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"It doesn't harm anybody"

Can commemoration controversy enable students' ethical understanding of history?

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Abstract

The present study aims to better understand how students make narrative and ethical sense of the relationships between the past, present, and future by focusing on a controversial commemoration. This study seeks to bridge cultural psychological research on historical representation and the narrative mediation of collective memory with approaches in history education, promoting a deeper understanding of the ethical dimension of historical thinking. Analysing a group discussion in which 18-year-old students with different political orientations engage with questions about the yearly commemorative celebration of the Conquest of Granada in Spain, we find that they are able to critically reflect on the nationalist narrative and the concept of Reconquest behind the celebration. However, their understanding of the ethical implications of the celebration is limited, suggesting that they need more practice and guidance to be able to understand what is controversial about it, the different perspectives involved, and to establish connections between past and present that ultimately enable responsible commemoration.

Keywords

Commemoration, master narrative, collective memory, historical thinking, ethical dimension

1 Introduction

Commemoration controversies offer a great opportunity to integrate sociocultural research on historical representations with history education. These controversies inevitably involve a historical narrative, a perspective on what happened in the past and how this should be represented or commemorated in the present. The relation between past and present has emerged as a central element of historical thinking, featuring in Rüsen's (2004) concept of historical consciousness and in Nordgren's (2016) approach to the uses of history. The latter refers to how people draw on sources from historical culture to express ideas, construct identities, make moral decisions, or justify political positions in the present. In a similar vein, the relation between past and present prominently features in the ethical dimension of historical thinking, as proposed by Seixas and Morton (2013). The relation between past and present has also been at the centre of studies on the narrative representation of the past among students (van Alphen & Carretero, 2015), indicating that these representations crucially involve a moral dimension (Carretero &

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Bermudez, 2012). However, as Connerton (1989) and recently Kaidesoja (2025) have pointed out, we need to study how people negotiate this relation in contested commemorations, because these are important in shaping how the past is remembered across different contexts. Understanding as well as promoting informed ways of relating to the past may be crucial for the formation of critically engaged citizens. Commemoration controversies enable actual engagement with the past and, because of their present relevance and inherent interest for students, allow for historical understanding to happen (Gibson, 2021; Miles & Gibson, 2022; Van Straaten et al., 2016). In this vein, two questions emerge. Firstly, how do students make narrative and ethical sense of the relation between past, present and future regarding contested commemorations? Secondly, how can we promote ethical historical thinking about these commemorations?

The current study responds to the existing tendencies in history education literature to involve ethical deliberation (Milligan et al., 2018), to use heritage in teaching sensitive pasts (Grever et al., 2012; Logtenberg et al., 2020; Savenije et al., 2014), and reflect on wider historical culture in history education (Nordgren, 2016; Seixas, 2017), by designing and analysing a student activity about a commemoration event. In contrast to previous work on individual students' narrative representations and moral judgments of the past (Carretero & van Alphen, 2014; Lopez et al., 2015), we focus on students' interactive discussion, because this can enable them to take different positions or perspectives, construct a narrative representation as well as reflect on the political uses of the past, and encourage their ethical historical understanding. Analysing their discussion activity better allows us to see how students employ or distance themselves from a master narrative, how they think about commemorations related to such narratives and how they navigate the relation between the past, present and future of these historical representations.

There is considerable debate in the literature as to what a troubled, difficult or sensitive past is and why it matters in history education (Gross & Terra, 2018; Jones & Edmondson, 2025). In this paper, we propose that the past is troubled not because it is more or less recent or sensitive, but because it appears as a controversy in the present context. In this study we will address a controversy in Spain, which is intricately related to the so-called "*Reconquista*," a master narrative central to Spanish collective memory and identity. This narrative frames the medieval time period on the Iberian Peninsula in terms of an initial Muslim invasion and an 800-year-long reconquest of the territory. A fundamental assumption of this narrative is that the territory was Spanish to begin with, morally legitimising the progressive expulsion of the Muslims. The narrative also involves a long-standing and fixed opposition between Muslims on the one hand and Spaniards or Christians on the other. The end of this story is marked by the so-called *Toma de Granada* in 1492, when this last Muslim kingdom on the Peninsula fell into Spanish or Christian hands again. The final part of this narrative, often seen as fundamental to the (re)establishment of the Spanish nation, is re-presented every year in the city of Granada, when, on January 2nd, the "Conquest of Granada" is celebrated. This commemorative celebration thus features and reinforces the Reconquest narrative, which constructs a Spanish national identity in opposition to Islam (Brescó & van Alphen, 2022), and is currently used by the political extreme right for populist and Islamophobic purposes (Hirschkind, 2021). In a Tweet by Vox leader Abascal (2018) this becomes very clear:

> On January 2, 1492, the Reconquest concluded with the taking of Granada, thus defeating the last Islamist stronghold on our soil. Centuries later, the indelible pride remains for a heroic deed taking seven centuries. And the determination remains not to submit to Islam #SpainIsReconquest

There has been an ongoing controversy about how to deal with this commemoration in the Spanish democratic context, whether to change it or not (Arigita, 2025). Because Spanish society, both within and outside of the classroom, is becoming more diverse and plural it is necessary to address this troubled past, rethink the national master narrative and involve students in the discussion of current social and ethical issues related to the past. We think this setting is particularly productive for improving our understanding of how students narratively represent and ethically reflect on the relation between past and present of a current social controversy.

