

## ■ memoirs

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## eports from lectures given by Joan Crexells at the University of Salamanca in 1921

Josep Pla<sup>1</sup>

Josep Pla had already met Crexells before the two men set off in 1921 for Salamanca by way of Madrid. They had started work at the Spanish-language Barcelona daily newspaper *La Publicidad* on the same day, under the direction of Romà Jori. Jori had given Pla the task of reporting for the paper on the philosophy lectures that Crexells was to give at the University of Salamanca. Pla's descriptions of the journey's events, which appear in his journal *Madrid 1921*, portray Crexells as a very educated young man, who was highly conversant with European culture and never gave himself over to intellectual laziness. When Pla and Crexells arrived in Salamanca, Unamuno took them on a tour of the university and other sites of interest. During their stay, Crexells found it impossible to get a word in edgewise on the subject of philosophy with Unamuno, who as rector of the University of Salamanca was fixated on the only two matters apparently of concern to the man at that time: Madrid politics and poetry. It was Unamuno himself who, in a hushed voice, introduced Crexells to the assembled audience. Pla, seated at the back of the hall, heard hardly any of the introduction. Based on the Crexells lectures, Pla wrote two lengthy reports. For the lectures themselves, Pla moved to a seat in the front row. Between him and Professor Noguera sat Unamuno, who was demonstrably impressed by the youth and talent of Crexells.

The reports written by Pla for the *La Publicidad* are confusing, convoluted and riddled with errors. Nonetheless, they remain a document of considerable value. Crexells, after paying tribute to his hosts and to his audience, turned to his work on the latest currents in German philosophy, which he had studied during his time in Berlin. His first lecture attested to the need to eliminate reductionist prejudices that restrict our understanding of the phenomenon of culture, while his second lecture sketched out the current panorama of philosophy with uncommon clarity and made an extraordinary effort to cast Scholasticism in a fresh light. Scholasticism still played a dominant role in the university chairs of Spain and certainly, in that distant year of 1921, Crexells still guarded secret hopes of one day rising to fill one of those chairs.

[Sílvia Gómez Soler]

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1 *La Publicidad* 8-III-1921 (evening edition, p. 1) and 11-III-1921 (evening edition, p. 1).

## Crexells's first lecture at Salamanca: the meaning of modern culture

In his introduction to Crexells, Professor Noguera evoked the pre-eminence of the lecturer in Berlin. Crexells, for the other Spaniards in the German capitol, served as a spiritual guide.

Then Crexells took the podium to speak.

Our friend saluted Salamanca, the spirit of that ancient city of learning, and extolled his contact with this spirit, paying tribute to Miguel de Unamuno, with whom his dealings, as Crexells put it, showed Unamuno to be an infinitely more complex, more provocative and more subversive spirit than anyone might imagine.

Then Crexells launched into his subject, dispelling its apparent obscurity with remarks on the division drawn since the eighteenth century between Culture and Nature. In addition to Nature and the Natural Sciences, which are the ones studied by the being crucified in space and time, there is Culture and its sciences, which are studied by an unreal reality, that which is the spirit situated in time and outside space.

Crexells analysed the factors that come into play in the spiritual phenomenon of the Word in order to reinforce his dualist position, citing Maragall. The Word has an expressive, physical significance. And it has a significant value – the truth or falsehood of a word – which is a construct of culture.

Going into greater depth, Crexells demonstrated that this analysis serves to free us from what a modern philosopher has called the prejudice in favour of the real, which consists in the absurd proposition that all objects to which we can refer in speech must necessarily yield to translation in terms of Physics or Psychology.

Once this hurdle of monism is overcome, the truth of the dualist position can be seen more sharply by examining the objects of various sciences. History, for example.

The real portion of History's object is infinitesimal. History is a science that studies a tissue of ideal relations, with a foundation in reality. These relations cannot be translated into the terms of Physics. The same can be said of Mathematics as well. Only an arbitrary realism or contradictory empiricism can think of numbers as realities.

In addition, without the justification of the ideal, it would be impossible to speak of moral ideals. Things, in their aspect of reality, do not belong to any moral system: they are simply real or unreal, not good or bad. Goodness and evil come about only when their meaning is compared to the degree with which they fulfil an ideal system. The contrary case is called fetishism.

Nor is it possible without the justification of the ideal to build an aesthetics. Aesthetics disappears when its object can be translated in terms of Psychology or Physics.

