

**PRESERVING THE HUMAN MOMENT
(IN MEMORIAM FRANCISCO JAVIER PEÑAS)**

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(in memoriam Francisco Javier Peñas)

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We were sitting in a café close to the Opera. I had returned to Madrid for the IPSA conference in July 2012. The conference was on ‘power’, so I was kindly asked to come, but it was during my holidays. In the end Paco offered to host me, so I jumped at the chance of spending some time again with him, after many years and a single encounter of only some weeks in spring 2006. I had just arrived, and we were discussing European politics until the sun chased us away to lunch, only to pursue the exchange in the restaurant and later in his flat. In the wee small hours we had become embraced by that flat, which hosts some of the things he cherished most: cigarettes (smoke), books (ideas) and records (music). Not prone to idle talk, Paco’s questions and reflections led to *tours d’horizon* that were more sober updates on his multiple curiosities than some grandiloquent (dis)play of knowledge. I learned, but not by being taught.

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If there ever was a personification of the idea that theory and practical politics were not of a different nature, Paco was it. He clearly did theory not *in spite of* real-world politics, but *because* he cared so much about politics. However, he did not pursue just any type of theorising. Theory was never so important to him in its instrumental function, that is, in the empirical generalisations we elaborate to intervene in practice, like technicians following a set of instructions. Instead, he focused on its constitutive function, the analytical lenses that make us observers see one way rather than another and that cut the relevant ‘facts’ out of the flow of history. Many of his reflections therefore targeted the underlying assumptions, both philosophical and meta-theoretical, that give shade and focus to these lenses.¹ And, as his repeated reference to and use of the idea of ‘social imaginaries’ shows, he was clearly interested in the role these ideas play in the minds not only of the observer, but also of the practitioner, as well as the reflexivity between these two levels.² Thinking about theories and world views was not some armchair pastime, but a way of addressing an important and shaping component of our political reality.

¹ Francisco Javier Peñas, ‘Clío y Palas Atenea: Apuntes sobre el papel constitutivo de la Historia en la Teoría de Relaciones Internacionales’, *Relaciones Internacionales*, no. 37 (2018), pp. 59–93 (67).

² See, for example, Francisco Javier Peñas, ‘Camino de perfección: el imaginario social liberal de las relaciones internacionales’, *Relaciones Internacionales*, no. 20 (2012), pp. 31–61 (36–37).

These social imaginaries, less abstract and more historically conceived than Alexander Wendt's cultures of anarchy,³ are the web of meaning within which international politics is understood, the shared background constituted by and constituting the practices of world politics at a certain point of time. This, in turn, has implications for Paco's understanding of the role of theory. Thus, the balance of power is not some observational concept or mechanism for understanding the dynamics of world politics, but the historically evolved practice that needs to be understood by the actors in order to function in the first place and that, in turn, the observers need to understand in those actors.⁴ What is normal and legitimate behaviour is not given by some eternal ethics, but by the always negotiated normative references of the day. They can display some coherence, and for this it is crucial to understand the social environment of the analysis, the specific historical configuration that makes up *international society*, and potentially *civilisation*, at a certain point in time.⁵ In short, for Paco, international relations are historically circumscribed social relations in which common understandings, rules and institutions develop. This means that the analysis cannot just take these social relations for granted but needs to investigate their historical origins and evolution, as well as the changing boundaries and self-understandings of the society thereby constituted.⁶

This made him open in principle to constructivism in international theory, in particular those versions that insist on relational and processual ontologies.⁷ Such ontologies provide lenses with which we invariably see any unit in a web of recognition that defines its properties. And we insist on the constitution of things, rather than on their fixed being, which explains why the literature has been filled with so many gerunds (e.g. othering, gendering, securitising, racialising). Indeed, politics is constituted by these processes of drawing these lines. Within this, Paco explicitly included the performative or interactive effect of language.⁸

Yet, much of his inspiration also comes from elsewhere, in particular classical realism and the English School. I suggest that there are two main reasons for this. First, Paco had a relatively state-centric focus in his vision of international affairs. This was not to deny the importance of other actors, but he insisted on the state, its national communities and the international society of states being the locus of politics in a stronger sense. This state-focus may also be connected to his understanding of the identity of the discipline of IR. The traditionalism of the

³ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴ Something Morgenthau's general approach understood so well, though his theory tended to deny it. See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948).

⁵ Francisco Javier Peñas, 'Estándar de civilización. Las historias de las relaciones internacionales', *Revista Jurídica Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*, no. 1 (1999), pp. 83–117.

⁶ Francisco Javier Peñas, 'Derechos humanos e imaginarios sociales modernos. Un enfoque desde las relaciones internacionales', *Isegoría*, vol. 51, no. julio-diciembre (2014), pp. 545–574 (557), which refers to Bourdieu's theorisation.

