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Ferrater Mora: political ideas

Josep–Maria Terricabras

Faculty of Letters, University of Girona
Institute of Catalan Studies
josepm.terrabras@udg.edu

abstract

This paper proposes that although Ferrater Mora was never militantly political, his writing reveals an enduring interest in the relationship between Europe, Spain and Catalonia and a belief that their relations should adopt a federal design. The paper also examines Ferrater Mora’s opinions and feelings about the Catalan language beyond the use of it his circumstances obliged him to make.

key words

Josep Ferrater Mora, politics.

Josep Ferrater Mora was born in his home in carrer de la Princesa in Barcelona on 30 October 1912. In his early youth he boarded at the school El Collell, near Girona, and after returning to Barcelona to complete his secondary education he eventually read philosophy at university. He was only twenty-three when in 1935 he published his first slim book of essays, *Cóctel de verdad* (‘A True Cocktail’ — or alternatively, ‘A Cocktail of Truths’), which by his own account was very much “the book of an adolescent” that he soon regretted writing. But although the style is rough, *Cóctel* contains a revealing passage on what Ferrater Mora calls “my non-transferable definition of me”. There, he describes (not particularly concisely) his distinguishing features, which include his physical appearance, abilities, tastes and feelings. And although he argues that self-portraits should not disclose one’s political views, somewhere between the adolescent flourishes and cryptic observations he drops this short paragraph into the text:

Politics. Who said I was a political sceptic? Who can say politics doesn’t make me buzz inside? How can I be an enemy of politics if I am a friend of science?¹

1 *Política. ¿Quién ha dicho que soy escéptico en política? ¿Quién ha dicho que la política no me hace vibrar intensamente? Yo no puedo ser enemigo de la política, porque soy amigo de la ciencia.*

We know nothing more about Ferrater Mora's political interests during this early period, even though his departure for France at the end of the Civil War suggests the ideological position he had adopted and would maintain for the rest of his life. But it was in the United States that he began to publish his thoughts on Catalonia, Spain and Europe, and this is the period I will now address, examining his work chronologically so as to follow his particular intellectual progress.

Ferrater Mora's first book on politics was the very short *España y Europa* ('Spain and Europe'), published in 1942. A comparative study, it describes each territory and then argues that while Europe can be defined by its interest in history and its acceptance of reason as a driving principle of life, Spain has rejected history and taken refuge in the driest, most rigid and most backward-looking form of traditionalism. Spain is not modern, he proposes, precisely because it will not live according to reason and instead insists on being led by passion alone, reducing history to an always intense act of living that centres on itself and feeds on what is around it. While Europe is moved by ideas, Spain is controlled by ideals which constantly drive it to disproportionate levels of action. This, he argues, is why Spain has been dominated by violence: because it is not so much a nation or state as an attitude. And from this first brief monograph, written over seventy years ago, one passage is particularly forward-looking:

The violence with which Spaniards have attempted to impose upon Spain a particular way of life is not actually the logical result of an allegiance to a culture or belief system; rather, it is the result of an attitude that is prepared to bend every other race, language or creed to its will and is capable of doing whatever it must to convince the rest of the world that the Spanish race, language and creed are unique.²

Twenty years later and as I shall discuss below, Ferrater Mora would admit that the tone of this book was rather lofty and he would be right, even though he continued to have the same basic opinions. And two years later, in 1944, these opinions led him to write his first detailed political analysis of Catalonia in *Les formes de la vida catalana* ('The Character of Catalan Life'), which together with his *Diccionario de Filosofía* ('Dictionary of Philosophy') became the writer's most widely read work (note that the *Diccionario*, which was first published in 1941 in just one volume, had by 1979 been extended to fill four volumes and was published in its sixth edition).