2 The role of national narratives and commemoration in collective memory

Within our sociocultural research framework (Lopez et al., 2025; Wertsch, 2002) we understand collective memory as a construction made possible by a variety of cultural tools. Because people have no direct access to the collective past as such, they rely on stories, imagery, monuments, museums, rituals and so on. National historical narratives, or master narratives like the so-called Reconquest, are the cultural artefacts that interpret the past in national terms, even long before there was such a thing as a nation-state (Carretero, 2011). This national interpretation of the past was disseminated by historians in the 19th century, canonised particularly by the Francoist dictatorship - as it aligned seamlessly with the regime's vision of a unified Catholic Spain in opposition to the more secular ideals advocated by its opponents - and put to political use by the extreme right over the last years (García-Sanjuán, 2018; Ríos Saloma, 2011; Ballester Rodríguez, 2021). Like other national narratives, the Reconquest supposes a simplification of the past by forgetting or ignoring the diverse historical actors and social groups, homogenising them in terms of a fictitious national unity and providing a teleological moral legitimation of acts carried out in the name of this imagined nation (Carretero & Bermudez, 2012). Precisely this simplification, homogenisation and moral entitlement are instrumental in the current political uses of this history.

Other cultural artefacts that are instrumental in what Hobsbawm & Ranger (2012) called the invention of tradition are national celebrations or commemorations. Connerton (1989) has argued that specifically the ritualistic and performative character of commemorative celebrations, the periodic repetition they involve, makes them powerful conduits for collective memory. They are more ubiquitous, he thinks, than printed texts and images. Billig (1995) proposes, in a similar vein, that celebrations are a common feature of banal nationalism, which implicitly shapes and tunes people's ideas and prejudices. The yearly celebration of the Conquest of Granada is a local rather than a national event and it was first installed by the Catholic Monarchs in 1493, long before the nation-state existed (Brisset, 1995). It has, however, been closely related to Spanish national Catholicism throughout the Francoist dictatorship and to Spanish nationalism in recent years. Yet, the event that is celebrated was not exactly a military conquest, historically speaking. In fact, the Catholic Monarchs signed a capitulation agreement with the Sultan of Granada, agreeing to respect the cultural and religious customs and traditions of the city's inhabitants in exchange for its surrender. This agreement was soon violated, forcing the city-dwellers to convert to Christianity and finally expelling them from the peninsula (García, 1995; Arigita, 2025). The public debate around the annual commemoration has been increasing, criticizing the commemoration as anachronistic and intolerant. There have been counter-demonstrations advocating for social coexistence and cultural diversity. The typical recommendation that our sociocultural framework offers to the field of history education is to have students critically reflect on such taken for granted narratives and celebrations, yet, without specifying how to do that exactly.

3 The reconquest and the ethical dimension of historical thinking

Scholars have often attempted to clarify the difference between memory and history (e.g., Halbwachs, 1997; Lowenthal, 2015; Wertsch, 2007): memory is conceived to be more subjective and endowed with emotion and identity functions; history aspires to be objective and is endowed with functions of rationality and distance. Yet, memory and history significantly interact when the relation between the past and the present is at stake, as is the case with controversial commemorations. Especially regarding the national past, this boundary between history and memory is blurred (Carretero, 2011).

Nationalist historiography was tied up with political nationalism, also in Spain. The reconquest narrative, once developed by historiographers at the service of the emerging nation-state (Ríos Saloma, 2011), is now heavily criticised by historiographers as a national identity-myth (García-Sanjuán, 2018). Attempts have been made to take the nationalist aims out of history education, offering students an account of the medieval Iberian Peninsula that involves Al-An-

dalus: the emirate, caliphate and Muslim-ruled city states organising the territory at the time. Textbooks acknowledge the economic prosperity and cultural development of Al-Andalus, yet it is considered as a historical anomaly (Rasskin-Gutman & Brescó de Luna, 2019), and the reconquest narrative is still present in textbooks as well as in students' accounts (Sáiz Serrano, 2017). Research using individual interviews shows that students' narrative representations of the Spanish national past are closer to national memory than to critical historical understanding and reflect homogenised notions of Spanish national identity (Lopez et al., 2015; van Alphen & Lopez, 2023). Through informal channels like popular celebrations the reconquest narrative dominates (Brescó & van Alphen, 2022; Hirschkind, 2021). This mythical understanding is nowadays further encouraged by the Vox political movement, as the reconquest narrative and a homogeneous notion of Spanish national identity is used to legitimise their xenophobic approach to migrants, especially Muslims from the African continent (Ballester Rodríguez, 2021).

Questioning and addressing such essentialist representations and nationalist uses of the past, history educators have engaged with heritage or historical culture in general (Carretero et al., 2017; Savenije et al., 2014), because this encounter between memory and history is rich with opportunity. Among other things, to engage students and to further their ability to critically and ethically relate past, present and future (Miles & Gibson, 2022; Van Straaten et al., 2016). Seixas and Morton (2013) developed an approach to historical thinking that includes an ethical dimension, which addresses the tension between history and memory and the relation between past and present, key to the present study. According to Seixas and Morton (2013), students developing a historical understanding of this dimension are able to 1) recognise the implicit and explicit ethical stances or purposes that are behind historical representations such as memorials and commemorations. They are also able to 2) contextualise past actions as well as their ethical judgment of these actions. Finally, they are able to 3) make a fair assessment of the ethical implications of history so as to responsibly remember and respond to contributions, sacrifices and injustices of the past. This means that they are able to see the relevance of historical injustices in the present (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

The present study addresses the ethical dimension of historical thinking by encouraging students to discuss the commemorative celebration of the Conquest of Granada. Through group discussion as a research method, we aimed to analyse a) the narrative about the historical event that the participants construct together, b) how they engaged with the different perspectives surrounding the commemorative celebration, and, c) how their narrative and historical understanding of the ethical dimension play a role in their deliberation on the future of this celebration. The group discussion was set-up to enable the students to establish relations between their collective narrative knowledge of the past and the controversy surrounding the celebration, inviting them to historically contextualize and ethically question the commemoration.

