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On the Significance of Public Protest in Spanish Democracy

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The circumstances surrounding the election victory of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in March 2004 and the dynamics shaping his final months in office in 2011 both underscored an enduring reality of Spain's post-Franco democracy: Public protest –much of which takes a form largely *autonomous* from the leadership of large mainstream organizations such as parties and unions– plays an extraordinarily large role in channeling and defining the participation of citizens in this political system, but the relationship between such protest and the *institutional power* conferred by election victories has been an uneasy and often distant one. In this essay I argue that Spanish politics cannot be understood without paying a great deal of attention to this nexus and I propose explanations for both the great importance of public protest in Spanish democracy and the chronically uneasy –indeed distant– relations between the voices of dissent in the streets and the institutional power wielded by elected power-holders.

The argument I present here¹ is not intended to question the significance of studying elections and formal institutional power –the subject of so much important work by Rosa Virós and many other major political scientists. Instead, I argue that students of Spanish politics need to focus *both* on the institutionalized politics articulated around elections and official decision-making and the often uninstitutionalized politics of protest in the streets as well as the typically uneasy relations between these two quite different arenas. Many of the most distinguished scholars of conventional institutionalized politics –such as the late Rosa Virós to whose memory this volume is dedicated– have recognized this point and called for the study of extra-institutional forms of politics: In her 1987 analysis of electoral behavior in Catalunya, Virós wrote of the need for the study not only of voting but also of “the different types of pressure of citizens on office-holders” (Virós i Galtier

1. I am grateful to Rosa Virós and her colleagues of the Department of Political and Social Science of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra for the stimulating environment for my work on this question and other themes as a recurring visiting professor there beginning in 1996.

1987, 177). But *how* should we study such pressure and its connections with the actions of elected politicians?

A great deal of excellent scholarship by political scientists, sociologists and historians takes up this general theoretical question in one form or another,² but work remains to be done making sense out of cross-national variation in the nexus between protestors and the holders of institutional political power. It is in this light that the Spanish case takes on special significance due to the juxtaposition in post-Franco Spain of i) the extraordinarily high salience of protest within the overall ensemble of participatory practices carried out by citizens, and ii) the typically distant relations –or in many instances the total absence of relations– between the voices of protest in the streets and elected governmental officials. Indeed, understanding the Spanish configuration of abundant protest, relatively weak socio-political organizations and typically distant or non-existent interactions between protest movements and power-holders possesses wide scholarly relevance –both for comparative students of contentious politics and for all those committed to understanding the connection between citizen inputs, the agenda of public life and governmental policy outputs in Spain's post-Franco democracy. I argue that the study of social movements and contentious politics in Spain should be seen as indispensable to an adequate understanding of how this democratic system operates. I propose here a way of conceptualizing the protest/power-holder nexus in the Spanish case and offer a historical argument about why the place of public protest in the post-Franco democracy is paradoxically central to the dispositions and actions of ordinary citizens but distant from the political concerns and practice of power-holders.

The M-15 Movement and its Antecedents

Despite their central place in most conceptualizations of democracy (Shapiro 2003), free elections, and the office holders chosen by such means, never stand alone in shaping meaningful political outcomes; to one degree or another, both policy-making and the agenda-setting that shapes public life are always subject to other influences operating alongside the institutional core of democracy. These other sources of influence may emanate from the economically powerful or, alternatively, from those who are relatively economically (or socially) disadvantaged. This was especially evident in Spain during 2011, the final year in office of the Zapatero government, when economic markets and institutions on the one hand and crowds in the streets on the other hand played a decisive role in shaping the public agenda of the country's democracy. Not only in Spain but also in other

2. Among especially prominent examples of this quite large literature, see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Tilly 2004; della Porta and Diani 2012.

Eurozone countries, such as neighboring Portugal, 2011 was a year in which market actors and dynamics came to encroach on the ability of democratically elected governments and electoral processes to effectively shape policy-making approaches on social and economic matters (Fishman, 2011a). But the backdrop of economic crisis and disappointing governmental performance also served to unleash –or strengthen– types of civic participation that challenged existing institutional frameworks, through mobilizational mechanisms rooted in the country’s post-transition forms of *practice*. Indeed, not only formal political and civil society organizations but also loosely organized movements, informal social ties and cultural (or sub-cultural) frameworks have helped to sustain protest and shape its *discursive horizons* in post-Franco Spain (Fishman 2004).

