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## The Generation Game:

Javier Cercas, Podemos and the (Im)Possibility of Progressive Politics in Spain<sup>1</sup>

Duncan Wheeler

The general elections held on December 20, 2015 were the most unpredictable and bitterly fought in Spain since 1979. This was the cause and the consequence of the rise of new political parties, most noticeably Podemos and Ciudadanos, who have translated into political currency the discontent and *energy of the* “15-M” movement, a shorthand for anti-austerity movement(s) that references the occupation of major squares throughout Spain by the so-called “*indignados*” in May 2011. The writings on and by Podemos frequently *speak of* “*una segunda Transición,*” a challenge to *the “régimen del 78” that midwifed the Transition from Francoism to a liberal monarchical democracy. This article employs Javier Cercas’s historical novel, Anatomía de un instante, about the failed coup attempt of 1981, as a means to contextualize and critically engage with the Podemos platform at a time when the Spanish political scene appears to be divided at least as much on generational as on ideological grounds.*

If all US citizens have their own theory on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a prerequisite for being a Spaniard is claiming to know the “real story” of what happened on February 23, 1981, when tanks were rolled onto the streets of Madrid and Valencia, while Lieutenant Colonel Tejero held MPs hostage in Parliament. This, at least, was the claim made by Javier

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the research for and writing of this article was undertaken when I was Visiting Fellow at St Catherine’s College, University of Oxford. I am especially grateful to the Master, Roger Ainsworth, and the Tutorial Fellow in Spanish, Ben Bollig, for accommodating my visit. I’d also like to thank Ruth Patiño for taking pleasure in dismantling my political arguments over drinks on Thursdays, always a highlight of my trips to Madrid.

Cercas in his inaugural lecture as Weidenfeld Chair in Comparative Literature at St Anne's College, Oxford in May 2015. The author also cautioned the audience against the multitude of his compatriots who boast of their anti-Franco credentials; on Cercas's calculations, a mere 0.5% actively opposed the illegal insurrectionist who ruled Spain from 1939 until his death in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

*Anatomía de un instante* is a historically rigorous literary rumination on the day when the formal investiture of Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo, a legally-elected MP from the centre-right Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD), as Prime Minister was interrupted by military force, and demands were made for General Alfonso Armada to be appointed as President of a provisional government. More importantly, perhaps, Cercas interrogates the meaning of democracy, a particularly loaded term and concept at a time when Spaniards are increasingly suspicious of what was once assumed to be an exemplary Transition, questioning to what extent it facilitated the continuation of dictatorial practices to the present-day. It is the most socially significant socio-political novelistic intervention in Spain since Ian Gibson's *The Death of Lorca*.

Even Cercas's most unforgiving critics must concede that he does his homework: *Anatomía de un instante* lends itself to inclusion on reading lists in history as much as literary courses. More contentious is the author's tendency to write himself into his narratives, and his characteristic melding of fact and fiction. A recurring theme in Cercas's oeuvre is the split-second heroic actions of individuals whose personalities and psychological make-up are far from commendable (see Wheeler, "Anatomy"). In the case at hand, the task he sets himself is to employ a novelist's skills to explore what went through the heads of the only three MPs--

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero and Ignacio Wert agree that dissent has been exaggerated, but do not go as far as Cercas in their revisionist estimates: "About 15 percent of the population actively identified with the Franco regime and shared its authoritarian values, its dogmatism, and its intolerance. At the other extreme, about one-quarter to one-third of the population held entirely different values and were alienated from the regime" (39).

Santiago Carrillo, leader of the Communist Party; Adolfo Suárez, the outgoing President; and General Gutiérrez Mellado, the Deputy Prime Minister--to defy Tejero, when their personal and political biographies contained little to suggest more than a reluctant commitment to democracy.

The pre-histories of Carrillo and Gutiérrez Mellado situate the titular moment within an epic landscape. The former was a key player in the 1934 illegal uprising against the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1936), and it was on his watch (although probably not his orders) that the massacre of civilians and soldiers--from which Gutiérrez Mellado was fortunate to escape--took place in Paracuellos during the early months of the Civil War. *Anatomía de un instante* hardly shies away from critiques of the architects of the Transition, but its deconstruction of far from great men conceals a tendentious narrative and political sleight of hand: it seduces the reader into accepting the novel's underlying thesis that everyday Spaniards were as passive in the face of the coup as Cercas believes them to have been under the dictatorship.

### **23 February 1981: Defending/Defining Democracy**

In the prologue to *Anatomía de un instante*, Cercas recalls how, on hearing from his mother of armed troupes entering the parliament, he went to the Complutense University with romantic ideas of manning the barricades; this recollection of his eighteen-year-old self is quickly undercut as he reveals his motivation to be more sexual than revolutionary: he naively assumed the girl he fancied would be there, and was surprised to discover that neither she nor indeed anyone had risked leaving home to put their neck on the line (16-17). The novelist later approvingly quotes Calvo Sotelo's claim that, had the coup been successful, instead of going out onto the streets to proclaim the triumph of democracy, a million Spaniards would have shouted

“Viva Armada” (257), in honour of the General who masterminded the coup and claimed to be acting in the name of King Juan Carlos.