4 Methods

The methodology of this study, as already becomes clear in the objectives, seizes the opportunity that group discussions offer. We chose a group method over an individual interview method to bring the research methodology closer to a classroom situation and to study narratively mediated collective remembering in dynamic interaction (Wagoner et al., 2019). We think this methodology can greatly contribute to the interdisciplinary study of collective memory and history understanding, as well as a meaningful exchange between the studies on history learning and teaching. We think analysing group discussions might contribute more than analysing individual interviews, as we have done in our previous work on narratively mediated historical understanding so far, because the interactive group process can show how students actually mobilise their narrative knowledge, negotiate different historical and contemporary perspectives and might relate historical knowledge to ethical deliberation. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid with reference number CEI-104-2019.

4.1 Participants

The participants for the group discussion were recruited via the research participation programme of our university. The students who volunteered to participate were selected based on an online questionnaire that asked for their age, gender, political orientation, and whether they had attended middle and high school in Spain. Their political orientation was assessed on

a seven-point scale: very left, left, slightly left, centre, slightly right, right, very right. We composed a small group, as heterogeneous as possible in terms of gender and political orientation, following the group discussion method and focus-group recommendations (Mena Manrique & Méndez Pineda, 2009; Payne & Payne, 2004). Of the six selected students (age: *M* = 18.33; *SD* = 1.07; 4 female and 2 male participants) one student indicated to be left-orientated, three students were slightly left-orientated, one was centre orientated and another one slightly right-orientated. They were all first-year undergraduates to ensure they had recently finished high school but had not yet taken university courses on collective memory. All of them had been familiarised with Spanish national history in high school and, before that, in middle school, because it's an obligatory part of both curricula. This informs us about whether the history of the Reconquest is known to them, an assumption supported by earlier qualitative interview studies (Sáiz Serrano, 2017; van Alphen & Lopez, 2023), but not about how they will eventually employ this knowledge when reflecting on and make decisions about a controversial commemoration.

4.2 Procedure

We designed the group activity based on the proposals by Logtenberg et al. (2020), Swan and Coquillon (2020), and Nordgren and Johanssen (2020) to work on sensitive issues with heritage objects and the different temporalities around them, to ask compelling and supporting questions regarding heritage objects and to address controversial issues from multiple perspectives in history education respectively. We were particularly inspired by how Logtenberg et al. (2020) proposed to address the sensitive issue of 'Black Pete' in the Saint Nicholas celebration with students in the Netherlands (see also Lemmens, 2017; Rodenberg & Wagenaar, 2016) as this bears a lot of resemblance with how the so-called 'Moors' are treated in Spanish national memory (Martín Morales, 2002), a term that enables racist and xenophobic discourse. The commemoration of the Conquest of Granada is a sensitive and controversial issue and a peculiar kind of heritage object, not a monument but a ritual performance. We structured the group discussion into four parts. Each part was designed to address a different temporality (historical time, historiographical time, present time and future) with supporting questions for each part derived from the compelling question directed at the future: "What do we do with the celebration of the Conquest of Granada?" For each part, source materials were selected and prepared to facilitate addressing these questions in the group. This temporal sequence enabled us, first, to examine the construction of the narrative about the historical event before explicitly presenting students with the different conflicting positions surrounding its celebration. Second, the decision-making phase was placed at the end of the sequence in order to better understand the role that the preceding phases played in shaping students' final decisions regarding the commemoration. Also, we started with a task about a narrative relatively familiar to them and, after familiarizing them in more historical depth with the celebration related to this narrative, proposed them the unfamiliar task of deciding about a celebration's future. By the end, the students were also on more familiar terms with each other, facilitating the collective decision-making process. The discussion was also scaffolded by the material provided to the students (see *materials*).

After the two interviewers welcomed the students, the first author explained the task at hand, introduced the compelling question and the supporting questions, and invited them to briefly comment on their knowledge and beliefs regarding the celebration before asking them to jointly narrate the historical event behind the celebration in more detail. The questions in this first part, related to historical temporality, aimed at the students' building a joint understanding of the event that the celebration is about: What happened (with the Conquest of Granada)? How? How did the people involved get there? Who were they? What were their reasons for and purposes of their actions? In the second part, the participants were asked to reflect about the celebration of the Conquest of Granada: "Why and how has it been celebrated?" – a question related to the historiographical temporality. In the third part, they were asked to discuss the present controversy around the celebration, illustrated by the material they were given: "How is the celebration controversial nowadays?". Finally, they were asked the compelling question, related to the future: "What to do with this celebration?" The participants were asked to reach an agreement about whether it should continue to exist and how, deciding about what exactly should and shouldn't change in the celebration, simulating a democratic decision-making process.