The collective outpouring of semi-organized public protest and, in its midst, of highly expressive demand-making on a wide range of themes, filled the plazas of numerous cities during the run-up to the local elections of May 22, 2011, capturing the attention of scholars and citizens throughout Spain –and beyond the country’s borders. Much of this protest was quite antagonistic toward the increasingly market-oriented public policies enacted by the Zapatero government following its economic U-turn in May 2010 (Fishman 2010). The 2011 protest movement changed the country’s mood in fundamental ways³ and at least partially shifted the tone and thematic content of political life in ways that challenged the Socialist (PSOE) government’s turn toward austerity and labor market liberalization roughly one year earlier, but it also reflected the Socialists’ growing inability to attract the support of left-oriented activists, a harbinger of the PSOE’s massive electoral defeat in parliamentary elections on November 20.

This final chapter of the Zapatero government was in a deep sense ironic, for its initial path to power in an election held on March 14, 2004 (four years prior to its reelection in 2008) had been characterized by *de facto* social movement support in the de-institutionalized end to an electoral campaign that was called off in the wake of the massive terrorist attack on March 11 of that year in Madrid. Misinformation from the right-wing government then in power regarding the identity of those responsible for the attack quickly gave way, two days before the election, to the appropriation of an officially sponsored anti-terror demonstration by *micro-demonstrations*⁴ critical of the government and then, one day later, to semi-spontaneous anti-government protests on the legally designated “day of reflection” prior to voting on March 14 (Sampedro 2005; Fishman 2007; Sampedro 2008). One of democracy’s most institutionalized undertakings –the process culminating in the choice of a new government by the voters– had in a sense turned into a social movement episode in which Spanish citizens improvised new ways to express their rejection of both the Aznar government’s support for the American invasion of Iraq and

3. For an early indication of public opinion on the movement see *El País*, June 26, 2011, p. 20.

4. See Fishman 2007, 281.

that same government's effort to place the blame for the terrorist attack on the Basque movement, ETA, instead of its true authors in Al Qaeda. An election which had been expected to produce a third consecutive victory for the conservative Partido Popular (PP) instead served to reflect a large-scale shift in popular sentiment after the extraordinary events of the preceding days; a new government widely seen as Spain's most left-oriented since the Second Republic (Encarnación 2008; Field 2010) and influenced by the civic republican school of democratic theory (Martí and Pettit 2010), came to power.

For many social movement-oriented citizens, the new government appeared fundamentally different not only from its immediate predecessor, the Partido Popular (PP) government of José María Aznar, but also from the earlier Socialist government of Felipe González –widely seen as responsible for neo-liberal policy approaches on the economy (Royo 2000). Yet in May 2010, in the midst of economic crisis and under the influence of exogenous pressures from market actors and European Union institutions, the Zapatero government abandoned counter-cyclical economic stimulus and embraced austerity as well as labor market liberalization, thus distancing itself from many of its erstwhile supporters and their social aspirations. The social energy of the streets and of relatively uninstitutionalized protest reemerged with force one year later, in May 2011, but on this occasion protest was aimed in part at the policies of the PSOE's Zapatero government and at the institutional framework seen to impede alternatives to those policies. Protestors sought to expand policy options and avenues for civic expression and in the process they altered the country's political agenda –at least for a time. But was there anything fundamentally new about the politics of Spain's *indignados*? What role had public protest played in the country's post-Franco democracy prior to 2011 and did that pre-existing pattern change in any meaningful way in the last year of the Zapatero government? We now address these questions before turning to an examination of the historical basis for the Spanish model of political contention.

Public Protest and Political Institutions in Post-Franco Spain

The democratic regime inaugurated in the elections of June 15, 1977 and institutionalized in the Constitution of 1978 was the product of a pathway to democracy that has been much theorized –and debated (Maravall 1982; Foweraker 1989; Fishman 1990a; 1990b; Gunther 1992; Linz and Stepan 1996; Alexander 2002; Threlfall 2008; González Martín and Martín García 2009; Sánchez Cuenca 2010; Herrera and Markoff 2011). Social pressures from below –especially those of the labor movement, which had constituted a growing challenge to the Franco regime– played a crucial role in the passage to democracy, but the central decisions of the transition and the design of new institutions were undertaken by political elites committed to a consensus-oriented framework. The forging of new representative institutions and freedoms was carried out within constraints set by conti-