The role of the monarch, chief of the armed forces and General Franco’s chosen successor, is the most fiercely contested aspect of the multiple accounts of what actually happened. Traditionally revered as the saviour and guarantor of democracy, cynics have always questioned why it took him so long to declare himself to his subjects: might he have been hedging his bets, waiting to see how the day’s events unfolded? Cercas dismisses the more extreme (conspiracy?) theories: in his view, if the King had wanted a coup to succeed, it would have and, if he brought it to a halt, that was simply because he was the only person with the power and authority to do so (160-61). This does not, however, automatically entail that the head of state was anti-coup and pro-democracy; the novel’s most important insight is to demonstrate how and why these two notions were neither antithetical nor absolute prior to February 23, 1981.

It was a journalistic commonplace to compare Suárez to the eponymous protagonist of *Il Generale Della Rovere* (Roberto Rossellini, 1959), a petty thief hired by the Nazis to impersonate an Italian resistance leader. A former member of the Falange, the proto-fascist movement instrumental in bringing Franco to power, Suárez was viewed with suspicion by those on both ends of the political spectrum. Never forgiven by the armed forces for what they construed to be an act of treason, Suarez’s legalization of the Communist Party, the PSOE retained a grudge against the first Prime Minister to be democratically elected since 1936 for having shamelessly exploited the electorate’s fears, returning incessantly to the Marxist aspects of their Constitution in a televised debate, widely credited with the UCD receiving the mandate to rule for a second term in 1979. As Cercas notes, “es un hecho que al menos para sus principales cabecillas el golpe del 23 de febrero no fue exactamente un golpe contra la

democracia: fue un golpe contra Adolfo Suárez; o si se prefiere: fue un golpe contra la democracia que para ellos encarnaba Adolfo Suárez” (37). An authoritarian but charismatic mode of address made Suárez well-suited to midwife an ad-hoc Constitution and inaugurate some semblance of democracy, but ill-equipped to govern in truly democratic fashion.

The same could be clearly be said of the royal household. As Paul Preston’s generally sympathetic biography of Juan Carlos details, democracy was largely an expedient tool for both the incoming King and his father, who made multiple attempts to join the Nationalist side during the Civil War, but was rebuffed by Franco (9), the General being sharply aware of potential future threats to his own position within the broad-church of anti-Republicanism.<sup>3</sup> If his father had subsequently employed liberalism to actively oppose Franco from exile, Juan Carlos carved a niche for himself as the guarantor of market capitalism and parliamentary representation. The Moncloa Pacts of 1977 were capable of providing a degree of consensus and compromise across the political spectrum largely because the major players, from Carrillo to Manuel Fraga-- Franco’s former Minister of Information and Tourism--began to understand democracy as the best option for channelling their own political interests; if they had not been convinced that they might yet be President, their enthusiasm would likely have dwindled, as it frequently did in the tense political climate building up to February 23. A general sense of stagnation coupled with record unemployment and the violent actions of ETA resulted in an overwhelming disillusionment with a liberal parliamentary system: abstention rates for the first democratic elections in June 1977 were twenty-two percent, but this had risen to thirty-one percent in the March 1979 elections, a significantly lower-turn out than for general elections elsewhere in

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<sup>3</sup> In Preston’s account, Juan Carlos was reported to have asked as a child: “And why does Franco who was so good during the war, treat us so badly now?” (40).

Europe and, at the time of writing, the lowest registered in post-Franco Spain. Amongst the non-voters, thirty-six percent claimed their abstention was due to a lack of interest in politics, with twenty percent attributing it to an outright hostility towards democracy (López Pintor 107, 126).

The PSOE, especially Vice-President Alfonso Guerra, were ruthless in their sustained critiques of the UCD and Suárez complained to the press about the opposition's dangerous and counter-intuitive flirtations with the armed forces; Cercas references compelling historical evidence that party leader Felipe González, having successfully petitioned members to excise any references to Marxism in their Constitution and electoral manifestos, had conversations with the royal household about potentially heading a provisional government were military means to be used to depose an unpopular President, tainted by his links to a former dictatorship. Suárez and Juan Carlos had increasingly clashed over matters of state such as the possibility, and even desirability, of Spain joining NATO, a measure aggressively pursued by the King who believed US support to be instrumental to his own power-base and the country's future.

Anodyne depictions of the coup, such as the 2009 mini-series *Febrero 23: el día más difícil del Rey*, produced and broadcast by the state television channel, systematically eschew the extent to which Juan Carlos exceeded his constitutional powers in having Suárez replaced by Calvo Sotelo, also implying that the coup somehow caught him and much of the royal household off-guard, a highly improbable claim when potentially corrective measures had been at the centre of so much recent political debate. Cercas introduces the vital delineation between a “golpe blando” and a “golpe duro,” the distinction residing in if military force was considered the means or the end. A soft coup offered what the Pacts of Moncloa had promised four years previously: the best prospect for self-advancement couched within reason of state. While cowering on the

parliamentary floor, fear would have been mitigated for at least some Spanish politicians by the excitement and expectation that they might be asked to form part of some new ruling formation.