The participants were invited to a university meeting room for 3 hours of discussion. A 30-minute break separated the first 45 minutes, dedicated to the historical event, from the 1.5-hour discussion of the celebration (35 minutes), its present controversy (30 minutes) and its future (25 minutes) respectively. The students were given the time they needed to look at the discussion materials before continuing. They gradually warmed up to the task and, by the end, commented how it had been interesting and much more fun than they expected.

4.3 Materials

To trigger their ideas about the historical event, all participants received a printout of the well-known 1882 painting of Francisco Pradilla "The Surrender of Granada" (see Figure 1). Thirty minutes in, they were all given a source document with "a historian's perspective" on the event – mentioning the capitulation agreements between the Sultan and the Catholic Monarchs, ultimately violated by the latter (García, 1995). The students were then asked to comment on this document. For discussing the celebration, they were given source documents with information about its origin and evolution (from Brisset, 1995), about its current form (from Girón, n.d.) and a critical comment by García (1995) about its functions. They were also given a sheet with questions orientating them to consider the origin and evolution of the annual festivities. For discussing the present controversy, the participants received sheets containing the arguments used by different social stakeholders in favour of maintaining the celebration and the arguments against it. These were adapted from an online newspaper article (Lopez, 2020), a political tweet (Populares Granada, 2019), an academic article (Santamarina Campos, 2008) and the website of the Human Rights Association in Andalusia (2018). The source information about these arguments was included. Finally, they received another question sheet, to help them consider the different perspectives on the celebration in more depth. When the participants did not refer to the material, the interviewers encouraged them to do so, asking the questions on the sheets.

Figure 1. Francisco Pradilla (1882) "The Surrender of Granada."



4.4 Analysis

The group discussion was transcribed verbatim for narrative and critical discursive analysis. The questions we asked regarding the historical event allowed us to perform a narrative analysis of this first part of the group discussion. The same analysis has been done on historical narratives constructed in individual interviews (Carretero & van Alphen, 2014; Lopez et al., 2015; van Alphen & Lopez, 2023). Concretely, we analysed four narrative elements: the narrative actors, their actions, the participants' moral judgments about these actions and the general scheme or plot underlying the joint narrative, through a combination of inductive and deductive coding.

In the remaining parts of the discussion a critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015) was performed, with the rationale of the discussion, the supporting questions and historical temporalities in mind. We analysed how the participants understood the importance and implications of the celebration in its historiographical and present temporalities. We analysed how they related their view on the celebration to the narrative they initially constructed and the decision they

finally made about it. We specifically looked at the discussion through the criteria for assessing the ethical dimension of historical thinking formulated by Seixas and Morton (2013). Following their guideposts, we analysed whether or not the students considered 1) the historical purposes behind the celebration, 2) the different perspectives on the celebration in relation to their own ethical judgments and 3) the current responsibilities to remember and respond to the injustices in the past. The analyses were done by each author independently and subsequently discussed to reach a consensus on the interpretation of the data.

5 Results

We will be presenting the results in four chronological sections, following the sequence of the task that structured the group discussion. The illustrative fragments are all taken from the single document in which the entire discussion was transcribed and from the parts of the discussion they each represent.

Part 1: The historical narrative behind the celebration

In the first section, we analysed how the participants co-constructed a narrative about the historical process leading to the so-called Conquest of Granada in 1492. We were interested in examining these specific narrative elements: the actors of the narrative, the actors' actions, the participants' moral judgements about them and the general scheme underlying the narrative they produced together.

As to the actors, the group built a narrative revolving around an apparent dichotomy between Christians and Muslims, appearing as timeless and invariant actors in a narrative of intergroup conflict.

> Participant 5: Well, it was the peak moment for the Catholic Monarchs, right? Because it coincided with the conquest of America, with this completion of the conquest of Hispania, they managed to expel the Muslims, which in the end was the Christians' objective. [...] Participant 1: And that the Christian advance culminated. Because even though they [Christians] had been dominating, they [Muslims] always found a way to resist or somehow returned to dominate again; this was definitive. Investigator 1: Does everybody agree? Anything to add? ... So, how did they get there? Participant 3: Well, the entire peninsula was conquered by the Muslims and the Christians started to descend from the north and started to conquer all of the peninsula (Discussion Transcription, Part 1)[1].

The participants' narrative reflects an essentialist and naturalised idea of group identities. Christians and Muslims are mutually exclusive categories, from the time that "the entire peninsula was conquered by the Muslims" until eight centuries later when "they [the Christians] managed to expel the Muslims, which in the end was the Christians' objective".

The actions discussed by the group were specifically those carried out by the Christians, emphasising their ideological goal, that is, aiming to eliminate Islam and at the final expulsion of the Muslims. The Muslim actions and intentions are not that explicitly represented in their narrative. For example:

> Participant 3: Also, because, the Catholic Monarchs, their goal was religious unification. So, they didn't care, anything that got in the way they were like: "we want this and we are going to eliminate the Muslims from the peninsula." Basically, they were not going to die before achieving this (Discussion Transcription, Part 1).

This objective of eliminating Muslim ideology is questioned when the group discusses how Muslim cultural heritage continues to be present in Spain today.

> Participant 4: I don't think that the Catholic Monarchs or the Christians in general were interested in entirely eliminating that culture, because of all the heritage they [Muslims] left in place... in the end all of Andalusia is heritage from Al-Andalus, you know. Actually, if you go to Seville right now and say "oh yes let's look around" all you see is this [heritage] (Discussion Transcription, Part 1).