nities in the state apparatus and, largely as a result, the opposition's renunciation of aspirations for radical economic or socio-cultural transformation. Democratic freedoms were achieved but the major institutional actors –not only on the right but also on the left– came to see the expansive agenda of the Second Republic in the 1930s as out of place in this new post-Franco context. Such were the foundational understandings of the new democratic regime, but what role was to be played by social protest and more institutionalized forms of politics in the new system? In fact, as we shall see, the post-Franco democracy has been an unusual one in certain crucial respects that hold considerable significance for political actors and scholars alike.

The new democracy initially experienced a rapid growth of membership in long banned political parties and civil society organizations –such as the union movement. The end of repression and the opening of new opportunities for citizen involvement generated a mini-boom in various forms of citizen involvement, but that early wave of involvement was more limited than in many other new democracies and it quickly gave way to a decline in membership in some crucial organizations, such as unions (Jordana 1996; Pérez Díaz 1993; Fishman 1990b; Hamann 2012). Political party membership, a crucial component of conventional institutional participation, was low in Spain's new democracy in comparison with both other European democracies and Spain's own pre-Franco past (Morlino 1998). The party system which emerged soon experienced a major crisis in two parties, the center-right Unión del Centro Democrático (UCD) and the Communist Party (PCE), which had played a decisive role in the agreements characterizing the country's transition-era "politics of consensus" (Gunther et al. 1986). In a fundamental sense, institutionalized forces which played a central role in Spain's transition proved weaker than expected and than equivalent organized forces have been in many other European democracies. This outcome offers suggestive evidence of the historically-rooted uneasy connection between individual-level civic dispositions and institutional politics in post-Franco Spain. Even when local-level power-holders later sought to forge participatory institutions at the municipal level, the result was somewhat disappointing due to limits in the public disposition to make use of new institutional channels for participation (Navarro, Cuesta and Font 2009). But what of *uninstitutionalized* forces and forms of participation –such as protest in the streets? Was the relative weakness of institutional channels of participation reflective of an apathetic citizenry or of something quite different?

As a great wealth of quantitative data and qualitative evidence demonstrates, post-Franco Spain has been a world leader in social protest of various sorts (Fishman 2004, 10-15). Strikes, demonstrations and smaller gestures of protest –including numerous instances in which apartment dwellers have hung signs or banners from their windows to attract attention to one cause or another– have constituted a common and recurrent component of public life. If many such protests have been sponsored by large mainstream organizations or even (in the case of anti-terrorist demonstrations) by governmental office-holders themselves, many others have been thoroughly insurgent in character, responding to the

call of 'alternative movements' (Flesher Fominaya, 2007) some of which have grown quickly. These movements' *creative uses of public space* –a crucial point to be discussed further below– have made it possible for them to mobilize many citizens lacking any direct or permanent organizational link to the initiators of protest. Spanish protest has been far more massive in scale than a strictly organizational analysis of its foundations might lead one to expect, and many protests can be characterized as semi-spontaneous in the sense that informal social connections or loosely organized movements rather than formal political organizations have served as their mobilizational underpinning.

Spain's ubiquitous protests have served as a source of encouragement and meaning to many participants and supporters; however, these widespread mobilizations have struck some Spaniards as a nuisance or inconvenience. Emblematic of this latter perspective were the remarks of the municipal traffic commissioner of Seville who complained in 2002 that his city was suffering from a daily average of three demonstrations.⁵ The effort to minimize the public role, and the significance, of protest has been a recurring theme in the discourse and actions of many office holders. Indeed, a crucial foundational limitation on contention in post-Franco Spain has legally prevented protestors from taking their causes to the steps of the country's parliament in Madrid. Political elites of the transition period decided to institute this policy as a way of insulating representative institutions from the direct social pressure of protest movements (Fishman 2011b). Conservative political forces have often sought to deny the legitimacy and the significance of large scale protest, a tendency recently reflected in declarations by Madrid PP leader Esperanza Aguirre likening the *indignados* of 2011 to "precursors of totalitarianism".⁶ Yet the effort to keep social protest out of the recognized space of legitimate politics has not been limited to conservatives. The prohibition on demonstrating outside the parliament in Madrid has been broadly supported by Socialists as well as those to their right and press coverage of social protest has often been limited and, to one degree or another, unfriendly (Sampedro 2004). The *indignados* of 2011 and their predecessors in earlier Spanish protest movements have in many instances encountered harsh police treatment in local contexts governed by forces other than the PP. Within the PSOE a virtual fault line has separated political leaders and activists friendly –or at least open– to social protest from others deeply antagonistic toward uninstitutionalized forms of citizen expression (Fishman 2004, 154-162). With some notable exceptions, institutional power-holders have tended to view extra-institutional protestors as lying outside the realm of legitimate politics, thus establishing a fundamental contrast between the *democratic practice* of contemporary Spain and that of neighboring Portugal, where the passage from authoritarianism to democracy took a thoroughly different form –with enduring consequences for the protestor/power-holder nexus (Fishman 2011b).