2 *La violencia con que cualquier español ha querido imponer a España una forma de vida no es, consiguientemente, el resultado de una adscripción a una determinada cultura o a una determinada creencia en cuanto tales; es el resultado de esa actitud que está dispuesta a españolizar cualquier raza, cualquier lengua o cualquier creencia y que está dispuesta, además, a hacer creer que esta raza, esta lengua o esta creencia son las únicas posibles en el mundo. (España y Europa, p. 35.)*

In *Les formes* Ferrater Mora outlined the four essential features of Catalan character: continuity, common sense, measure and irony (the influence on him of the writer and philosopher Eugeni d'Ors was particularly notable). As he maintained even up to the time of the series of lectures titled *Un sistema obert* ('An Open System') that he gave at the Universitat de Girona in 1989 (as the first guest speaker of the newly-created Ferrater Mora Chair), these were not the only features of Catalan character. They might also define Catalans as much in their absence as by their presence. Features or virtues, even, they were essentially four 'rules of thumb' that could describe the Catalan way of being. It wasn't that the Catalans themselves could lay claim to them or possess them in any specific way; rather, and to use Bergson's expression, they were a description of tendency. (Thirty years later in 1979, in the speech he gave on receiving an honorary degree from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Ferrater Mora also referred to four "tendencies", "attitudes" or "traits" in Catalan philosophy that had a "feeling of family" about them — a passing nod to Wittgenstein — and that were, namely, loyalty to reality, contractual predisposition, professionalism, and the desire for clarity. He also conceded that these could be seen as analogous with the four features he had described decades earlier.)

In the year of 1944 *Les formes* was published, in Ferrater Mora's own words, "together with a humble Spanish translation". Since then the Catalan text has gone through several revisions (1955, 1960, 1972, and 1980) and the Spanish translation has been revised twice (1963 and 1967), although the text has generally reappeared not on its own but in Ferrater Mora anthologies alongside other essays on similar subjects (note that Ferrater constantly revised much of his work, both in his writing on philosophy and his discursive essays).

The second Spanish edition of *Les formes* was published in 1963 in the book *Tres mundos: Cataluña, España, Europa* ('Three Worlds: Catalonia, Spain, Europe'). *Tres mundos* contains six chapters, of which five are relevant to the present paper. The chapter of *Les formes* is the longest and contains a new introduction in which Ferrater Mora refers directly to two seminal works that had appeared between the first Catalan edition of *Les formes* of 1944 and this second Spanish edition: *Notícia de Catalunya* ('News from Catalonia') by Jaume Vicens Vives, published in 1954, and *Nosaltres, els valencians* ('We, the Valencians') by Joan Fuster, published in 1962. In the second book, Joan Fuster had in some way recovered the title Vicens Vives had originally planned to give his book, which was *Nosaltres, els catalans* ('We, the Catalans'). Ferrater Mora also makes two things clear in his introduction to the chapter. First, he warns us that his analysis of Catalan character is in no way intended to be comprehensive and that his conclusions may not be the only ones or even the best ones (his vision, he says, is simply "one amongst other possible visions", not because it is "merely subjective" but because it is "selective"). Second, he considers that

his view “complements” the analyses made by Vicens Vives and Fuster. Indeed, it was Vicens Vives who noted that this expressed “a consciousness of being within a generation”. Finally, it should also be noted that the introduction reveals no significant changes in Ferrater Mora’s attitude towards the essay itself or the concepts he uses in it.

From the beginning of his exile and fully aware of the disastrous consequences of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, Ferrater Mora had already found it necessary to reflect upon the complex relationship between Catalonia, Spain and Europe. He did not choose this subject because he had in some way become fixed by the paralysing potential of these events, but because he believed that an analysis of the past could help us understand the present and negotiate the future. (Note that much later in his life Ferrater Mora refused to write his memoirs, even though he was asked to do this many times.) He had no desire to contemplate the past for its own sake but saw it as an instrument by which to gain understanding about life. Some of these historical and political essays can be found in several different volumes and in a number of versions, again reflecting the writer’s habit of very rarely declaring a work complete.

As suggested above, although Ferrater Mora revised many of his essays, their basic premise did not vary. This is particularly true of another of the chapters in *Tres mundos*, “España y Europa veinte años después” (‘Spain and Europe Twenty Years After’) There, he starts by condemning the style of his writing in 1942 as “frankly unbearable”, “rickety” and “rhetorically verbose” (“just reading my marred production made me more and more irritated”) but concludes that, so many years later, he still agrees with the general lines he set out in that essay and he intends to reflect on the three separate worlds of Catalonia, Spain and Europe and build bridges between them.