1 All of the fragments taken from the transcript were translated from Spanish to English by the authors.

Therefore, as the discussion evolves, the participants propose that the Christians aimed to obtain ideological power, cultural appropriation of Muslim advances, and territorial conquest.

> Participant 5: It was more ideological. If many Muslims stayed, in the end their goal was not to eliminate but above all Christian ideology, to get to the top. Participant 3: Yes, basically saying: I'm in power and you're going to do as I say. Participant 1: A lot of contributions as well. [...] Participant 3: That's super intelligent, like, obtaining culture and ideas and such from other people, it makes you grow, you know? It's not like focusing on what you got and be done with it (Discussion Transcription, Part 1).

Nevertheless, the actions of the Christians are judged to be an imposition, exercised by the powerful over the weak. According to the participants, this Christian position of power was due to their union, contrasting this with the division among the Muslims, which ultimately led to the Christian victory.

Overall, the historical narrative constructed by the participants reveals a scheme of the culmination of a long-lasting feat. For example:

> Participant 4: [get] the territory and say "it's done, we've completed the reconquest, we won." [...] Participant 1: I also remember [...] that it's symbolically very relevant, what it meant at the time, it was like ending a final stronghold... if I remember correctly, in the epigraph a lot of significance is given to this part, to sum it up. Participant 5: Like, the conquest of Spain culminated, well, Hispania, right? [laughter] Participant 2: I remember that for a long time, many years, the Christians were on standby, like: "now I want to conquer you, now I withdraw a little because I have other business and now," in the same year that they conquered America: "let's go and raze it all." (Discussion Transcription, Part 1).

The participants understand the historical process as a permanent struggle between two opposing groups that culminates in the Conquest of Granada. This event gains historical significance for the participants as the final step of the Christian feat.

Once the group had agreed on this historical narrative, the researchers provided a historiographical text explaining the Granada takeover as a negotiated process rather than a conquest. The text emphasises how this negotiation included a pact of "respect for the customs, language and religion of the Muslims". It also explains the rupture of that pact through the repressive policies carried out by the new rulers, culminating in the expulsion of the *Moriscos*[2] in the seventeenth century.

After reading this text, the participants started to mention different historical actors, such as the *moriscos*, and clearly sharpened their judgment about the actions undertaken by the Christians.

> Participant 2: I wasn't aware of this [...] I didn't remember this agreement [...] allowing the Muslims to keep their customs and culture. They [Christians] were supposed to leave them [Muslims] be forever, and as soon as they were able to [said]: "bugger off." I think this is very heavy, very hard. [...] Participant 1: Looking at it in more detail now, I do see a defeat that was very hard on the Muslims, because it seemed like they were getting along and, in the end, bit by bit, it was a destruction. Participant 5: Yeah, in the end the perspective changes about, well, only the territory, but, really, it's not only the territory: "we want to take everything away from you." Participant 1: Yeah, bit by bit they succeeded. [...] Participant 4: In the end, it was going to be a religious unification, a territorial one, like, unification in all kinds of ways [...] they [Christians] took it literally, because as much as they embellished it and said it was just a bit... they were going to obliterate everything, because that was really their objective, so they went for it (Discussion Transcription, Part 1).

The historiographical text questioned the concept of Reconquest. When asked about this notion the group displayed a somewhat critical view:

> Participant 6: since the beginning of that period they always called it Reconquest, so as to give themselves permission, that it was their territory, you know [...] even though 600 years would have passed they didn't care and said "no, this is the Reconquest," even though people had been living there for centuries. [...] Participant 4: Also, what we talked about, that it depends a bit on the author. Surely the Muslims wouldn't write, or maybe one of them would, but I wouldn't write "in the Reconquest" because I would not want others to think that this territory wasn't mine, I mean, I would write "the conquest." Participant 1: "The Christian invasion" [laughter, because in the traditional narrative Muslims, not Christians, are considered the invaders] Participant 4: "The Christian invasion" Participant 3: Bad Christians Participant 4: Like, it's clear that you do it from a Christian point of view (Discussion Transcription, Part 1).

2 The controversial term used in Spanish history to indicate the (converted) Muslims who lived in the Christian kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula. It is controversial, because it derives from the racist "*Moro*" or Moor.

There is an agreement on understanding the term Reconquest as an ideological concept that legitimises the Christian perspective, acknowledging that groups build biased versions of past, present and future events.

Part 2: The celebration of the conquest of Granada then and now

In the second section, we analysed how the participants related the origins of the celebration in the past with the celebration in the present. In terms of the importance of the celebration, the group generally agrees that the celebration was important in the past, for the people who had participated in the historical events. However, it is no longer that important in the present, because people now are so distant from these events, mitigating potential links between past and present. The reason why the Conquest of Granada is still celebrated, according to the participants, is that it is a tradition. The fact that it has been celebrated repeatedly for so long is meaningful to the participants.

> Participant 4: after trying for so many years to end this reconquest, I think that for them it was an incredible achievement. I understand that they wanted to celebrate it the next year. [...] it's a celebration that does not influence us right now, not in a good nor in a bad way [...] but it's true that if it wouldn't have been celebrated all those years, it would have been forgotten (Discussion Transcription, Part 2).

In terms of what the celebration implies or means, the group considers that it was an ideological and indoctrinating event in the past. It was meant to instil pride about the Christian feat in the population, without taking the Muslim population into account.