5. See *El País*, February 11, 2002, p. 63.

6. See *Público*, June 15, 2011, p. 16.

At the same time, many Spanish movement activists have manifested a thorough disinterest in the institutional political sphere, preferring to avoid any sort of engagement with power-holders. Indeed, protest movements have been internally divided between those determined to maintain a strictly anti-institutional practice, free of contacts with government officials, and others open to one or another form of discussion and engagement with power-holders (Flesher Fominaya 2007; Juris 2008). On both sides of the divide separating movements from power-holders in post-Franco Spain many actors have sought to keep these two political worlds thoroughly separate from one another. At some moments in 2011 this pattern seemed to be evolving, with the transformation of what Charles Tilly has formulated as *repertoires of protest*. The *indignados* crucially sought to take their case to the doors of parliamentary institutions in Madrid and Barcelona as well as to other decision-making bodies. Yet in the end these initiatives have not (or at least not yet) produced a fundamental change in the place of public protest in Spanish politics. Protestors have generally not wished to engage power-holders in conversation or any sort of sustained interchange and their efforts to pressure official institutions, by bringing the voices of discord to their doors, have been met by a strong police response –limiting demonstrators’ ability to physically situate protest on the steps of representative institutions. Despite tentative signs of some evolution in the longtime disconnect between movements and (most) office-holders, at the close of 2011 these two worlds of political action remained essentially separate from one another. The protest arena, preferred by many citizens for the expression of their sentiments and grievances, has remained largely unconnected to the doings of official governmental institutions.

Of course, it is something of a simplification to suggest that contentious politics has consistently followed one cohesive logic throughout Spain. Most scholars, following Charles Tilly, would expect incidents of contention to constitute a *repertoire* with some internal range of variation, just as has indeed been the case, but Spain has additionally been characterized by quite significant territorial differentiation –especially between those regions with a distinctive national consciousness and history and the rest of the country. Thus the practice of Basque social movements and their interactions with political power require monographic treatment (Tejerina, Fernández Sobrado and Aierdi 1995) and the politics of labor protest in Catalunya has also been somewhat distinctive (Fishman 1993). Yet, having said that, the commonalities of Spanish history reflected, for example, in the country’s shared experience of Francoist repression and democratic transition, have created enough commonality in patterns of political practice to justify the effort to conceptualize and account for general Spanish patterns found in most of the country’s territory. Crucially, the general pattern constituted by these commonalities –and presented above– has tended to persist despite the shifting nature of government policies and popular concerns. This pattern of relative continuity in the face of constantly changing circumstances raises an obvious question: What accounts for the distinctive place occupied by public protest in Spanish politics?

Explaining the Place of Protest in Spanish Politics

I argue that the explanation for the pattern described above is to be found in certain crucial facets of Spanish history, yet the explanation I offer focuses on relatively recent history rather than on nineteenth century and early twentieth century forms of political action interrupted by the Civil War and the repression of the Franco years. Granted, Spain's 19th century did generate some tendencies toward relatively uninstitutionalized forms of political expression (Linz 2006), and at least one social movement scholar has recently taken up the possibility that the country's pre-Franco political past holds the roots of the ongoing reticence of many protestors to engage power-holders in conversation (Romanos 2012). From my perspective, efforts to account for the current place of protest in political life by primary reference to elements of the country's pre-Civil War past encounter numerous difficulties. To the observation that larger Latin European countries with an early history of anarchism and syndicalism in the labor movement have developed patterns of political contention rather different from that of contemporary Spain (Romanos 2012), I add several points. From the standpoint of cross-national comparisons, it should be noted that Spain's smaller neighbor to its west, Portugal, was also home to a major early 20th century anarcho-syndicalist movement but its contemporary form of democratic practice –and of political contention– is thoroughly unlike that of Spain (Fishman 2011b). But in a broader sense, the crucial factors defining the role of public protest in Spanish political life cannot be reduced to the reticence of many movement activists to engage institutional office-holders in dialogue.