To return to an earlier question, why did the King take so long to address the nation and denounce the illegal insurrectionists? Cercas invites us to reconsider the phrasing of the question: the issue is not so much whether the coup was going to be successful as it is what kind of coup was going to unfold, and to what extent the military uprising might be redeemed as a pragmatic concession to the consolidation of Spanish democracy. The unfeasibility of this latter option was shown not only by Tejero's specific demands, but also by the televised footage. Suárez, the closest Spain has ever had to a John F. Kennedy-style President, had a better sense of theatre as he faced the barrel of a gun than his assailant, who exposed himself as an anachronistic clown. Barely a week goes by in Spain in which clips of the coup are not broadcast on the national television, and Cercas approvingly cites the writer and philosopher Julián Marías's impressions on first watching the footage on 24 February 1981: the protagonists ought to have been given an award for "Film of the Year" (19). The overthrowing of what had descended chaotically not only into a hard coup attempt, but a farcical one at that, was instrumental in curtailing the possibility of future military uprisings, and the consolidation of a liberal parliamentary democracy. The possibility offered by the Moncloa Pacts was consecrated by the coup whose only logical outcome was the victory of the Felipe González and the PSOE in the 1982 elections: the UCD was in disarray, and the image of Tejero did more to discredit the right both at home and abroad than any left-wing party had every achieved. The rest, as they say, is history. Except that history is being re-written: Preston's biography of Juan Carlos would surely be less hagiographic if its narrative had ended in 2016 as opposed to 1982, and conflicting accounts of the Transition have been instrumental to debates surrounding the recent elections.



## **Parliamentary Chaos: Podemos and Revisionist Accounts of the Transition**

Mariano Rajoy and his right-of-centre Partido Popular (PP) registered more votes than any other political formation in the December 2015 elections, but they were significantly short of an absolute majority; even if their MPs had been pooled with those of Ciudadanos--their most obvious potential ally--the total would still have been insufficient to form a government, and none of the other major political parties were willing to play ball with a leader they generally believe to have behaved in a self-interested, corrupt and authoritarian manner since his election in 2011. The PSOE, led by Pedro Sánchez, who had received substantially more votes than Podemos, were then given the opportunity to form a government. Negotiations were always going to be tough when Pablo Iglesias, Podemos's leader, had previously gone on record as equating the long-term success of his party with their ability to overtake PSOE in electoral strength, stating that a hypothetical coalition government in which they would be in a position to demand representation through, say, two key cabinet ministers, would offer valuable experience but would likely have an adverse effect on their subsequent showings at the polls (Una nueva 112-115).

This led to the unprecedented situation of Spaniards being called to the polls for a second time on 26 June 2016, Podemos pooling resources with veteran minority left wing party Izquierda Unida (IU) to form Unidos Podemos. In the days leading up to the election, there was much speculation surrounding the possibility of a "sorpasso," whereby the PSOE would be overtaken in votes by this new progressive political coalition. In the end, however, the PSOE retained their position as the second largest political party, losing votes not to Unidos Podemos--who proved far less attractive to the electorate than virtually any opinion poll had predicted--but

to the PP, who were nevertheless still unable to form a government unless Sánchez's party abstained as opposed to voting against Rajoy's investiture. Parliamentary gridlock over the summer suggested that Spain might be heading for a third set of general elections, until an internal coup, in which Felipe González was instrumental, resulted not only in Sánchez's stance being reversed, but to the PSOE's leader being unceremoniously removed from office. Rajoy was thereby able to form a minority government, whilst the Spanish left found itself in disarray. With IU now effectively absorbed by Podemos, there are no immediate solutions to the internal divisions and battles at the heart of both Unidos Podemos and the PSOE.

Irrespective of their eventual electoral under-achievement, Podemos unquestionably constitutes the most valuable litmus test in over a generation for gauging the (im)possibility of progressive politics in Spain. They seemingly do not object to a two-party system per-se: it is simply that they want to replace the PSOE as the progressive option, with no desire to remain on the fringes in the manner of IU. They have self-consciously positioned themselves in opposition not only to individuals or political parties, but also to the very foundations by which the major players in Spanish politics secured and retained their parliamentary power. In a text published in *New Left Review* Iglesias wrote the following:

Spain's post-1975 transition, transformed Francoism into a liberal-democratic system, comparable to that of most Western countries. Crucially, it left the Francoist economic elites untouched and helped to recycle a good part of the political and administrative leadership, who retained their positions within the state apparatus even after the landslide election of the PSOE in 1982. A "spirit of consensus" governed not only the Francoist reformers, led by Adolfo Suárez, but

also the democratic opposition--the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), mainstay of underground resistance to the dictatorship, and PSOE, initially much smaller.