> Participant 6: it's clear that they started to celebrate this to explain to the people that this was [property] of the Catholic Monarchs, that this was Spain and that it was Christian. Like, I think that at the outset it was done to indoctrinate a bit (Discussion Transcription, Part 2).

Though the group agrees that at present it is mainly a festive event and a tradition, the participants disagree about the implicit or explicit ethical position of the celebration. For participants 2 and 5, the origin of the tradition is important and this makes it controversial in the present, whereas for participants 3 and 4, the current celebrations are no longer related to what happened in the past. The tradition in itself is the reason for celebration:

> Participant 4: I understand that it can be done perfectly well, because of what it says [referring to the document describing the current celebration], it's just that it doesn't do anybody any harm. [...] Participant 3: I don't think that everybody who goes to this celebration feels proud of this. I mean, you don't celebrate something only because you feel proud of it, but because it's tradition, because you do it just to celebrate and because it's nice to remember these things, but in the end, you don't go with the pride of "feeling ..." you know? Participant 2: Yes, I understand that, but I think that there's always something behind every celebration. You can go to a party tomorrow because its dope and all, but that party was created because of something and that can be... Participant 5: In the end it's what we said at the beginning, like, they did it because they were laughing in the faces of the Muslims, that's the origin, it's ... Participant 4: Right, but I don't think that people intend to repeat this (Discussion Transcription, Part 2).

Participants 1 and 6 agree with participants 3 and 4 that what the celebration means depends on who is celebrating. The group had discussed about how easily people were indoctrinated in the past. People celebrating nowadays are different, they think:

> Participant 1: participants nowadays have nothing to do with those in that moment and... now [...] it's more like a tradition and there might be someone who does have that feeling, but... I don't think they give it the same connotation. [...] Participant 6: right now, I don't think they do it to indoctrinate [...]. Now you go and [...] see like a theatre-play [...], see those fights they perform and that the representation is fun [...] but they're not trying to convince you of anything [....] they're showing you things (Discussion Transcription, Part 2).

For participants 2 and 5 it does matter what is celebrated and a relation between the past and the present exists through the celebration. Not only does it matter what it meant in the past, but also what it means now. The religious, patriotic and nationalist dimensions of the event are controversial in the present, according to them:

> Participant 2: you keep on exalting the ideology of that time [...] this suggests that "we would do it again now, because we are so proud" and I don't think that's very correct for society. [...] Participant 5: I don't think that this is so because it's damaging, this is my personal opinion, but because Spain is way behind compared to other countries. And, I don't know, this kind of celebration obviously doesn't harm anyone, it's culture. But I believe it can be done in a more objective way, changing the connotation a bit, like, perhaps less church, no, not less church. I don't know how to explain it, less national. I think there's an exaltation of things that you don't exalt as such, but they are there... For example, in Germany they're not doing anything, no Nazi celebration whatsoever (Discussion Transcription, Part 2).

The group received this comparison made by Participant 5 with shock. Most of them consider Spain and Germany, the Catholic Monarchs and the Nazis incomparable. Only participant 1 agrees with the idea that Spain is somehow "behind" on other countries and participant 2 suggests that at some point in the future, looking back, this comparison might be made.

Part 3: The present controversy around the celebration

In this section, we analysed how the participants understand and position themselves in the current debates around the celebration, illustrated by the material provided to them. At first, it was difficult for them to understand why some people find the celebration controversial at all. This difficulty is related to how the participants had previously differentiated between the past and the present ("it doesn't hurt anybody"). The positive connotations of "celebration" made it difficult to critically reflect: how can a celebration hurt somebody? Implicitly, ideological contents can still be transmitted in informal or festive contexts (Connerton, 1989). Yet, for the participants, the celebration had become part of mainstream Spanish-Catholic culture, hindering them to consider other possible perspectives. On the ethical dimension of historical thinking, this reflects a limited understanding, because participants either see no relevance of the past for the present or identify completely with one side of the controversy. For them it's perfectly normal to celebrate a victory, clearly positioning themselves in opposition to people criticising the celebration:

> Participant 2: I don't understand very well what they [those opposing the celebration] are complaining about, about the fight or about some humiliation of Muslims. Logically, I think it's fine that they represent the fight, in fact, I think it's necessary and important. And if it's done with respect, without pride, I think it's great that they do it. I also suppose that if someone complains about somebody being humiliated, that this is because this happens, but I don't understand very well... (Discussion Transcription, Part 3).

Three different positions are taken regarding the controversy. First, a position is taken that – after the questioning efforts by investigator 1 – acknowledges the different perspectives on the celebration, the purposes and events behind it and that a relation exists between how history is told and how people presently feel about this story. This position is taken by participants 2, 5 and on occasion by participant 1:

> Participant 5: Perhaps there's people living in Granada that don't like to celebrate it. Participant 2: Of course, they do it for everybody, because they're not going to say: "you're not coming to the party" but I understand that for a Muslim it's not fun to celebrate this. [...] Participant 1: I think it's on the side of those who lost, however they may call it, that there's still that feeling of loss (Discussion Transcription, Part 3).

Second, a position is taken that repeatedly points at historical errors in the celebration, but does not understand how it can affect people in the present, as history is separated from the present. This position is taken by participant 6:

> Participant 6: in the end you can't complain about a war being represented, because they are telling a story. So, complain about the story no being true to reality, complain about that, all right? But don't complain about that they're representing it. [...] I think that the feeling of defeat is dumb, but I also think that the feeling of victory is dumb. No, don't identify with people who [did] that, because you are not that person. [...] I don't see that they are trying to manipulate [with the celebration], I see that they are representing it wrongly (Discussion Transcription, Part 3).

