

Geographies of violence and democracy

Politics in Spain

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On the morning of 11 March 2004, after ten bombs were detonated on four commuter trains in southern Madrid, the communist-led United Left coalition released a press statement, part of which translates as follows:

Today is a day of democratic unity. With this fascist-like massacre, carried out with despicable cowardice against hundreds of workers and students, with this act of nazi barbarism, ETA seeks to destroy Spanish democracy and undermine the rule of law. It is a direct challenge to the whole of society, a challenge to democracy, an attempt to drench our voting booths with blood.

Like other political forces, United Left initially got the perpetrators wrong; but it was right about the fascism. And they should know, because the trail of the 11 March bombings leads back to parts of Madrid's geography that are charged with political significance for the Spanish Left. They are places that evoke all the violence, hope, antagonism, terror, solidarity and disenchantment associated with the democratic struggles against fascism in that part of the world. With the 11 March bombings these sites have once more acquired a global significance, raising questions of democracy, violence and political economy on a transnational plane which pose especially challenging dilemmas for the internationalist Left.

Atocha, El Pozo, Lavapiés

Atocha is not only the train station originally destined for the terrorist 'spectacular' of 11 March 2004. It also names the street where five communist lawyers were assassinated by fascist gunmen on 24 January 1977. On that occasion, close to 200,000 mourners attended the victims' funeral at the Plaza de las Salesas, in what was to pass as Madrid's largest free political demonstration since the proclamation of the Second Republic in the spring of 1931. For historians, the funeral of the Atocha five signalled a turning point in the road towards the 'democratic transition' inaugurated six months later with the first free multi-party elections after Franco's forty-year military dictatorship. The 1977 elections opened up a fraught and protracted process of political democratization marked by intensive class struggles, Spain's own *anni di piombo*, the approval of the 1978 Constitution granting unprecedented autonomy to the country's various nationalities and regions, the aborted military coup of February 1981, and the first electoral victory of the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in 1982.

The fourteen-year PSOE hegemony that ensued both challenged and consolidated Spain's budding liberal democracy. Under Felipe González's successive premier-ships, Spain joined the European Community, and experienced economic growth and significant improvements in public infrastructure, administration and services. By 1992 this brave new Spain officially entered the hallowed world of 'modernity' with not one, but three ostentatious displays of its advanced capitalist status: the Seville Expo, the Barcelona Olympics and Madrid's turn as European city of culture. These were also the *pelotazo* years (that reckless swigging back of bonuses and backhanders somewhat akin to the English 'loadsamoney'). They were years of state-sponsored terrorism against suspected ETA sympathizers, privatizations stacked in favour of PSOE cronies, and systematic corruption at senior levels of the administration. It was a period that witnessed the ruthless, often violent deindustrialization of entire regions, unemployment reaching 25 per cent of the working population, and a continued class antagonism that provoked no fewer than three general strikes in the space of a decade.

Few places in Madrid better represent that bittersweet experience of 'democratic transition' than El Pozo del Tío Raimundo, a working-class neighbourhood where successive generations of migrants from Spain's south forged some of the most powerful – and emblematic – opposition forces to Franco's dictatorship. Many of those gathered at the Plaza de las Salesas in January 1977 would have arrived from El Pozo. With the legalization of the communist party and the advent of civil liberties many more will have later participated in the movement against Nato membership which was narrowly defeated in the 1986 referendum after the PSOE reneged on its electoral promise to campaign for Spain's withdrawal from the Atlantic Alliance. A quarter of century on, despite – or perhaps because of – momentous domestic and international changes, the people of El Pozo and its neighbouring districts are likely, together with 90 per cent of Spanish public opinion, to have opposed the government's support of Anglo-American military adventurism in Iraq. Yet it was in these defiantly leftist and historically anti-militarist neighbourhoods of southern Madrid that four of the ten bombs blew up on 11 March 2004.