Two additional factors have played a decisive role in shaping the place of protest in Spanish public life. First, whereas subordinate social groups such as workers were highly organized in the 1930s, especially during the Second Republic when both union and party membership was relatively high, post-Franco democracy has been characterized by relatively low levels of mass membership in political and labor associations except for the distinctive case of the Basque Country (and smaller sub-cultural settings such as the coal valleys of Asturias). Second, it must be emphasized that the relative disconnect between protest and institutional power has been very much a “two-way street” in which many governmental office-holders have played a large role by curtailing any opportunity for discussions with the voices of dissatisfaction in the streets. The ban on demonstrations on the steps of parliament, supported by Socialists as well as those to their right, is but the clearest exemplar of this rather broad and persistent tendency. This is not to say that all Spanish office-holders have rejected the legitimacy and significance of protest or opportunities for dialogue with the voices of dissent. Particularly within the Socialist Party, but also to a lesser extent in other parties, political elites have been divided over whether to open their offices and agendas to the concerns of social movement activists. Divisions over whether to pursue or avoid opportunities for dialogue between protestors and office-holders have been found within both social movements and the circles of power, but the ove-

rall balance –and pattern of interaction– characterizing public life has relegated social protest to a relatively marginal and extra-institutional position in the country's post-Franco democracy. At times office-holders have even practiced a *politics of denial*, essentially ignoring the numbers and concerns of protestors.

I argue that the explanation for this form of practice is to be found in a complex, two part, “critical juncture” constituted sequentially by the Franco regime and the democratic transition of the 1970s. The argument which I offer attempts to identify a two stage historical “turning point” or “critical juncture” (Abbott 2001; Pierson 2004), albeit one which has been quite obviously conditioned by its “critical antecedents” (Slater and Simmons 2010) in prior history. I suggest that this extended two-stage historical experience channeled much political expression by socially subordinate sectors toward uninstitutionalized types of practice and simultaneously led many institutional actors to view social protest in a highly critical light. The result has been a relative disconnect between common forms of citizen participation voiced in the streets and the institutionally recognized mechanisms for formulating public policy –a pattern which has generated certain suboptimal societal outcomes (Fishman 2010, 2011b).

Part of the explanation for this pattern of bifurcated democratic practice is to be found in the experience of workers and their organizations under the Franco regime. Despite the massive, often deadly, repression of the early Franco years, the regime failed to eliminate the ability of workers and others in the opposition to engage in collective action in defense of their interests, but the collective action which survived (or re-emerged) under these difficult circumstances was to take an increasingly distorted form shaped by the contradictory authoritarian context of the 1960s and early 1970s. The regime continued to jail opposition labor activists in large numbers but at the same time it opened spaces for the election of worker representatives in the obligatory regime “vertical union” and for collective bargaining carried out by those representatives on behalf of workers. (Fishman 1990b, 87-137). The opposition labor movement successfully adapted its practice to the dual reality it faced of high ongoing risks of repression for leaders and activists –who were in danger of arrest and long stays in jail– alongside the opening up of institutional possibilities to represent workers (within certain constraints) inside the regime's obligatory union. Comisiones Obreras and its allies in the opposition labor movement remained illegal and subject to arrest yet they were able not only to win many representative positions for their militants in elections held within the official “vertical union” of the regime but also to wage strikes that reshaped labor relations in Spanish industry. Employers often found it necessary to negotiate with the *de facto* leaders of workers in the illegal opposition labor movement; the regime's effort to construct a non-conflictual model of labor relations met with complete failure. Through its successes, the opposition labor movement helped to undermine the basis for anti-democratic rule.