Third, a position is taken maintaining that there's no political influence exercised through the celebration, separating cultural from political spheres and present liberalism from past oppression. This position is taken by participants 3 and 4, and sometimes subscribed to by participants 6 and 1:

> Participant 3: but they are not representing how it happened, they are celebrating, you know? It's not a representation. [...] Participant 4: like, you think that now, with this celebration, that they are trying to indoctrinate you? Participant 5: no, but ... Participant 4: you think that these festivities are celebrated to indoctrinate and manipulate? I think that right now this is not the goal (Discussion Transcription, Part 3).

The participants continue counterbalancing the need to celebrate respectfully with the freedom of expression, until participants 2 and 5 make their ideas clearer and start to convince the others:

> Participant 2: it's one thing to indoctrinate, which sounds exaggerated to me, looking at what is happening. I think what happens is that some truths, which are also pretty important to understand history, are partially hidden. Participant 4: Yes of course, like always. I think that in history as such, as we know it, there are many things they have hidden from us. But talking about the celebration, I don't know. Participant 5: I don't see it as indoctrination, because they're not saying "this and that" to me. But I do think that perhaps, like we said, they are putting things together that can be done in other ways (Discussion Transcription, Part 3).

Part 4: Deciding about the future of the celebration

In this section, we analysed how the participants came to a decision and what they decided. They agree on maintaining the celebration, because they consider it to be a tradition and are reticent to intervene with this. In their decision-making, the participants separate the historical events from the celebration:

> Participant 1: I'd also separate the commemorative act from the celebration and festivities, [...] so that one concept isn't mixed up with the other. [...] Participant 4: More like "this happened", clear and simple. That obviously the real facts are given and then, when you want to party or whatever, that this is more due to the party tradition, but not relate the historical stuff to that party, I don't know, so that everybody's happy. Because in the end everybody wants to party. [...] Participant 1: separating the official commemorative act and that there's a party but a little afterwards [...] even on the same day but separated so that the concepts aren't mixed and everyone can decide what they want. [...] Participant 4: more actualised, a party like any other normal party, but separating a bit all of this [pointing to the historical documentation on the table] (Discussion Transcription, Part 4).

The group emphasises that the "real" story should be told, including several perspectives. There is no intention of reparation or remembering past injustices in their proposal.

> Participant 1: it should be the citizens' responsibility, but oh well, what we said: give more veridical information, facilitate it and make it more accessible. [...] Participant 2: it continues to be a celebration, a festivity, because in the end, it's something traditional that people like, but try to add a more informative and less patriotic perspective. [...] I do think it's necessary to change things. [...] A way of doing it that includes both perspectives, in theatrical representations, in debates, whatever, so that all possible perspectives are presented (Discussion Transcription, Part 4).

In terms of the ethical dimension, these participants chose to distance historical actions from the present, precisely when making decisions that bear on the collective responsibility to remember the past.

6 Discussion

The results of the study shed light on how students make narrative and ethical sense of the relationships between the past, present, and future when engaging with this contested commemoration. Furthermore, they offer insights to develop our ideas on how ethical historical thinking about such commemorations might be promoted in the field of history education. With regard to the first research question, what inevitably draws our attention is that, even though the participants were cautious not to construct a narrative of national reconquest and even morally condemned the Christians for not complying with the surrender agreement, they keenly defended the tradition and the need to maintain the celebration. They did not employ the Reconquest narrative to defend the celebration, but rather defended the people's right to celebration. According to Michael Billig (1995) celebrations are perfect occasions for banal nationalism, that

is, nationalism implicitly functions in these festivities. The fact that not all students were previously aware of what is behind the celebration and were reticent of considering what this implies for the present celebration supports this idea. The key issue is how they related the past to the present. The ideological function of the celebration in the past is clear to all of them, but only two participants argue that this is still a function today. The other participants emphasise the time distance and that the importance of the historical feat for the population has evaporated out of the celebration with time. For them, it transformed into a cultural tradition, given meaning by those who choose to celebrate in the present. The participants do not talk about who organises the celebration in the present and with what purpose, as if the people's general celebration impetus has taken over. We see that the past loses importance in the discussion as well. Eventually, the participants rejected the relevance of the historical purposes behind the celebration for the present (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

When focusing the discussion on the present, the participants reject that the celebration is controversial. They seem annoyed by the perspectives arguing against the celebration and lament that everything is politicised and polarised today, losing sight of the implicit purposes behind it. The tradition is considered a mere cultural event, now spoiled by political uses. Thus, the participants did not see the relevance of historical injustices in the present (Seixas & Morton, 2013). The questions by the investigators encourage participants 2 and 5 to point out the controversy of the celebration, but mainly for its lack of respect for cultural diversity. Participant 6 insists there should not be a problem, because the past and present are fundamentally different. Both the notion of cultural diversity and the separation between past and present temporalities shape the final decision made by the group. The celebration is maintained but separated in time from the commemoration of the historical events. The commemoration should not involve much pomp and the information given about the historical events, also through representations, should be true and neutral, representing and including both perspectives. The popular celebration, however, must go on, regardless of the alternatives offered by the voices critical of the implicit meaning of the celebration.