Police investigations soon established that the explosives had been activated with the aid of mobile phones purchased at a shop in the neighbourhood of Lavapiés, a stone's throw away from Atocha. The Plaza de Lavapiés stands on the border between the sixteenth-century Habsburg Madrid of the 'Austrias' and the nineteenth-century Madrid of imperial decline. Like most old quarters on either side of the Mediterranean, the area has historically been populated by lower orders – artisans, shopkeepers, traders, domestic servants, some proletarians and the odd bag-snatcher, pimp or dealer. For the past decade or so, it has attracted immigrants from all corners of the world, principally from Spain's former colonies, many of whom have joined locals in these professions.

After Ecuador, Morocco is the largest exporter of labour to Spain, and there are currently close to half a million Moroccan citizens living and working across the country. Many are recent arrivals who tend to gravitate towards neighbourhoods like Lavapiés with affordable accommodation and an already existing expatriate community; most work in the agribusiness sector, and some – like a number of the twenty-four suspects associated with the 11 March explosions – have been residents for many years and developed business interests in the peninsula.

Moroccans and other immigrants have been victims of Spanish xenophobia from the beginning. If they survive the treacherous waters of the Gibraltar strait (or the stretch of the Atlantic leading to the Canary Islands), African immigrants can expect racist assaults, police intimidation, institutional discrimination, super-exploitation and outright pogroms like those that took place in the Andalusian village of El Ejido in February 2000. Responses to such experiences are diverse, but they typically involve the politicization of racism and xenophobia through trade unions, immigrant associations,

political organizations and solidarity groups. It has generally involved campaigns for the extension of democratic rights to immigrants; very rarely has religion played a major part in such mobilizations. The Association of Moroccan Immigrant Workers in Spain (ATIME) is one of the oldest and – with close to 15,000 members – the largest of such organizations. After the bombings, which killed fifty-four of his fellow immigrant workers, ATIME's secretary-general, Mustapha El Mirabet, told the Spanish daily *El País* (7 April 2004):

The moment we're living through requires radicalism in certain areas, and we're going to be radical on this issue: the democratic state of law requires the defence of civil liberties. And there are some extremists who abuse these liberties to attack our coexistence. Well, we're going to confront them. We're going to be uncompromising in our defence of the democratic state of law.

Their values and ours

That such a statement could just as easily have been issued from the White House or Downing Street raises the first challenge for the internationalist Left: to reappropriate the language of democracy, freedom and solidarity from its monopolization and instrumentalization by the authoritarian Right. For one of the most serious failures of the Western Left in recent decades has surely been to let such language be bandied about by governments like those of Bush, Blair, Aznar and Berlusconi, which have systematically undermined substantive democracy, clamped down on genuinely plural public spheres and fostered opaque, unaccountable and unrepresentative forms of rule both at home and abroad. The current occupation of Iraq, where 'freedom' and 'democracy' are being imposed externally through the barrel of a gun in much the same way that British imperialism tried to do some eighty years ago, is perhaps the most notable example of how such concepts are being abused domestically and internationally. More worryingly, it is a textbook example of how to ratchet up the global 'strategy of tension' pursued by al-Qaeda and its supporters.

A central component of such a reappropriation must be its internationalist dimension, because it is not only in the West that the authoritarian Right is revising the meanings of democracy, freedom and solidarity. The Madrid bombings and their precursors have made it clear that the political issues at stake are transnational in nature. The sources of this violence cut across national borders, and so clearly must the political responses. Here the Left should be at an advantage, since its politics have, at least in principle, always been suspicious of the inherent legitimacy of state borders and disdainful of primordialist notions of nationality, religion or ethnicity. Yet for many on the Left this requirement of anti-essentialist internationalism seems only to apply to 'the West'. The millenarian demagoguery of Bin Laden and other, more 'moderate', Islamists are, in a perverse leftist version of the 'clash of civilizations', all too often legitimated as sole expressions of the 'Muslim world' or the 'Arab resistance'. However, political Islamism is only one of various responses to societies in the midst of a general crisis. It is at root a reactionary ideology, and as such is no friend of democracy or democrats but rather antagonistic, often violently so, towards leftists in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The clash is over ideologies and within civilizations.