Yet in other respects, the achievements of the opposition labor movement were something of a double-edged sword. Comisiones Obreras and its opposition allies mobilized

workers without constructing a mass-based organizational tie to most of those engaged in supporting strikes and voting for opposition activists in union representational elections. Through its skillful use of electoral channels of representation within the official regime union and its (quite risky but successful) endeavors to reach workers and spread strike actions through the *creative use of public space* (Fishman 1990b, 121-134), the opposition labor movement managed to initiate a great deal of collective worker action while also representing worker interests rather effectively in negotiations with employers. Broad rank and file support, reflected in widespread participation in strikes and protests, extended well beyond the core of opposition activists who sustained a permanent and clandestine organizational structure, at the constant risk of being jailed. Thus many of the workers who were mobilized and represented by opposition labor activists lacked any sort of ongoing organizational linkage to the still clandestine organization of “core” activists. The multi-layered pattern of struggle which emerged in opposition to the regime partially dissociated collective worker action and representation from the autonomous organization of workers. Workers – and others – learned that collective struggles could generate important victories and material benefits but they also learned that such struggles could be successfully waged without mass membership organizations linking most movement supporters to “core” leaders and activists in a stable and institutionalized way.

The experience of the labor movement –the most decisively important collective actor in opposition to the Franco regime– was, then, a deeply contradictory one. Continuing repression coupled with the simultaneous opening up of certain spaces for the limited institutional expression of worker interests contributed to the dynamics ultimately leading to the demise of authoritarian rule and the return to democracy but at the same time profoundly reshaped the normal relationship between mass organization and collective action. Worker protests and strikes contributed in significant ways to undermining the long-term viability of anti-democratic rule, but the Franco regime changed the nature of the labor movement in certain crucial respects. And the cultural lessons learned by many of those involved in the struggles of that period led them to see sporadic mass participation in demonstrations and strikes (without ongoing membership ties to worker-based organizations) as an effective way to defend popular interests. These historical struggles provided a basis in *practice* for the enduring importance of relatively uninstitutionalized forms of collective action. If, after the death of Franco in 1975, the politics of the transition period had encouraged the left’s institutional leadership to articulate demands and carry out mobilizational campaigns which fully expressed the hopes and expectations of their activist base, political life might well have taken a direction greatly strengthening mainline organizations such as parties and unions –leaving relatively little room for extra-institutional voices of protest. However, the distinctive constraints of the post-Franco transition were not to lead in that direction.

I argue that the consensus-oriented transition to democracy, despite its success in consolidating representative government (Gunther, Montero and Botella 2004), accentua-

ted the tendency for much political life to take place outside mainstream organizations while also contributing to the mutual suspicions which have distanced institutional power-holders and extra-institutional “alternative” protest movements from one another. It is generally accepted that the post-Franco transition was characterized by a new embrace of democracy by reformists within the Franco regime alongside moderation and self-restraint by political forces on the left –reflected in the Moncloa Pact of 1977 as well as negotiations over the new democratic Constitution and other matters. Some analysts have viewed this pattern as essentially one of elite level decision-making and moderation (Gunther 1992), presumably without a widespread social basis or at least without mass-based pressures leading elites in that direction. However, strong evidence indicates that many workplace level worker activists and leaders, located far from the halls of power in Madrid, thoroughly internalized the case for moderation and advocated self-restraint on the part of the labor movement and its allies (Fishman 1990b). The dynamics leading to moderation and restraint were not limited to the political elite. Nonetheless, many Spaniards did not internalize the preference for moderation; the nature of underlying worker grievances and concerns could have led socio-political action in a very different direction had the conditioning circumstances been fundamentally different. Many aspirations that were felt at the time of the democratic transition (and consolidation) were either left unsaid or, more often, somewhat understated in the context of the institutional left’s restraint during the early post-Franco years. The important research of Durán Muñoz (2000) shows that the initial demands and concerns of workers during the Iberian Peninsula transitions of the 1970s were virtually identical in Portugal and Spain but that in Portugal those demands quickly gave way to revolutionary and “transgressive” mobilizations whereas in Spain such mobilizations were effectively made impossible by continuity in the state apparatus and its coercive capacities; collective worker action followed a far more moderate path in Spain. Crucially, this moderation was never universally embraced within the opposition, and internal conflicts over the renunciation of more radical mobilizational strategies beset many political and social forces on the left –especially in Catalunya (Fishman 1993) where the magnitude of the internal crisis within the communist-linked *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (PSUC) was especially severe. Many militants who, in the early phases of the transition, joined mainstream organizations such as large parliamentary parties or unions ultimately left those organizations and turned toward other forms of involvement.

