

Spain Again, Seventy Years After

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Before leaving Montreal for Madrid a friend gave me a heads-up. He had traveled to both Russia and Spain this year and told me that the Spanish police were much worse than their Russian counterparts. He said that if I was within striking distance of a cop and his truncheon, whether I was involved in a protest or not, I would be considered fair game, and also that being with the press or wearing something that said prensa would not protect me. With 25% of the country out of work and fed up with the government and its austerity cuts or recortes, the police, he said, were showing no mercy. Men, women, teenagers, it didn't matter; if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time you could expect to be hit. Someone had given them a green light to get the job done the old fashion way, and it showed. On the 25th and 26th of September, the Spanish were shocked to see news reports of the Policia Nacional savagely clubbing and shooting demonstrators with rubber bullets in front of the Congreso de los Diputados. For a country that had endured 36 years of Fascist rule, it was a bit much. Police brutality was not something to be taken lightly, and while the transition to democracy after Francisco Franco's death had for the most part worked, it didn't mean that the secret torture chambers and the unmarked graves of the fascist era had been forgotten. The memories were still there and with every clash between the police and the protestors, the Spanish could judge for themselves whether or not anything had changed since the 1930s.

But was history really repeating itself, I thought? Was Spain, as it struggled to survive in a worldwide economic crisis, on the brink of something catastrophic? And if so, who or what was to blame and was there any solution to these problems? Certainly a case could be made that the country in 2012 has more in common with 1936 than it does with the period immediately preceding the Wall Street collapse. Before the crash everyone was making money, and in the small town where I lived in 2006 just east of Malaga, it was obvious why the British had jokingly renamed the Costa del Sol the "Costa del Crane." Everyone was building. There was a mad rush by anyone with any kind of land to sell it as fast as they could to the developers of the Nuevas Urbanizaciones (the new subdivisions). They were springing up in an almost Brazilian way wherever you looked: European favellas complete with structural faults and in some cases no running water. My own apartment building had been built on a hill and had a large visible crack dividing the upper section from the lower section. You could see it in the outside wall, and I asked one of my neighbors if the structure was actually splitting in two, but he assured me that it was just the ground that was settling and that it would take a while.

Like all property bubbles this one didn't last and when it collapsed the economic engine of the country disappeared with it. Unemployment skyrocketed, people

started to default on their mortgages, and the mood of the country went south. Since 2008, over 400,000 have been evicted from their homes and my grandfather would have certainly recognized the anger and frustration the average Spaniard faced with such bleak economic prospects. He would have also recognized a government that is essentially powerless to stop the international forces that are bearing down on the country, but that at the same time are aiding and abetting these forces as it soldiers on with the austerity budgets demanded by the Germans, the IMF, the E. U. and the big banks.

The Andalusian writer, Antonio Muñoz Molina, who was the head of the Instituto Cervantes in NYC and now teaches at NYU, is not a friend of the Rajoy government, nor does he approve of its austerity policies. “There are 6 million unemployed in Spain and many of them have no government support whatsoever. The government is simply following the E.U. game-plan and pushing its own right wing agenda.” We were speaking in a bar near the center of Madrid and I asked him how things had changed in the last four years. He said that there is an immense sadness in the people. “Whereas before the crisis there was energy and hope for the future, now there is none.” At the same time he cautioned that this generalized feeling of depression could easily change to populism. “For example, look at the Catalan independence movement. It is their new fantasy. As a country it would never be viable and in fact it has never existed as a sovereign state. It has always been a part of Spain. Now they are saying that their region gives more to Madrid in taxes than it ever gets back in funding for its social programs. But when the economy is bad everyone starts to complain about that. The real problem is that there is too much bureaucracy in Spain. There are simply too many governments when you add up all the local, provincial, and regional entities. And all of these governments are redundant and cost money, because we are looking at a lot of salaries that have to be paid for a lot of useless bureaucrats. That is what we need to cut, not our health, education or social programs.”