With unstinting support from the mainstream media, above all the Prisa group's influential new daily *El País*, this consensus was embodied in the 1977 Moncloa Pacts, tying the unions to wage restraint in exchange for social benefits. It was translated into judicial norms by the 1978 Constitution, affirmed by referendum, which gave its name to the "78 regime." ("Understanding Podemos" 10-11)

In terms of broad historical context, this narrative does not substantially depart from that described by Cercas. A radical difference nevertheless lies in their respective positions as regards the ethical and pragmatic wisdom of predicating the Constitution on collective amnesty (some would say amnesia) coupled with market capitalism. Iglesias construes this to be the source for Spain's current crises in both ethical and economical terms. Cercas, by contrast, explicitly nails his flag to the mast, claiming the "régimen del 78" to be perhaps indefensible from the perspective of justice, but an unqualified success in terms of politics or even the ethics of politics, facilitating the longest period of genuine democracy in Spanish history (109).

The novelist's self-caricature as a teenage revolutionary alongside a somewhat glib dismissal of collective agency and a certain brand of left-wing thought which, as he notes, retained an adolescent romance with ETA for their anti-Francoist legacy long after their actions ceased to be defensible, clearly suggests little sympathy for the Podemos platform. From this perspective, young Spaniards' rejection of what they construe as parental betrayal in both personal and political terms is the equivalent of children brought up in evangelical households becoming Goths or brandying Iron Maiden T-shirts. The obvious counter-argument is that this is

just what one would expect of a wealthy middle-aged author whose canonical status cannot be separated from lionization by *El País*. It is regrettable that, with the notable exception of Hayley Rabanal, much academic criticism directed against Cercas has been applied in an iconoclastic and overly-personal fashion.<sup>4</sup> Alberto San Juan's play *El Rey* staged by the Teatro del Barrio--a theatre co-operative based in the Madrid neighbourhood of Lavapiés, and with strong links to the 15-M movement--features staged appearances from Cercas alongside other establishment figures such as historian Santos Juliá and Juan Luis Cebrián, *El País*'s former editor in chief as well as a key ally and friend of Felipe González. At least on the night I saw the production, a complicit audience delighted in interventions such as the following:

Soy Javier Cercas. La abdicación es el último servicio fundamental que Juan Carlos I le ha hecho a este país. El primero fue contribuir de manera decisiva a instaurar la democracia. Sin el Rey no habría democracia. El segundo fue impedir el golpe del 23 de febrero. Ese es el día en que empieza realmente la democracia y terminan el franquismo y la guerra civil. La principal ficción sobre el golpe es que lo montó el Rey. Es una solemne estupidez que siguen sosteniendo montones de memos solemnes. (San Juan 99-100)

There is an unintentional irony in the fact that this parody of Cercas's purported glibness constitutes a tendentious and over-reductive gloss on his position.

It is not, in any case, necessary to subscribe to the real-life Cercas's conclusions or premises to accept that the events of February 23 throw up a series of unsettling and largely

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Faber; and Sánchez Cuenca, especially 31-35.

unanswered questions about the past, present and future of Spanish democracy. In the remainder of this article, I would like to reverse the framing of the debate: how might the historical material covered in *Anatomía de un instante* challenge current re-writings of the Transition? The nomenclature of the “régimen del 78” sidelines the extent to which it was only ratified post-1981: the uncritical veneration of the Constitution was both a symptom and a cause of the PSOE riding into government on the back of the slogan “Por el cambio.”

There are strategic advantages to Podemos focusing their attention on 1978 as opposed to 1982, which have less to do with political-party allegiances (as Iglesias argues, they seek to transcend the traditional paradigms of left and right), than with the attribution of blame and responsibility: the closed-doors negotiations of the Moncloa Pacts make them easier targets than a parliamentary success which, much like Tony Blair’s election win some fifteen years later, received both popular support and uncritical endorsement by many intellectuals and cultural commentators.<sup>5</sup> Hardly an impartial commentator, there is at least a kernel of truth in the claim made by Calvo Sotelo in his memoirs of the Transition published in 1990 that “[s]ólo Felipe

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<sup>5</sup> As Juan Pecourt notes: “[...] después del golpe de estado de 1981 la relación de fuerzas entre los realistas y los desencantados, que ya era claramente favorable a aquéllos, se había inclinado definitivamente hacia el realismo” (272-73). In his memoirs, the writer Vicente Molina Foix recalls election night in the following terms: “El 1 de octubre fui contratado como profesor no numerario en la recientemente creada facultad de Filosofía y Ciencias de la Educación de San Sebastián, donde ya impartían clases algunos amigos y compañeros de estudio de mi generación, y que a lo largo de esa década cobraría fama de ser el Nanterre español por sus planes docentes interdisciplinares, su informal ambiente académico y su ebullición política, que se haría en poco tiempo literalmente explosiva. Y el 28, diez días después de mi cumpleaños número treinta y seis, bien entrada la noche de una jornada de revuelo y ansiedad, supimos que el líder socialista Felipe González había ganado las elecciones por mayoría absoluta, con, entre otros diez millones, nuestro voto y el de casi todos mis amigos” (222-23).