After clarifying these matters, it is possible to begin speaking of the thing that is “culture”, which is composed of these ideal, not real, elements of being.

Prejudices that arise in reflections on culture: the view that there is only a single line of culture that is distinguishable by degrees. In a word, the prejudice of progress.

The chief merit of Spengler, the author of the work *The Decline of the West*, which has recently appeared in Germany and which Creixells has discussed in *La Publicidad*, lies precisely in showing the possibility of interpreting history as a series of cultural processes that do not inform one another, so that each culture pursues a given development until its most deep-seated motives disappear and no one else inherits them.

Another prejudice to avoid is reducing the process of culture – which is complex and made up of divergent elements – to a moral progress of humanity. This is the Kantian prejudice.

From this point, Creixells drew on some words of Goethe to establish the enormous complexity of the phenomenon of culture. This is a complexity that nonetheless enables us to distinguish two factors in the concept of culture: an object to which we refer and the subjective function that drives our reference to a thing.

Through the crack opened up by this distinction, Creixells proceeded to the heart of his lecture, noting that the tendency in the cultural attitude of modern man, unlike the cultural attitude of his classical counterpart, is to merge into the culture, to take greater interest in the subjective elements of the subject-object dualism within culture than in its objective elements.

Then Creixells went on to support this idea with evidence, singling out crucial moments when such an interest becomes apparent.

First, the interest in history, viewed not as the act of adopting an attitude of curiosity toward what has been left behind by the centuries, but as the taking of a suitable stance to uncover how the individual and social subjects of history viewed their things.

This interest entails the smallest, but no less intense, interest in biography.

Related to this point, there is in the modern sensibility a special taste for unfinished things, for torsos. In works of art, this sensibility wants to see the effort, the passion, the furrowed brow of the artist. This explains the desire for the subjective, which is not found in the finished work because the fact of its being finished makes it entirely independent of its creator.

This also explains the predominance of music in modern culture as opposed to the predominance of sculpture in ancient culture.

Another feature of modern culture is a certain tendency toward originality. This can be explained by the fact that what is objective, both real and ideal, is the patrimony of all, it is something vulgar. Works that are original and unique, works that cannot genuinely be reproduced or communicated – these are subjective phenomena.

In addition, there is a tendency in modern culture to put greater trust in intuition than in intelligence, for the reproduction of reality. And however hard it may be to believe, this tendency comes to us from the North, from Goethe, from the grand Romantic systems of the Germans, and it has been systematized in Bergson.

This tendency is perceptible in morality, too. The predominance of Kantian morality enthrones subjectivity. We are constantly told that acting according to an external code, according to a traditional system, is legality, not morality.

Moreover, the talk is constantly of Life. Life is the word in vogue. The demand is that art be alive, that it goes hand in hand with the period, that science has a life-affirming value, that anti-vitalist morality is inhuman. This word Life is used today to a degree and to an extent that has never before been greater. The truth is that since Goethe everything of Life is a divine thing anointed with religiosity. The preponderance of the notion of Life is simply the possibility of being in direct contact with a consciousness, awakening its deepest subjective resources.

Crexells alluded to Spengler's work when he said that this tendency [of modern man] toward subjectivity, in opposition to the objectivity of his classical counterpart, explains why there has been no communication between the two cultures. They have both come about organically. Both have been born and both have matured. Classical culture has died. Our culture will go on until roughly the year 2200. A revolt against this state of affairs in the name of rejuvenation is futile.

Crexells took Spengler's conclusions as they must be taken, i.e. with a certain sense of irony, and moved on to summarize that the tendency of modern man toward subjectivity is an ethical tendency, in opposition to the ethics of his classical counterpart, which was objective and essentially aesthetic. The objective provokes contemplation. The subjective is a spur to action. Ultimately, Greek morality is about beauty, elegance. Modern beauty is closely bound up with certain moral interests.

In his conclusion, Crexells refuted the materialist interpretation of History, a truly powerful source of objection to any dualist philosophy.

He stated that this doctrine emerged remotely from the hands of the theoreticians of capitalism. And now it is pushed by capitalists and Marxists alike, who deny the existence of a disinterested life beyond economics.

In response to the fact that recent history has not followed the Marxist path, in response to Berstein's revisionism, which attempts to unite socialism with Kantian philosophy in order to define history according to ideal elements, in response to the failure of Marxism to explain any fact of culture, in response to all of this, Crexells said: "Even if economic materialism were right, it would be unjust".