Strangely enough, Rodrigo Rato, an ex-managing director of the IMF and a former minister in the conservative Aznar government (PP), agrees with much of what Molina has to say. They are about as different as you can be politically but they both believe that the sheer size of government in Spain has to be reduced if the country is ever to recover financially. Rato also thinks that Catalan independence is unrealistic, but not because you can't change the laws (presently it would be illegal under the Spanish constitution) but for economic reasons. He gave the example of the port of Barcelona. It is the largest and busiest, not because it is in Catalonia, but because it is in Spain. Put that port in an independent country and its business will suffer. He then mentioned the problems that they would have using the Euro and repaying their share of Spain's national debt. He did think, though, that the push for independence was being exacerbated by the bad economy and that the Catalans were right to a certain extent in expecting more from Madrid.

Unlike Molina, Rato is in favor of the government's austerity policy as a solution to Spain's economic problems. Still, he thinks that the government working on its own is not enough. It needs the active support of the European Central Bank (ECB) as a lender of last resort, similar to what we have in the USA with the Federal Reserve. This, however, would require a European banking union, with a unified system of supervision, he said. I asked him if the Germans would agree to this and he answered that he thinks so, that eventually they will have to. I nodded and as he started to explain the need for “mutualizing (bank) losses on a European level,” I thought that it was actually quite surreal to hear Mr. Rato talk about the merits of a unified system of supervision, considering that recently he and thirty others had been indicted in Spain for banking fraud, falsifying documents, and embezzlement. As president of Bankia (an enormous Spanish savings bank) from its creation in 2010 to May of this year when it reported losses of 4.3 billion Euros, it would have been his responsibility, in theory at least, to have an idea of what was going on where he worked. The meltdown, after all, was quite a scandal. The bank had to be partially nationalized by the Spanish government and here in front of me was a man who had perhaps looked deep into the center of this financial black hole. A man who supported, without hesitation, a program of austerity and budget cuts that would never affect him (he is quite wealthy) and who, as president of Bankia, stood accused of nearly destroying an institution where tens of thousands of ordinary citizens entrusted their savings. Every man is of course innocent until proven otherwise, but it occurred to me that should eventually he be found guilty as charged and convicted, Spain would have succeeded in doing something that the United States with all its courts and lawyers seems incapable of doing: actually bringing to justice one of the bankers responsible for this huge mess.

Later that day when I met Toni Cantó, an actor turned member of parliament with the Union Progreso y Democracia (UpyD), he said that if I had spoken with Rato, then I should know that the money used to bail out the banks that he was connected with was public (which I knew). But that this was totally normal in Spain because the two major political parties are inside the banks (which was something I didn't know). “In the Cajas de Ahorros (the savings banks) Rato and company were running the banks, controlling them for their own uses. Making a lot of money and using them for projects that they could utilize in upcoming elections. Construction projects, like the city of lights in Valencia, the Castellon airport, have you heard anything about that? It was built but it isn't open, because it isn't being used, no one actually flies there.”

What I needed to understand, said Cantó, was that in Spain half the banks are private and the other half are public and the political parties thought of the public banks as a kind of gigantic ATM machine.

“This is true,” agreed Pablo Gallego, one of the founders of Los Indignados, the Spanish group that was the inspiration for the activists of Occupy Wall Street, “But part of the reason for this stems from the fact that after the dictatorship

there was a political change, but there wasn't an economic change. Franco himself said that he had essentially left the regime intact. And now everyone is talking about this economic immobility. The same oligarchy that controlled things under Franco is still in control. The families that ran the banks and the building industry in Spain when Franco was alive are still there.”

But it gets worse. According to Gallego, many of the leaders of the present political parties are sons of those who were members of the Fascist party. “Rubalcaba, the head of the socialist party, is one such person. For the Falange he was a black sheep, but no one on the left ever held it against him that his father was a fascist. But this guy now has a million euros in his bank account so what kind of socialist are we talking about? People are talking about this. They don't trust these politicians and they don't trust the system, which in turn favors the fascist parties in Europe. Look at what is happening in Greece with Golden Dawn.” I asked him if there was anything similar to Golden Dawn in Spain and he said that there wasn't, but that there are some members of the Spanish delegation to the European parliament who now openly say that Spain was better under Franco.

But what do the Spanish really want; more or less democracy? In the end would the Spanish favor a group like Los Indignados or the Greek Golden dawn party? “That is the question. We asked for more democracy. I know what happened to Occupy Wall Street. How the US government got rid of them. Here in Spain we had some meetings with the police, the police union. These cops told us that we had to be careful because the government has spies in our organization. In the end what we really want is a democracy that is protected from economic power.”