González ha recibido una buena herencia en estos tiempos: y él lo sabe, pero los electores todavía no” (88). In relation to un-elected representatives of the population, the former President might also have added Juan Carlos--arguably the figure with most to gain from the foundational myth of the Transition--the following platitude by Julián Marías (a political senator by royal decree from 1977-1979) being representative of common wisdom and popular opinion during the commemorations of twenty-five years without Franco in 2000: “Fue el Rey que impulsó, aceptó y estableció la democracia, no a la inversa” (199). In a somewhat quixotic attempt to counteract the rose-tinted heuristic lens through which Spain viewed its recent past at the turn of the century, a commemorative edition of articles compiled from *Por Favor*--a satirical magazine that ran from 1974 and 1978--was published during the same year (Claret).

Belén Gopegui--a novelist far to the left of Cercas on the political spectrum--spoke in a public conversation with Hayley Rabanal held at the University of Sheffield in May 2015 of how she had voted for the PSOE in 1982, going on to argue that, in order to adopt a critical stance in relation to the Transition and its aftermath, it is important to look not just at the victims of their neo-liberal policies, but also at those who were too happy to go along with them. Her novel *Lo real*, first published in 2001, is a Bildungsroman centred on Edmundo Gómez Risco, a young man whose father becomes a scapegoat for a real-life corruption scandal under Franco. Determined not to suffer the same fate himself, he employs every possible resource from diligence to subterfuge to ensure that he is not a victim of political backstabbing. The narrative inserts numerous references to real-life personalities (the PSOE’s Minister of Culture and future director-General of NATO, Javier Solana; Pilar Miró, the director of the State Broadcasting Channel). Gómez Risco’s apogee comes as he co-ordinates the PSOE’s campaign for a “Yes” vote in a referendum on NATO, at the same time that his wife and mother to his children dies

from a heroin overdose. As Gopegui argued, Lo real is more political than her writings on Cuba--she has been heavily criticized at home for reportedly pro-Castro statements--but the abstract style combined with an absence of definitive statements on specific political issues (there are no concrete reflections upon either the Constitution or the coup beyond references to potential new job opportunities) meant it was far less controversial. This is symptomatic of how literary and political debates have been framed more widely: issues generate polemic only when they touch upon specific contentious matters or constitute a threat to individual or collective interests in concrete as opposed to abstract terms.

### **Challenging the “Régimen del 82”**

In the memoirs of his time as Minister of Culture in the late 1980s, Concentration Camp survivor and excommunicated Communist Jorge Semprún suggests amnesty was justifiable within the tightrope political context of the Transition, but that it was a missed opportunity to not tackle the issue when the PSOE had such a strong power-base in the late-1980s (111). It is not altogether surprising that this did not take place. The party was heavily reliant on opinion polls and reports, policies determined by pragmatics more than ideology. Sociological studies repeatedly suggested there to be no electoral advantage to raking up the past, while economic security (be that real or perceived) was crucial for victory at the polls. In a national survey conducted in 1994, three quarters of the Spanish population affirmed that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied with how the Transition had been handled, alongside the socio-economic changes of the past two decades (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 62); approval rates were highest amongst university-educated urban dwellers (64-5).

Internationally, Spain became a (perhaps even the) text-book example of a successful Transition from dictatorship to democracy, and the coincidence of its EU membership and the collapse of totalitarian states in the Eastern bloc was instrumental in boosting the esteem in which both the country and its President were held. Mikhail Gorbachev always cited González as the foreign politician he felt closest to and admired the most (Brown 116-117). The pride many everyday Spaniards felt in at last having a world-class leader who ensured they no longer had to walk through separate doors at airports ought not to be under-estimated whilst,<sup>6</sup> as Carlos Closa and Paul M. Heywood note: “González’s strong leadership in European affairs was characterized by a combination of a high level pro-European statesmanship with less visible hard-edged bargaining” (44). As Spain became richer and the past a different country, it was not always clear whether Franco was discredited at home for being a dictator or for being old-fashioned.

In contrast to the recession-prone period between 1975 and 1981, “disenchantment with politics experienced during the 1980s did not translate into open disdain for democracy” (Encarnación 122). Despite multiple corruption scandals and the use of torture by government-sanctioned illegal anti-terrorist squads, González remained President until 1996, when José María Aznar’s PP--born out of the ashes of Fraga’s Alliance Party (AP)--became the first openly Conservative party to win in the national election since before the coup. If the euphoria surrounding the election of New Labour to the UK government in 1997 recalled the PSOE’s

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<sup>6</sup> González was made sensitive to the effects of this ostracism at an early age when, as an undergraduate, he spent a year as an exchange student at the University of Leuven. In a letter to then-girlfriend Concha Romero dated 18 November, 1965, he wrote: “Nena que decepción de Europa, inmensa soledad la de los emigrantes. Están desamparados, oprimidos, explotados y, para colmo, odiados como seres inferiores, como raza maldita.” He goes on to add: “Montones de bares en Bruselas ponen un cartel diciendo: entrada prohibida a españoles, africanos y latinoamericanos. En fin, como esto un millar de detalles especialmente significativos” (cited in Guerra 60).