⁷ Peñas, 'Clío y Palas Atenea: Apuntes sobre el papel constitutivo de la Historia en la Teoría de Relaciones Internacionales', p. 62; Francisco Javier Peñas, '¿Es posible una teoría de Relaciones Internacionales?', *Relaciones Internacionales*, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1–32 (22).

⁸ Peñas, '¿Es posible una teoría de Relaciones Internacionales?', p. 3.

classical realists spoke to him in this regard. The other reason is more connected with a kind of closet liberalism (understood as progressivism) he claimed was often present in constructivism. Paco was a sceptic at heart, almost viscerally so: nothing would provoke his sarcasm more than yet another pipedream of progress forgetting its flipside,⁹ another grandiose monocausal explanation,¹⁰ some linear histories and processes¹¹ – all the facile and illusionary solutions of the dimwit, the ideologue or the naïve. Whatever humanity may have achieved it is never given, but always in flux, always potentially on the verge of being undermined. There is no time to rest on one's laurels. Paco's eyes would immediately start looking for the turns of fate threatening the respite that a temporarily positive evolution has given us, not with the superior eyes of the ever-prepared cynic, but with the anxiety of the pessimist.

Such sceptical attitudes informed his ambivalent relation to modernity. He strongly resisted the attempt to read the world wars and the Holocaust as aberrations of modernity. For him, they were part of it (and, like Nietzsche, he did not say this with a sense of joy or priggish achievement). As Raymond Aron had earlier remarked, the ultimate cause of the 'disillusion with progress' stems from modernity itself, namely from what he called 'the *Promethean ambition*, an ambition, to use Descartes' formulation, to master and own nature through science and technology.'¹²

This also touches the liberalism that cannot be so easily distinguished from (European, Western) modernity. Paco's theorisation of the state system insists not only on its social character and its specific modern social imaginary. He also stressed that this European or Western international society was constituted by its encounters with other civilisations.¹³ In doing so, he pushed the post-structural critique further. Rob Walker had argued that the external relations of states in the European society of states are not just defined by the absence of government, to be overcome through the increasing evolution of the international. Rather, this 'outside' was constitutive of the 'inside' of the states themselves, and of our respective reflections on it.¹⁴ Similarly, for Paco, the multiplicity of civilisations was not just some external encounter with an outside waiting for a mission, to be educated and brought into the same temporality ('modernised'), but constitutive of the very European society of states, here seen as the 'inside'. And, like Walker, he sees in liberalism the particular solution that modernity found for its underlying

⁹ Francisco Javier Peñas, *Hermanos y enemigos. Liberalismo y relaciones internacionales* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2003).

¹⁰ Peñas, 'Clío y Palas Atenea: Apuntes sobre el papel constitutivo de la Historia en la Teoría de Relaciones Internacionales', p. 62.

¹¹ Peñas, 'Camino de perfección: el imaginario social liberal de las relaciones internacionales', pp. 56–57.

¹² Raymond Aron, *Les désillusions du progrès. Essai sur la dialectique de la modernité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 287.

¹³ Peñas, 'Estándar de civilización. Las historias de las relaciones internacionales'.

¹⁴ R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International relations as political theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

universalism and the actual particularism of world politics, organised in different communities and civilisations.

Yet, this critique of liberalism and modernity does not end there. Paco certainly did not accept teleologies of any kind, but similarly, he did not acquiesce in the mirror image of an 'eternal return'.¹⁵ The determinacy of progress was not to be exchanged for the determinacy of endless historical cycles. The problem with the creed in progress was not the possibility of positive change, which surely exists, but the faith in its inevitability. He opposed the eschatology of Heaven, as well as of Hell, on Earth. History is contingent. It is important in this regard that history did not become for him a static reservoir from which to cherry-pick convenient pieces that suit the story one prefers. When he turned to history, it was to acquire a strongly reflexive contextualisation of our knowledge and social practices. A recourse to history (and History), in its contingency, ends up undermining certitudes, not confirming them. It shows a resistance to what Alfred Hirschman, citing Flaubert, referred to as 'la rage de vouloir conclure', that is, the desperate will to make a final point that forces closure upon an open and plural social world.¹⁶ Paco's invitation to us is to be wary of human hubris.¹⁷

And if Paco did not share the certitude of liberalism's universalism (a line that actually has something in common with, say, the early Frankfurt School and Habermas), he had the same critical mindset as that launched by the Enlightenment. He may not have shared Kant's political theory, but he based his very approach on a neo-Kantian understanding of knowledge, where concepts are the condition for the possibility of knowledge and where there is a reality independent of our thought, but not our understanding of it, and where humans act on the basis of their vision of that reality, which includes themselves.¹⁸ Reality comes with no meaning-tag attached. And he gives it a twist that is not unusual in our lineage from the late nineteenth century. In a world without God, Descartes' proud dictum 'cogito, ergo sum' has turned into a far more hesitant 'dubito, ergo sum', a principle Paco lived by. Reason is applied again and again to itself – it never succeeds being written with a capital R. It is itself historical.¹⁹ Scepticism becomes here another stage in a more reflexive modernity.