Crexells closed the lecture with a reminder of that tragic scene from George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*. The son of an armaments manufacturer fights his father, because the business is repugnant to him and he wants to devote his life to politics.

Crexells also spoke of another tragedy, the one of the businessman who becomes imprisoned by phantoms – ghosts of gold – that he himself has created. And next to the unlimited power that we have given to gold, there is the power that we have given to another spectre, the stomach.

A "dictatorship" against capital, but also a "dictatorship" against the stomach in order to ascertain the principle of freedom and, ultimately, of potency in the creation of new works – that is what Crexells seeks.

The "dictatorships" of capital and of the stomach are injustices. And even if these "dictatorships", which are mechanical or biological, are things that we cannot rid ourselves of, they do not therefore cease to be the more unjust.

## Crexells's second lecture at Salamanca: the rebirth of Scholasticism

If the first lecture of Crexells was good, the second lecture, in which he improvised, fully demonstrated the youthful doctor in his philosophical calling, advancing an idea of how rich with life, interest and refinement his tenure will be as a professor.

Crexells has a way of speaking that I find captivating. His oratory, with its hint of urgency, slowly builds without great shifts in pitch, creating as he goes. It is all as little Roman as anyone could wish, but it is closer to our own sensibility. The composed, academic orator and the chatterbox orator, who goes on like a parrot, such as the young do when they start off, I find utterly abhorrent.

Crexells talked about the rebirth of Scholasticism. Pursuing this theme, which does not seem interesting at first glance and which we might even say has no interest for us at all, Crexells did nothing less than advance a highly personal

synthesis of the doctrines and directions currently at the cutting edge of philosophy. An articulate, clear and profound synthesis.

Crexells spoke of the direction of philosophy in our times, which some may see as an attack on Kant. While a critical review of Crexells's remarks on the point does not fit in the commonplace pages of a periodical, I have sought to boil them down into a few words and, in so doing, I have given more thought to the few who take an interest in these matters than to the general readership.

This is my attempt.

From the Renaissance onward, Scholasticism fell into the same disrepute as the other products of medieval culture.

Until recently, most treatises on the history of philosophy addressed Greek and modern philosophy at considerable length, while paying scant attention to the products and benefits of medieval philosophy, which were dispatched in a few cursory pages. The Scholastic method, the syllogism, suffered numerous reversals and it appeared to have been left so steely and bloodless that it became nothing but a heap of scrap-iron and rubbish.

Today there is a movement to rectify this attitude, with new fields of study tending to give medieval philosophy the attention that it deserves. In contrast to the articles that until recently dominated the most interesting philosophical publications, contemporary philosophy now shows a tendency to pose questions and give solutions that share many points in common with the scholastics.

Contemporary philosophy tends to reject the Copernican revolution of Kant: things do not revolve around knowledge, as the philosopher of Königsberg wished, but rather it is knowledge that revolves around things. The anti-Kantian movement was begun by the late Professor Brentano, in Vienna.

Other noteworthy signs of this rebirth:

The resurrection of the ontological problem by the school of Husserl.

The development of formal logic, which is simply mathematical logic, the subject on which the famous Bertrand Russell is at work.

The realism of Külpe and the American realists against the idealism of the Kantians and the sensualism of the positivists and of the new, more subtle positivists like Avenarius and Mach.

Finally, the tendency towards a non-egotistical materialist ethics, which can be seen for example in the essays of Scheler, shows several aspects of this movement toward forms of scholastic thinking, such as we have observed.

Therefore, the modern scholar of philosophy needs to know Scholasticism and its special approach to problems.

A highly fascinating philosopher who has recently died – Alexis Meinong – to whom scholastic influences have been attributed, even though they could not be direct influences given his imperfect knowledge of the school's doctrines, decries this lack of knowledge. Meinong said that he recommended to his students that they study the philosophy of the Middle Ages as an essential part of their education as scholars of philosophy.

In conclusion, Creixells noted that he had not been able to present the issues other than with a cinematic sweep given the broad horizon of the subject matter, but that he could offer further reading on all the points and would be delighted to go into greater depth with anyone pursuing any of the issues discussed in his lecture.

We have jumped from the cinematic to the homeopathic, from the vast sweep of thought to the most intimate well-being of the individual, and that is why it is infinitely more necessary for any readers who cannot encounter Creixells's lecture except through my muddled and paltry report to turn to Creixells himself. I can assure them that Creixells will so admirably attend to them that they will be left short of words to praise him.

Translation from Catalan by Joel Graham