landslide victory some fifteen years previously alongside their pragmatic approach to ostensibly progressive politics, Blair's friendship with Aznar was facilitated by their common endeavour to transform parties steeped in tradition and martyrdom into viable prospects for a broader electorate than their core contingent. There are even some counter-intuitive synergies between Aznar's memoirs and Iglesias's position; the former President complains repeatedly of hubristic Socialist hegemony, a claim pre-dated in a column by Federico Jiménez Losantos originally published in 1992 in which this incendiary commentator rallied against "lo mucho que en la democracia sobrevive de autoritarismo y servilismo, de cobardía intelectual y política, lo mucho que de lo malo de entonces hay en lo malo de ahora. Para ser antifelipista hoy, haber sido anti-franquista supone el mejor entrenamiento" (536).

Current criticism of the two-party system often neglects to mention that it effectively operated as a one-party system for over a decade. Aznar and the PP were kept partly in check by a weak majority in their first term, but succeeded in taking hubris to new levels on receiving an absolute majority in 2000, when the electorate rewarded the PP for what was seen to be a booming economy and punished the PSOE for their alliance with IU. Following an interval of Socialist rule between 2004 and 2011, corruption has blighted the PP since their return to government, with both they and their leader Mariano Rajoy somehow retaining power simply because a significant portion of voters believed them to be the least unreliable of a discredited political caste. In local and European elections, Podemos secured the support of what political scientists refer to as expressive voters, citizens wishing to express their (dis)content. This helps to contextualise the frequently hysteric reactions of their detractors which constitute text-book examples of a broader dynamic characterised by Jacques Rancière in the following terms:

Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy and even to the mixed form of representative system. This name at once masks and reveals the intense wish of the oligarch: to govern without people, in other words, without any dividing of the people; to govern without politics.

(80)

This contradiction is manifest not only in the reaction of the established parties to new opponents, but also in the new consolidation of Podemos as it makes the transition from a pluralistic political start-up to a disciplined party, as is clearly apparent in the documentary film *Política, manual de instrucciones* (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2016).

There are, in fact, revealing structural parallels with how the PSOE of the late-1970s looked to show their professional running of local town councils as evidence that they were government material, not merely repositories of discontent. If Mariano Rajoy's electoral power is predicated on the logic of "Better the devil you know," to substitute the title of one of Kylie Minogue's catchiest hits with the campaign tune for Blair's first election win, has Spain reached a stage where "Things Can Only Get Better"? An intuitive and pragmatic appreciation of this change in public mood was instrumental in King Juan Carlos deciding to abdicate in favour of his son, now Felipe VI or, in the words of local wags, the aristocrat formerly known as Prince.

According to a 2013 report by Catholic charity, Caritas, Spain is the most unequal society in Europe with six percent of its forty-seven million inhabitants living on three-hundred-and-seven Euros or less a month (Hamilos). Gopegui's latest novel, *El comité de la noche*, tellingly

transfuses a real-life anecdote by which an unemployed man in Seville translated the price of her book into a more sanguine currency--multi-nationals have begun to offer to pay poor Spaniards, whose dole had either run out or is insufficient, to donate blood. One does not have to spend much time outside of the historic centres and tourist resources to see that, were it not for strong family units (household budgets are frequently reliant on grandparents' pensions and saving), not only the economic but also the social fabric would by now have collapsed.

If, as Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca argues, the “llegada de la crisis de 2008 sirvió para hacer más visible la decadencia de las grandes firmas” (15), others benefitted from a re-negotiation of the canon. When reissued in 2015, Gregorio Morán's *El precio de la Transición* received far more attention than it had been when first published in 1991, a fact the author himself emphasizes in the prologue (12). Morán's hyperbolic rhetoric and frequent refusal to acknowledge sources results in texts that meld fact and fiction, speculation and history--far more disingenuously and deceptively than Cercas ever does--whilst, to borrow a phrase from Juan Francisco Fuentes, “nos apartan del importante debate que plantea este libro, al menos en su título, sobre lo que ganamos y aquello a lo que renunciamos con una democracia que, para Morán, ha sido muy condicionada por su origen”. Worryingly little Spanish historiography or journalism appears mature enough to address the personal and political costs of the Transition, questions that, for this reader at least, have been addressed in more sophisticated fashion in works of fiction such as *Así empieza lo malo* by Javier (son of Julián) Marías or Marta Sanz's *Daniela Astor y la caja negra*.

### **Podemos, Spanish Academia and Generational Strife**

In *Política*, manual de instrucciones, the viewer is introduced to Podemos's leading players, whose names are accompanied by their academic qualifications. It is no coincidence that the party's future leaders emerged in and around the Faculty of Political Science at the Complutense when Santiago Carrillo's son was vice-chancellor. Frequently and inaccurately referred to as a Professor by the foreign press, Iglesias in fact had a temporary teaching contract. Juan Carlos Monedero--a key figure in the formation of Podemos who withdrew from the party leadership in 2015, believing a thirst for power and self-promotion to have corrupted Iglesias's circle--is a classic example of a first-rate mind who, despite his best efforts, never found the institutional support or job security he most probably merited. The absence of a genuinely world-class Spanish university has less to do with relatively low funding--investment has been higher than, say, in Italy--than a top-heavy system predicated on hierarchies and nepotism, from whose patronage many of the leading lights of Podemos frequently benefited.