In his ambivalence towards modernity and his refusal to go for easy solutions, Paco sometimes invokes the myth of Sisyphus.²⁰ Rather than referring to the mere condemnation of seeing one's efforts fail time and time again, I suggest that he

¹⁵ Peñas, 'Clío y Palas Atenea: Apuntes sobre el papel constitutivo de la Historia en la Teoría de Relaciones Internacionales', p. 86.

¹⁶ Albert O. Hirschman, 'The Search for Paradigms as a Hindrance to Understanding', *World Politics*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1970), pp. 329–43 (335).

¹⁷ This wariness is surely one of the reasons that realist foreign policy's insistence on *prudence*, which Paco endorsed, is received well beyond realism.

¹⁸ Peñas, 'Clío y Palas Atenea: Apuntes sobre el papel constitutivo de la Historia en la Teoría de Relaciones Internacionales', pp. 82, 86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91, Peñas, 'Camino de perfección: el imaginario social liberal de las relaciones internacionales', p. 58. Other constructivists have a similar reference. See Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Why Sisyphus is Happy: Reflections on the "Third Debate" and on Theorizing as a Vocation', *The Sejong Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1995), pp. 3–35.

comes close to Albert Camus' rendering of that myth.²¹ Camus used it to introduce his view of the 'absurd'. What makes our human lives absurd, in his eyes, is not the mere idea that there is no ultimate meaning to our lives. Instead, the absurd exists in the sense of lost meaning that is concomitant with the continuing aspiration to human harmony. Camus derives from this an ethics not to deny either side of the tension. Camus' book goes through the for him deceptive 'solutions' that either exist in the various forms of denying the meaninglessness of our existence, which Paco would see in some liberal lapses, or in the denial of our quest for harmony, as celebrated by versions of nihilism or cynicism, which E.H. Carr famously criticised in realism.²² Consequently, the sceptical existentialist needs to live out the tension and achieve happiness through it ('il faut penser Sisyphe heureux'), assuming his or her fate. There is no sentimentalism of the tragic. Paco would have been just as much annoyed by the romantic who basks in a self-anointed sense of tragedy as impatient (Italian *insofferente*) with the cynic's smugness, ultimately self-centered, and intellectually and politically sterile.

In this context, Paco chose a vocation as a teacher. Although we may not be able to get to *the* truth, we can get rid of many myths and deceits, as he put it.²³ Some teach to tell us where to go, others to tell us not to forget. For all his at times blunt directness, he was ultimately humbled when confronted with the positive sides of the human heritage of ideas and deeds. For a person who did not easily come to universalisms, there was a drive to document and preserve – and, why not, enjoy – what humanity had been able to achieve in terms of the good and the beautiful, even though another self-made calamity will surely strike it. At least, the human spirit bids defiance to fate. In his teaching and mentoring, as well as through this journal, he sought to preserve a space in which we could all contribute to this archive, so that the next piece of human stupidity or ill-will does not make us forget the moments in which a worthy humanity did actually materialise.

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It was this ever-unfinished archive that embraced us when we were in his flat, an archive of ideas and (musical) harmonies, memories of many conversations, of sharing, person to person, a world we ultimately do not understand, but still make sense of, together. Here, as elsewhere, he would show his generosity to those he liked or who shared his particular quest for meaning, forever unattainable and yet forever repeated in the moments when the good and beautiful could appear together with a feeling of human togetherness.

²¹ Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe. Essai sur l'absurde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).

²² Edward Heller Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1946).

²³ Peñas, 'Clío y Palas Atenea: Apuntes sobre el papel constitutivo de la Historia en la Teoría de Relaciones Internacionales', p. 85.

When Camus moved beyond his Myth of Sisyphus, it was a turn towards solidarity: 'Je me révolte, donc nous sommes'. In *La Peste*, Camus gives us a story of the values of solidarity and generosity which can guide people in a world without God. He describes a city decimated by a plague.²⁴ Bernard Rieux, a medical doctor, finds a helper in Jean Tarrou. The book follows the two in their attempt to contain the spread of the contagious and mortal disease, even though it ultimately escapes their control. They work themselves to exhaustion over days and months that just seem to repeat themselves, a mere record of deaths. On All Saints Day, when the disease seems to have passed its peak, they sit on a terrace at night after a full day. They hear, not for the first time, the shots that stop desperate inhabitants from leaving the quarantined city. Tired, yet feeling the sea breeze, Tarrou suddenly suggests to Rieux that they use their *laisser-passer* to have a night swim on the beach. They take the car and reach a sea lit by the moon. Taking off all their clothes, they dive into the water still lukewarm from the summer. They swim next to each other, silently sharing a special moment of common humanity. When a cold current reaches them the moment ceases, and they return to the beach and to their duty in the town. I like to imagine Paco as one of them.

²⁴ Albert Camus, *La peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

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