This context generated strong pressures pushing the two arenas under discussion here –those of uninstitutionalized public protest and institutional power– away from one another. For those committed to the transition’s predominant moderation, social pressure that was “decoupled” from the mainstream preference for restraint seemed potentially “destabilizing” and troubling. The consensus-seeking construction of memories of the Civil War (Aguilar 2002) contributed culturally to the case for moderation (and thus to the distrust of bottom-up social pressure) embraced by many in the mainstream leadership of the left –and other institutionally central forces. It was in this climate that political elites decided

to prohibit demonstrators from taking their protests to the steps of parliament. The discomfort with popular protest reflected by that decision has often reemerged in the practice and declarations of institutional political leaders.

For those activists –or ordinary citizens– skeptical of the elite-level negotiations and mobilizational restraint of the transition period, mainstream organizations seemed insufficient as an outlet for their political energies. Public protest, much of it semi-spontaneous or responding to initiatives of “alternative” movements outside the polity’s institutional core, came to occupy a large role in the country’s collective life. Elected office-holders, including many on the left, have often attempted to “screen out” such voices of extra-institutional protest, rather than seeking to incorporate them into mainstream democratic life. Socially marginal actors –such as the residents of informal shanties subject to demolition and somewhat less marginal actors in housing protest movements– have failed to gain a hearing from institutional power-holders parallel to that enjoyed by their counterparts in the smaller Iberian democracy, Portugal, which inaugurated its post-authoritarian political life in a revolutionary process thoroughly unlike the Spanish transition (Fishman 2011b). The sharp contrast with neighboring Portugal helps to establish that it was the circumstances of relatively proximate history rather than the cultural memories of pre-Franco Spain which set the stage for the place occupied by public protest in the political life of contemporary Spain.

The Larger Implications of Spanish Protest

Whatever explanation one prefers for the role of public protest in contemporary Spain, the larger implications and consequences of this pattern must be addressed. Does Spain’s extra-institutional protest really matter for anyone other than those directly involved? It should not come as a surprise to readers that I view Spanish social protest as holding considerable significance even though the direct impact on policy-making exerted by extra-institutional protest (as opposed to actions such as general strikes led by mainstream organizations) has typically been far more limited than protestors would like or than has been the case in at least some other national contexts. Protestors have contributed to large-scale shifts in the country’s public agenda and in public opinion on some crucial occasions such as the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003 (Jiménez 2007, 414-417) and, just over one year later, the collective national response to the massive terrorist attack preceding the elections of March 14, 2004. Protest movements have often managed to articulate their grievances through globalizing discourses which identify distant causes of locally felt problems and similarly scaled solutions (Fishman 2004), thus helping to calibrate Spanish politics to the evolving challenges produced by the increasingly global nature of economic phenomena. And in concrete local ways, such as protecting homeowners from foreclosure, they have also made their mark. But in many ways, crucial societal outcomes in post-Franco Spain

reflect the inability of bottom-up pressure to influence the institutional realm as thoroughly as has been the case in some other contexts (Fishman 2010).

Yet even the shortfalls to be found in this historical record hold their significance, for they raise important theoretical issues requiring scholarly analysis –precisely the sort of activity so effectively encouraged by Rosa Virós. The analysis of Spanish political reality has played a prominent role in the elaboration of theories of democracy (Linz and Stepan 1978; 1996) and I argue that the distinctive place of public protest in this country’s democratic life holds equal promise for contributing to the theorization of the nexus between protestors and institutional power-holders. The Spanish experience underscores the fact that the significance of public protest in politics needs to be understood in (at least) two-dimensional space. National contexts vary in the salience of public protest within the overall set of participatory citizen strategies and practices, but variation on this dimension –where Spain scores quite highly– appears largely unrelated to variation on another dimension, namely the relative openness of institutional office holders to the concerns and demands of protestors. Scholars have been well aware of the existence of variation on these two dimensions but the existence of a national case which in a rather enduring way has placed itself highly on one of these dimensions and far lower on the other raises questions requiring further theoretical work. The place of public protest in Spanish politics sets out puzzles and challenges not only for political actors but also for students of politics committed to understanding “the different types of pressure of citizens on office-holders” (Virós 1987, 177).

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