Throughout the 1980s, the PSOE expanded the public university system to an unprecedented degree. An ostensibly democratic opening up of higher education was undermined by problems in recruiting teaching and research staff of sufficient quality, alongside a paternalistic and overly-bureaucratic system colonised by what Monedero refers to as a "generación que alcanzó responsabilidades muy pronto y que no aprendió a soltarlas" (61). Professors and tenured lecturers hardly ever speak positively of the Spanish university system, but rarely offer even token opposition to a system of examining PhDs whereby examiners are not only virtually prohibited from failing students, but are also put under immense pressure to reward even sub-standard work with the qualification "Cum Laude." This sacrifice of academic freedom is generally recompensed by generous and non-taxable allowances for food, which go largely unspent as convention dictates that the generally unemployed new Doctor pays for a

lavish dinner with their examiners (sometimes as many as five) and supervisors. Until recently, there has been a tacit agreement between young academics and their seniors predicated on a neo-feudal system by which the former assume the role of obsequious lackeys hoping to curry favour. This hardly democratic pact lasted for as long as socio-economic conditions were such that these authority figures had the power to open doors. In the current climate, young and sometimes talented scholars are questioning, both to themselves and to others, how and why frequently pathetic minds have managed to accrue such power and influence. Similarly belated questions are being asked by those embarking on careers in the media and cultural industries.

In a column for *El País*, Félix de Azúa accused Podemos of acting on campus “como si fueran los falangistas de la Complutense de los años treinta.” According to the diagnosis of this veteran novelist and public intellectual: “la Universidad está tan corrompida como las finanzas, los partidos o los sindicatos: es una de las instituciones más corruptas del conjunto institucional español.” This, he argues, is the symptom and cause of the fact that the “Universidad es su finca y nadie se atreverá nunca a limpiar esos establos”; “Si ya la Universidad española (sector Humanidades) es como un cetáceo muerto, imagínense un país construido con los mismos mimbres.” An alternative interpretation might suggest that what the core leadership of Podemos have witnessed first-hand at the Complutense instilled a belief in the urgent need to resuscitate Spain, that “cetáceo muerto.” The higher echelons of Podemos contain a disproportionate number of relatives of leading lights of the PSOE; much like Owen Jones--something of a celebrity in Spain’s new political landscape--their analysis of the nepotism and mediocrity of the “classes” is more astute than discussions of the “masses,”<sup>7</sup> precisely because they have generally had more privileged access to the former. A charge frequently levelled against the outgoing

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique of Jones along these lines, largely applicable to Podemos, see Hatherley.

government is that their leading lights are the children (almost invariably sons) of Francoist politicians; true as this is in some but by no means all cases, more concerning than their ideological and biological genealogies is the fact they are so often less capable than their forebears.

As is well-showcased in the film *El futuro* (Luis López Carrasco, 2013) many children are angry at their parents' generation: alternatively accusing them of complicity with a sham democracy or being fools for having allowed themselves to be hoodwinked; in 2011, Monedero tellingly published a widely distributed and well-received book titled *La Transición contada a nuestros padres*. In response to what it perceives as affronts of this kind, the *Fundación de la Transición* was established by a group predominantly comprised of politicians alongside eminent historians and political scientists. Amongst their number was Soledad Becerril who, on being appointed Minister of Culture by Calvo Sotelo in 1981, became the first female cabinet member of the nascent Spanish democracy. She is currently the Spanish ombuds(wo)man. When Becerril invited me to her offices in June 2014, I was struck by the visible prominence awarded in a board-room with few books to the works of Juan Linz, the sociologist and historian who famously characterized Francoism as an "authoritarian" as opposed to a "totalitarian" dictatorship, and the founding father of canonical accounts of the Transition.

An all too real democratic deficit came to the fore over the course of 2013 as the editors of Spain's major newspapers were dismissed as the publications were taken over by major corporations who feared the country was heading the same way as Greece and, once again, required steering from above. In a conversation between Alan Rusbridger and Javier Moreno Barber, respectively the former editors-in-chief of *The Guardian* and *El País*,<sup>8</sup> held at Lady

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Xon de Ros for inviting me to this private event.

Margaret Hall in Oxford on June 18, 2016, a tendency, arguably unprecedented in democratic Europe, very clearly emerged for power and influence in Spain to be concentrated in an increasingly small number of hands. This self-elected elite were likely responsible for encouraging Juan Carlos to abdicate, whilst helping to maintain a visceral assault on the Podemos platform in much of the mainstream media, frequently conducted in such unsubtle and childish terms that, in a sufficiently mature democracy, one would have hoped its effect would be counter-productive. Iglesias is skilled at appearing reasonable when faced with ranting figures from the PP; meanwhile, the obstinacy of the old PSOE guard--who refuse to engage with them as anything other than unruly and inexperienced kids--has been nothing short of childish.