But are people in Spain beginning to wonder if they even need a government considering the lack of success Prime Minister Rajoy has had in reducing either unemployment or the deficit? “Well, during the Civil War there were over a million anarchists, a really a huge number. We have a tradition of that here. We had Franco, but we also had anarchists. If you ask me, though, it's better to have a state, and a government.”

As for Los Indignados, he thinks that they have to evolve from being protestors to citizens. They have to ask themselves just what kind of society they want. In his opinion, most people would say that they want equality, justice and an end to corruption. Unfortunately, he admitted, while a lot of people want change, they don't want to get involved because they are afraid of another coup d'etat. “Spain has had a history of this.”

To get a better idea of how the crisis was affecting the average Spaniard and indeed how it was moving up the economic ladder I spoke to film director Alejandro Toledo. Toledo has had a very successful career directing TV commercials for corporate clients and I asked him about the advertisement he filmed for Caritas, the Catholic Church's main charitable organization. It is a very powerful clip that shows a young man in his thirties walking through the

streets of Madrid with a little girl who isn't more than five or six. The two of them are homeless and the man is tired and worried, not so much about anything that might happen to himself, but because of his daughter. He doesn't have any money and she doesn't understand why they can't go home, and she wants something to eat. The first thing you notice about him is how normal he seems. He is not at all what you would think of when you think of a homeless person. His trousers and his jacket are neat and clean and his hair is cut, and even the suitcase that he's pulling along gives him more the look of a tourist than a man who has just lost his job. This is a story about the new poor in Spain, about the middle class that is finding it harder and harder to get by in the big cities and that is increasingly turning to organizations like Caritas for help.

It is a very moving and realistic commercial and I asked Toledo how he came up with the idea. What inspired him to do an advertisement for Caritas? "It's based on a true story" he said. "One day I was walking along a street in Madrid and I saw this guy who I hadn't seen in ten years; a film producer like me, walking into a Caritas food dispensary with two of his kids. I was so surprised to see him that I stood there and the next thing you know the three of them were walking out again carrying bags of food. Of course, I understood immediately that he was taking that food because he needed it for himself and his kids and it hit me that this man was a professional and that if it could happen to him, if he could lose his job, then it could happen to anyone, myself included. And it was then that I knew that I had to contribute in some way. I couldn't just stand by saying nothing."

When I asked if the Spanish resented the immigrants who were still there and receiving unemployment benefits he said that none of these people are stealing from the system, that everyone is just getting what they paid for. He was categorical in his support for them. "This is a crisis that is affecting our own but also all these immigrants. We have millions of them here who came to work in the construction industry during the boom period. They have put down roots in Spain, with kids too, and they are covered by the system. So, what I noticed when I was making my movie was that the crisis was relative. Most of the people are covered by social security and health care is free. Of the five million that we have here who are unemployed, three million are covered by social security. It is the other two million who we really need to think about."

All of this is manageable, he said, so long as the government continues to pay for benefits like unemployment and health care. The money is there, it's just a question of how the Spanish decide to use it. Caritas does a lot to help those who don't have any kind of coverage, but even more important is the traditional role of the Latin family in taking care of its own. "In a Latin country, you have to ask yourself with 5 million people unemployed why aren't these people on the streets, why isn't there already a revolution? It's because of the communities that exist, with the family doing their part, this is what Latin is, this is the Latin mentality. If you go to the USA you don't see many Latin people who are

homeless in the streets. In Miami for example you don't see Latin homeless.” He did have a point about Spain. Many people who I spoke to while in Madrid told me that if it wasn't for their families it would be much more difficult to survive in the crisis.

So the safety net in Spain was not just the government. Individuals and families still counted. Recently a couple in the Basque Country, Jose and Isabel (their last names were not given) posted an insert in a local newspaper offering their vacation home for up to a year to any family in economic difficulty, free of charge. The turning point for them was the suicide (one of many due to eviction) of a woman who was about to be removed along with her family from a house not too far from where Jose and Isabel live. In one interview, Jose said that at this rate “Spain will become a country of houses without people and people without homes”. He said that they were not millionaires. That life, however, had been good to them but that they were no better than anyone else. Something had to be done and this is what they decided to do. Their example has inspired many. The city governments of both Madrid and Barcelona, for instance, have now decided to allocate some of the houses that they have to people who have been evicted from their homes. Perhaps all of this could be seen as a new trend and evidence that people are waking up to the fact that strong measures, and not just more austerity, need to be taken with the crisis and the pain that it has generated.