And beyond the philosopher’s own critique of his heavy-handed discursive style, we should bear in mind the especially keen vision he had of the world around him and the manner in which he always preserved this: that years later, for example, he would continue to warn readers of the dangers of provincialism and self-isolation (the shunning of others’ company), which he saw as much as a threat to the Catalans as to the Spanish. This, he argued, made it all the more important to build bridges across the divide to Europe; this, very clearly, was behind his conviction that the only future for Catalonia and Spain was a future in Europe and in Europe as a federation.

Ferrater Mora did not support the cause for independence and neither was he a nationalist: his family and intellectual tradition as well as the terrible political and social experience that had just taken place in an extraordinarily hostile and belligerent world did not prompt him towards either of these political positions. (It is not easy to understand that his first book, published

in 1935 in the midst of an atmosphere of severe regulation, was written in Spanish and carried the cryptic dedication “To the memory of Eugenio d’Ors, champion of culture who fell in the line of duty”³). Although time has proved him wrong, Ferrater believed that separatism and nationalism were about to become obsolete, moribund ideologies and remnants of a century that was already dead and buried. His deep-seated aversion to political self-declaration (his earliest text) and his intellectual openness encouraged him to share with many other, mostly leftwing Catalan intellectuals of his generation a vision of politics and territory that was based on federalism. It had nothing to do with the “third Spain” which Josep Pla proposes, the position he defended in the literary portrait he wrote of Ferrater Mora (in the second series of his *Homenots*, in which he addressed different intellectual figures); and this is especially true if we attempt to base such a case, as Pla did, on Ferrater Mora’s proposal in *Les formes* that one of the four features of Catalan identity was *seny* or ‘common sense’. Ferrater did not believe in adjusting or patching up the cloth of his country in one way or another for more or less well-intended reasons; for him, Europe had to be cut fairly and squarely across federal lines, and Spain within Europe had to do the same, divesting itself of its centralist, authoritarian and enforced Castilian character.

For this reason, the project of an integrating federalism did not strike Ferrater as being in any way the escape route from some more difficult political path. His pro-Catalan feeling clearly defended Catalonia as a nation and he frequently used the term the Països Catalans. And if there was still any doubt, he dispelled this in his essay “Unidad y pluralidad” (‘Unity and Plurality’), which in 1965 was included in the book *Esa gente de España...* (These People of Spain...) alongside essays by such prestigious thinkers as Raúl Morodo, Sergio Vilar or Américo Castro. (Note that In his own article, by contrast, Américo Castro spoke about the “Spanish people” of the XVIIIth. century!) It was also clear that the federalism Ferrater supported would have to respect the Catalan nation, as reflected in his observations on language. And here we need to distinguish clearly between his specific personal experience — forced by the circumstances of a painful linguistic exile — and his intellectual position towards the subject in general terms.

Ferrater Mora’s militancy regarding language matters can be clearly exemplified in three specific moments in his writing, which I shall now consider to conclude this paper. These moments are curious because, at least initially, they seem to conflict with the writer’s interest in defending the Catalan language. The first comes in a letter written on 22 May 1951 to Joan Oliver (*Joc de cartes*, [‘Card Game’] p. 59), where Ferrater Mora had this to say:

The truth be told, you'll be tempted to wonder at the number of mistakes I make in Catalan but what you should actually be impressed by is the resilience of the language: remember, after all, that I sometimes spend months without speaking or reading it.⁴

The second moment comes in 1960 in the preface to his book *Una mica de tot* ('A Little Bit of Everything'), where Ferrater acknowledged that he was an author who had to assume a number of different linguistic identities:

There exists in this day and age a certain type of writer or thinker who can be basically defined as 'disinherited' and I am one of these. I must also add that I do not find this deplorable: no longer having a language of one's own is not necessarily the same as no longer having any language at all; it might also be that you have a number of languages and in a world like ours, which is becoming more universal every day, this may not actually be a bad thing.⁵