In a manner that recalled an interview I did with Fraga shortly before his death, Guerra abruptly curtailed me asking his thoughts on the exemplary nature of the Transition being increasingly put into question, attributing that position solely to ignorance, claiming that people who advanced it were simply not aware of the realities of Spain in the late 1970s (Wheeler, "Letter" 314-15). Following a series of self-satisfied and condescending opinion pieces in *El País*, Felipe González now rivals Rajoy as a figure of hate for politically engaged young Spaniards. It is not necessary to subscribe to the reactionary scare-mongering that has proliferated since the emergence of the new political start-ups to appreciate that the definition and value of democracy is now more hotly contested in Spain than it has been since the build-up to February 1981.

When the major parties agreed with uncharacteristic speed and efficiency to amend Article 135 of the Constitution in 2011, thereby introducing a cap on the structural deficit of the state, the betrayal felt by many was as much psychological as it was political: successive generations had been raised to believe the text to be sacred and untouchable. Recent debates are

frequently distorted through the problematic conflation of two sources of criticism: the content and philosophy of the Constitution itself; and its fetishistic veneration as the pre-requisite and guarantor of Spain's democratic credentials (December 6, the day on which it was signed, continues to be a bank-holiday). It is perfectly consistent to accept the former and reject the latter,<sup>9</sup> but this distinction is sometimes lost in an oppositional discourse that capitalizes upon the predilection amongst academics and adolescents for the reification of dissent. If, as Dick Howard notes, “[d]emocracy is not a solution (comparable to Marx's communism); it poses problems not only to the established order but to itself” (xiii), this ostensible rupture with the myths of the past lends itself to being interpreted as a healthy transition, a political coming of age for Spain and its citizens. A blind-faith in the kind of Manichean divide between democracy and dictatorship as manifest on 23 February 1981 has, paradoxically, been the principal obstacle to the consolidation and refinement of a bona-fide democracy.

## **Conclusion**

If the elephant in the room has always been that Franco died in his bed, *Anatomía de un instante* raises but hardly exhausts the question of how and why a significant proportion of the Spanish population has adopted a somnolent attitude to ostensibly democratic rule. As Cercas

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<sup>9</sup> Maruja Torres, a stalwart of *El País* until new ownership led to her being dismissed in 2013, has, for example, argued, “Aquella trabajosa Transición, que sigo considerando necesaria, a fuerza de precocinada se quedó tiesa, deshidratada, y sirve únicamente para que la visiten esporádicamente, como a una estatua metida en un nicho de la catedral de la Almudena. Parada en el umbral de lo por venir se quedó la estatua de la Transición que, 23-F mediante, obstaculizó el paso de lo que pudieron ser las transiciones segunda, tercera y hasta puede que cuarta o quinta” (84).



suggests, a potentially uncontrollable coup paved the way for a symbolic and popular ratification of a highly-controlled democracy. The “régimen del 78” may frequently be seen to be synonymous with the Constitution, but they enjoyed neither the legal nor the symbolic force they subsequently accrued until after the failed coup attempt. It is hardly incidental that the 1979 elections had the lowest turn-out of any from the democratic period.

I, like Semprún, would have greater respect for González and the PSOE if they had raised the spectre of the Francoist past before it became a last resort for discrediting the PP in the run-up to the 1996 elections (Juliá 143-49); it is similarly regrettable that so many Spaniards only began to challenge the post-1981 consensus in the wake of the financial meltdown. It was, for example, a brave voice that referenced the ghosts of the past when Juan Manuel Samaranch--entering Parliament in 1964, his vocal advocacy of Franco aided his rise to being the most powerful political ambassador for Sport--used his position as Chair of the Olympics Committee to help secure the Games for his native Barcelona in 1992, the international showcase par-excellence for Spain’s new democratic order. In a swing that is all-too-familiar in Spanish politics, objects of veneration can be vilified seemingly overnight. Ostensibly progressive figures are seemingly at a loss as to why their authority is suddenly being questioned by those on the left; how can they be in the dock when they fought against Franco and in favour of democracy and modernization, concepts which, post-1981, have been construed by the vast majority of Spanish citizens to be both synonyms and absolute goods, immune from criticism? If González reasoned that Sánchez was putting party and personal interests before the state, the counter-argument is that Spain’s longest-serving President accepted another term of PP rule in exchange for preserving his and the Transition’s legacy. This may well be the case, but the nomenclature of the “régimen del 78” is a red-herring, distracting attention away from the 1980s, a less-

contested decade that offers fewer mitigating circumstances for Spanish political elites and the general public alike. Podemos are right to talk about the Moncloa Pacts in terms of (enlightened?) self-interest; their political narrative is nevertheless wanting in its failure to pay sufficient heed to other implicit or explicit pacts that have underwritten Spanish democracy. A dispiritingly mediocre political class cannot be held solely responsible for all that has gone wrong--or right--over the last forty years.

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