you stop thinking precisely when it is most needed.

5. 1968 and its freedoms.

In *Perictione o De la libertad* you portray Paris in 1968 and the protagonist's struggle with the idea of freedom, in its uses and abuses. Are the squares of 2026 still asking for freedom, or above all for material security: housing, food, schooling? Have we moved from emancipation to survival as a political horizon?

The opposition between freedom and material security seems misleading to me. Having a home lets you close a door, be alone, read, love, argue without the landlord deciding how long your privacy will last. Those are fairly concrete freedoms. Need doesn't begin where philosophy ends: it is one of its central questions.

In *Perictione* I wanted to challenge the identification of freedom with doing whatever we please. We can be utterly obedient to our appetites while believing ourselves sovereign. And we can also acquire capacities through commitments that, seen from outside, look like limitations. Freedom has to do with understanding our dependencies and acting within them, not with pretending we have no body, no history and no obligations.

The problem arises when securing your subsistence consumes your entire existence. If you have no time for anything except paying for the time you spend living, emancipation becomes a luxury word. But asking for a home or an education doesn't necessarily mean giving up a more ambitious horizon. It can be its condition of possibility. The sad thing would be if, once those needs were met, we no longer knew what to do with our freedom except keep on buying.

6. Ontology and politics.

You have built a system of your own, "generic naturalism," and theorized a realism that overcomes the divide between analytic and continental philosophers. Is there a politics of postcontinental realism? Can an ontology say something about a riot, or must theoretical philosophy fall silent before the street?

An ontology can say something about a riot, provided it doesn't claim to replace the study of it. Postcontinental realism tries to discuss problems that academic labels tend to keep apart. No ballot paper comes out of it. But neither does an obligation to stay silent every time philosophy has consequences outside the university.

In generic naturalism I'm interested in thinking about how norms and institutions arise from realities that, originally, are neither normative nor institutional. Rights have a genesis; they don't appear ready-drafted in some juridical heaven. This forces us to relate our claims to the needs, capacities and dependencies of the beings who make them. Being precedes ought, even if what exists sometimes annoys us enormously.

Applied to a protest, this approach invites us to ask how a dispersed capacity turns into an organized force, what relationships sustain it and what new obligations it produces. And to remember that what exists can't be reduced to what we say about it: changing the narrative about housing doesn't build houses. Philosophy can clarify these questions. When it claims to deduce from its first principles who should win at the next barricade, it becomes a machine for blessing preferences.

7. The philosopher as public figure.

Your YouTube channel has made philosophy popular across the Spanish-speaking world. You have said that if your books were successful, it was due to a misunderstanding. Protests are born and circulate on the same algorithms. What responsibility does a philosopher with a mass audience have today when the squares catch fire? To speak, or to step back?

Responsibility begins with not confusing an audience with a people. Those who listen to my lectures didn't elect me to represent them. My channel came from recording what I did as a

professor, not from a plan to lead my viewers politically. The number of views doesn't magically expand my knowledge of what is happening on a street in Paris or Milan.

The story about the misunderstanding concerned the gap between what you think you've done and what others find valuable in it. It's worth preserving that gap in politics too. That someone listens to you doesn't mean they've understood you; that they applaud you doesn't guarantee you've said anything sensible either.

I don't see why one should have to choose between being an agitator and disappearing. You can speak to introduce a distinction, correct a mistake or acknowledge ignorance. The obligation to pronounce on everything, immediately and in the tone your audience demands, is a rather effective way of ceasing to think. I'm more interested in training attention than in managing indignation. And if you do intervene, you should be able to make uncomfortable even those who consider you one of their own. A community already has its spokespeople to tell it that it's always right.

8. The university and public schooling.

In Madrid people marched to demand more funding for public education, with banners against Isabel Díaz Ayuso. You teach at a public university. What can a professor do when his students occupy? And is the university still a place of conflict, or has it become a company that produces credits?

A professor can start by listening to his students without treating them either as minors or as infallible embodiments of the future. He can also explain what is being demanded, discuss the means and defend conditions that make teaching and studying possible. Supporting a demand doesn't oblige you to turn every decision of an assembly into a commandment. The capacity to dissent is part of what deserves to be defended.

I have criticized the university a great deal, but I have also pointed out a paradox: it's one of the few institutions where you can publicly criticize the institution that pays you without automatically losing your job. That margin matters. We shouldn't hand it over to those who present all teaching as a service and every student as a customer.

Academic bureaucratization pushes us to confuse learning with accumulating certifications. But I wouldn't idealize a university without standards, without assessment or without intellectual work either. Defending the public also means demanding that what we fund make sense. More resources are necessary when they're lacking; after that, we have to discuss how they are used. A university deserves to be defended because it allows us to study things whose value doesn't depend on their immediate profitability, even if sometimes the university itself needs to be reminded of that.

9. The European paradox.

The squares are young and often left-wing, while in many countries the ballot box rewards the radical right. How do you explain this rift? Are the squares the noisy minority of a generation, or the symptom of a crisis of representation that elections don't register?

The paradox appears when we assume that a generation has a single opinion and that those who protest represent it in full. Being young is not a political program. Two people can share

precarity and reach opposite conclusions about its causes and how to fix it. And those who vote for the right don't stop existing socially when they leave the polling station.

A square shows the intensity of a mobilization; an election counts preferences within a given range of options. Both matter, but they don't measure the same thing. It would be absurd to dismiss a demand because those who support it are a minority. But it would be just as absurd to credit it with an invisible majority every time it loses a vote.

In my assessment of 15M I pointed to its difficulty in seeing beyond the urban squares. That warning is still useful: what doesn't appear in our own milieu doesn't disappear from the country. If the left interprets every vote against it as a moral failing or media intoxication, it spares itself the effort of understanding who casts it. Insecurity can arouse solidarity, but also fear and a demand for authority. There is no escalator carrying us from discontent to the emancipator of the day. You have to persuade, organize and respond to concrete problems; being indignant about the election result is no substitute for any of these tasks.

10. A question for Italy.

From Tronti's *operaismo* to Negri's autonomism, Italy has produced a radical thought born of struggle. How much does this tradition matter to you? Is it still useful for reading the looting in Milan and today's blockades, or are the categories of the 1970s now unusable?

The Italian tradition matters, among other reasons, because it allows us to discuss Marxism through its internal conflicts instead of receiving it as a homogeneous catechism. But I wouldn't put Tronti and Negri in the same package. Paying attention to how struggles force capital to reorganize raises a very fertile question. Turning any social change into the announcement of an emancipatory subjectivity raises quite a few more problems.

I'm interested in testing those categories, not in inheriting the obligation to always prove them right. "Multitude" can open an inquiry or close it: it depends on whether it helps distinguish the relationships among those who act, or ends up becoming the solemn name for whatever group we happen to like. Grandiloquence doesn't improve because it's written in Italian, even if in Italian it does sound decidedly better.

To analyze a blockade, I would ask what circulation it interrupts, which workers take part in it, whom it hits and what bargaining power it produces. Analyzing a looting would require other questions. Neither phenomenon is explained by filing it under the heading of autonomy. The categories of the 1970s are useful if they help us recognize continuities as well as differences. When the present serves only to illustrate the author we already admired, we have turned inquiry into a ceremony of confirmation.

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