Some, such as UGT union leader Cándido Méndez, whom I interviewed the day of their general strike in November, understand that it is going to take a long time, perhaps ten to twenty years, to rebuild Spain's economy after the collapse of the housing industry. Culture, the Spanish language, and agriculture are some of the strong points that he sees in Spain's economic future, but this is going to require a lot of investment, he told me.

Others, such as the 70 year old Enrique de Castro, are not waiting for the money and are taking matters into their own hands. De Castro was certainly one of the more interesting people I met while in Spain. A Catholic priest, although he doesn't like the word “priest.” “Jesus,’ he says, 'abolished the priesthood like he abolished the temple, like he abolished the intermediaries between man and god. In the Bible this is very clear, even if they try to hide it.”

De Castro has been serving the parish of Vallecas, a suburb about 10 miles outside of Madrid, for 31 years. During the transition period to democracy in Spain he denounced the torture that was still being carried out by the police, even during the socialist González government. He has always taken the side of the weakest in society and he and the other priests in his parish came out in favor of the laws legalizing divorce and gay marriage and this obviously created a lot of tension with his superiors. “We were talking to journalists in the newspapers and on TV and telling them, for instance, what we knew about the world of drug dealing (his parish is in a section of greater Madrid which has

always been a problem area for drugs). Namely that there were economic interests, even political interests, in putting to sleep, so to speak, a whole generation of potentially rebellious youth.”

“What we supported and what we were against contrasted stridently with the image of other priests and especially with the church hierarchy, but our job was to take care of those who couldn't take care of themselves. Finally I remember that an auxiliary bishop from Madrid came to see me and asked me to sign a document that was written by Ratzinger himself. He was already Pope, even if this particular document was from his days as a Cardinal in the Santo Ufficio. The bishop asked me to read and to sign that document if I wanted to be in communion with him and with the cardinal. But I realized that if I signed it I wouldn't be in communion with my people, because basically it was saying that homosexuality was against nature, that they were depraved, etc.” And so he didn't sign it.

I asked him what he thought about the austerity program of the Rajoy government and he said it was affecting in a negative way everyone. He has personally worked with many Moroccan teenagers, even taking some into his own home. The cutbacks meant that all of these boys could no longer receive medical treatment because they didn't have proper visas. He knew of a few who had been receiving treatment for cancer or AIDS and they had had to give up their treatment.

I asked him what he thought would happen to Spain and he said that in his opinion things would get worse. The government would continue with its austerity measures and the labor unions would hold their one day strikes that affected no one. “I am convinced that the only solution to our problems is living in small groups and doing the best we can within these groups. In our parish we have created this kind of community, one of mutual aid and respect for others. The only revolution that we need to start is the one based on caring, on feelings, and generosity. It is the only revolution possible, because if you seize power you become that power and there is no difference between you and it. This was the tragedy of the countries of Eastern Europe, they made a revolution with the people and they then governed without them.”

Spain, I knew, would be different. It would survive the crisis because of its people. “True faith,” De Castro told me as I said good-bye, “is believing in others.” The strength of the Spanish had always come from the small communities, from people taking care of each other and believing in their essential dignity as human beings, and it would be no different in 2012. In a time of crisis, everyone is given the chance to discover what is essential in life.

John Patrick Hemingway (born 1960) is an American author, whose memoir *Strange Tribe: A Family Memoir* (Lyons Press, 2007) examines the similarities and the complex relationship between his father Dr. Gregory Hemingway and his grandfather, the Nobel Laureate Ernest Hemingway; in particular it addresses the issue of his father's cross-dressing and sex reassignment and its connection to Ernest Hemingway.

Hemingway moved to Milan, Italy in 1983, where he pursued a writing and translating career. Some of his fiction has appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Provincetown Arts* and *Chum Literary Magazine*.

Hemingway is currently working on a collection of his short stories.

He lives in Montreal with his two children.

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