Finally, the third moment is in 1966, when the writer Joan Fuster published in *Destino* a critique of Ferrater's book *La filosofia en el món d'avui* ('Philosophy in Today's World') titled "Ferrater Mora y sus filósofos" ('Ferrater Mora and his Philosophers'). There, Fuster remembers that Ferrater has pursued his scholarly career in philosophy and language outside Catalonia and, after citing the passage from *Una mica de tot* recorded just above ("There exists [...] a bad thing."), he goes on to formulate in somewhat complicated and ambiguous terms the idea that Ferrater "must lament this resolve to 'not form part'" of the common work. In fact, Fuster used "the case of Ferrater" as an excuse to address an issue that went and still goes beyond any single individual and that is becoming a worrying feature of our culture. For this reason Fuster — who positively reviews Ferrater's rigor, acuity and clarity of thought — recognises that perhaps the philosopher here should have been as plurilingual as the philosopher there. But although he poses the question he does not pursue matters any further and will neither condemn nor forgive his subject because, as he argues, the issue is a much too complex one.

Here, then, are three moments which might not only appear to be apologies for Ferrater's 'disinherited' circumstances but might also be used to demonstrate Ferrater's disinterest in language and his disregard for Catalan. But nothing could be further from the truth, I would argue. Indeed, beyond his personal circumstances Ferrater defended the importance of the Catalan language as if it were the fifth feature of Catalan life. In a passage in the es-

4 *La veritat és que, en lloc de sorprendre't —com estaràs temptat de fer-ho— de l'abundor de les meves faltes en català, hauries d'admirar la persistència de la llengua. Pensa que passo mesos sencers sense parlar-lo o llegir-lo. (Joc de cartes, p. 59.)*

5 *Hi ha avui una certa mena d'escriptors i de pensadors que poden ser qualificats d'essencialment «destrats»; jo en sóc un exemple. He d'afegir que no ho deploro. No tenir ja una llengua «pròpia» no vol dir necessàriament no tenir cap llengua; pot voler dir tenir-ne vàries. En un món cada dia més universal com el nostre no és pas mala solució. (Una mica de tot, 1960, prefaci, p. 9.)*

say “Conreu de la llengua” (‘A Harvest of Language’) from the book *Catalanització de Catalunya* (‘The Catalanisation of Catalonia’) he demonstrated this briefly, clearly and unmistakably:

My thesis is as follows: Catalan personality can only manifest itself in its most complete form through its language. When the language takes a step back, the character wilts and becomes spoiled; it becomes flawed, and is an impediment to the essential way of being that is Catalan. What is Catalan ceases to be so. And to those who would ask what tragedy there is in this I would reply: there would none if in ceasing to be Catalan or in being less so, Catalan did not also simply cease to be.⁶

It is true that Ferrater never offered a declaration of his political principles in systematic or theoretical terms but he did not do this in other areas of his thought, either (in his preoccupation with aesthetics, for example). And it cannot be denied that, intellectually speaking, he clearly shared the progressive views of his pro-Catalan contemporaries and a commitment to the cause of Europe which, unfortunately, has still not borne its fruit. Indeed, we should remember that later in life, his condition for accepting an invitation to enter the Spanish university community was that the teaching staff who had been expelled by the Franco regime in 1965 should be readmitted.

Ferrater Mora never returned to Catalonia but, in a certain sense, he never left the country, either. Even today, his writing still provides a beacon for those who attempt to walk down paths of democracy and progress, just as it shines back on other paths we might once have taken but that in the course of history became closed.

Translation from Catalan by Barnaby Noone

6 *La meua tesi és: la personalitat catalana pot manifestar-se amb plenitud només per mitjà de la seva llengua. Quan aquesta reula, l'altra es marceix, es malmet, es vicia, retrocedeix la manera de ser pròpia de Catalunya. El català deixa de ser català. ¿Direm que, després de tot, això no és tan deplorable? No ho seria si, en deixar de ser català, o en ser-ne menys, el català no deixés també simplement de ser.* (*Catalanització de Catalunya*, “Conreu de la llengua”, 1960.)