Their decision reflects Wertsch's (2021) idea on troubled pasts in post conflict societies that there is a tendency to face these troubles from a point of view of reconciliation but not from a perspective of justice. The group agrees that everybody's equal and should get along from here on out, but there is no consideration of possible reparations or taking the victim's perspective into account. The Muslims and Jews suffering the consequences of the historical injustice are long gone for them. Yet, although the conflict in the case of the Conquest of Granada is in the remote past, responsibility can still be taken in terms of how this past is represented today, hence the controversy about it. The group, however, decides to eliminate the past from the celebration altogether, so that the celebration becomes the neutral cultural tradition they want to safeguard from political debate. This might be a consequence of the task, because they were asked to reach a joint decision. Nevertheless, the analysis of the discussion gives us a clear view on how the students deal with the ethical dimensions of the past and present, as well as their relations. According to the guideposts that Seixas and Morton (2013) proposed, which also guided our analysis, the students demonstrate limited understanding of the ethical dimension. They do not see the relevance of past injustices in the present and do not make a balanced evaluation of the past's ethical implications in the present, by rejecting the critical voices who according to them make the celebration a political issue, as if the celebration never had any political purpose in itself.

The findings also allow us to reflect on how ethical historical thinking about commemorations can be promoted in history education. Even though we designed the discussion activity following didactical guidelines that seek to facilitate students in making careful relations between the past and the present, the participants did not do so. For an ethical historical understanding, it's necessary that the students consider the relations between past and present in a responsible way (Seixas & Morton, 2013), that is, making them explicit and recognizing the different perspectives at play. We see that if they are just given various perspectives, they might not engage with all of them. If the aim is to enable historical thinking including the ethical dimension, questions about the past are not sufficient. They need to be significantly related to the present as well. Otherwise, we will be faced with students who, like participant 6, radically separate the past from the present and, like participant 4, use this as an argument to eliminate the past from the present. Logtenberg et al. (2020) suggest to work with students on the historiographical dimension to prevent this, that is, helping them see and understand the implicit purposes behind the celebration that were present in the instalment of the celebration in the first place and that are

ritually continued through the celebration. We see that, precisely when the students discuss in relation to this dimension, the present is isolated from the past. This might have been poor comprehension of the fact that histories are written, celebrations installed and monuments are erected by certain people with a certain purpose. Also, it might have been a strategy among the students to keep the peace, and defend the present that they conceive to be liberal and plural, so very different from the past. Importantly, students in Spain are not used to this kind of deliberation in class. Textbook activities typically demand low cognitive effort, focusing on knowing, locating, or reproducing information rather than assessing, judging, or evaluating it, which would involve higher complexity (Sáiz Serrano, 2011). So, regardless of the setup of the group activity encouraging them to do so, they did not consider that a past intolerance and injustice has been carried into the present by way of a tradition.

Therefore, telling students about the historical complexity and cultural diversity of Al-Andalus and teaching them how to deal with the national past in a disciplinary and critical way in school may not be sufficient in countering the persisting Reconquest narrative and the related exclusive notion of Spanish identity. Avoiding discussion on the controversial aspects of the medieval Iberian Peninsula and its heritage, like some historiographers would even prefer teachers to do (Hirschkind, 2021), might actually be counter-productive. Introducing students to social and ethical debates related to the past can foster their historical understanding (Gibson, 2021; Milligan et al., 2018) and we think that it can also improve their critical reflection on hegemonic narratives operating implicitly in collective memory.

The results of this study have implications for further research as well as for history teaching beyond Spain. Clearly, the group discussion on a commemoration controversy that involves ritual, maintained the sustained interest of the students throughout the session and they enthusiastically engaged with the task. This is similar in the case of other proposals on commemoration controversy, providing opportunities to have students actively and responsibly participate in deliberation if they avoid troubled pasts (Gibson, 2021) or do not explicitly work on the relation between past, present, and future (Van Straaten et al., 2016). If students do not practice and learn to deliberate themselves, they might ultimately defer to authority, historicism or tradition, as we have seen in the results of our study. What our study adds to the many proposals for working on commemoration controversy with students already out there, is that these controversies are not just about monuments, street names and museums. Ritual commemoration, such as the Granada celebration, is another important conduit of collective memory to attend to with students, both in research and in teaching. Particularly because the history and purposes behind it easily go unnoticed in the midst of celebration.

Another outcome of our study worth considering for future research and teaching is that the students successfully navigated their difference in political orientation throughout the discussion, because they formed a group working on the same issue together, with the same sources, having to reach a joint decision. This, we think, invites further research on students' active group participation and engagement. At least, the group discussion method has proven useful to register students' deliberation and reflection, involving their existing and changing historical representations. We think that this methodology contributes to bringing work on historical representations, narratively mediated collective memory, heritage education and the ethical dimension of historical thinking together.

Importantly, though, decisions about the future of a celebration cannot be made based on its past alone. The students took other present and future factors into account, as is only reasonable. The past can be comprehended in order to act in the present with a view to the future. As researchers and teachers, we do not have a straightforward idea about the decision regarding this celebration either, and it is crucial to make this clear to students: it's a problem and we need to think long and hard about possible solutions, if they are possible at all. We think that by developing a powerful historical understanding, which includes ethical deliberation, students will be better equipped to participate in social debates that relate past, present and future. Troubled pasts will remain troubled and troublesome to us; solutions that eliminate the trouble from these pasts are no solutions at all.

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