This is especially clear when seen from the southern side of the Straits of Gibraltar. The five men accused of executing the Madrid bombings originated in the northern Moroccan cities of Tangiers and Tetouan – the first an international zone and the second the capital of 'Spanish Morocco' until 1956. Like other major Moroccan cities, Tangiers and Tetouan display all of the contradictory symptoms of a postcolonial malaise: an intense and constant traffic with the outside world, which is nonetheless rendered impossibly distant by the Mediterranean ramparts of fortress Europe and a structurally unequal international exchange; a regional socio-economic dynamism,

atheists and Jews, but now generic 'Crusaders'. Unlike European interwar fascism, however, the *ihadists* do not dispose of the state's machinery of war and oppression. But this could change. The general crisis in states and societies across the Arab and Muslims worlds, coupled with the occupations of Palestine and Iraq, makes it very difficult for progressive forces the world over to deploy terms like 'democracy', 'secularism' and 'freedom' against radical Islamism.

What difference does four days make?

This conviction goes a fair way to explain the swing in favour of the Socialists at the general elections on 14 March 2004. Spaniards understood that, while our country's military presence in occupied Iraq was not the single cause of the attacks, it was nonetheless part of the international context that fuels Islamist terrorism. In other words, attacking Iraq was the worst way of combating terrorism. There is no question that the bombings were successful in placing the links between war and terrorism at the forefront of voters' minds. But equally important was the crassly partisan mismanagement by the incumbent Popular Party (PP) government of the circumstances surrounding the attacks. In their insistence, right up to the day before the election, that Basque separatists were in the frame for the atrocity, the PP displayed all too openly their manipulation of suffering and their disdain for public opinion. This arrogant miscalculation was to cost them the election.

Two facts gleaned from the electoral data bear out this interpretation. The first is the 8.5 per cent increase in voter turnout with respect to the previous legislative election in 2000, much of it made up of nearly 2 million first-time voters. The second is that while the PSOE gained close to 3 million new votes, the PP lost only 600,000 votes. Putting all these figures together, and factoring in the rise in the nationalist vote at the expense of the PP in Catalonia and the Basque country, it seems reasonable to speculate that the aggregate swing was not so much away from the PP, but in favour of the PSOE and the regional nationalists. Put differently, the first-time voters and those who abstained in 2000 went to the polling booths with the intention of punishing the ruling party. Whether this was the result of its support for the war on Iraq, its political manipulation of the 11 March bombings, or a combination, is an open question. In any event, a generation after the Atocha assassinations of 1977, Spaniards responded to the second Atocha attacks in a similar fashion: with a turn to the power of the electoral ballot.

For the Spanish Left, the departure from office (with a ticket to Georgetown University) of José María Aznar – a grey, pious, provincial politician to whom only the proverbially astringent *catellanos* could ever ascribe charisma – brings to an end eight long years of cultural and social regression marked by the unholy combination of devout colonization and wanton commodification of the public sphere. Many Spaniards breathed a sigh of relief after the elections in the expectation that the new Premier, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero – a quiet, unassuming northern Castilian who has nonetheless shown character by openly supporting the 'peripheral' football club FC Barcelona – will redress these years of right-wing Catholic, centralist socio-political and cultural hegemony. The promise of a democratic overhaul of the Senate, a more engaging attitude towards nationalists of Spain's various autonomies, a root-and-branch reform of the state's unspeakably philistine broadcasting media, and, most importantly, a political willingness to tackle comprehensively such pressing social questions as the epidemic of violence against women or the astronomical rise in the cost of housing, all point to the unequivocal leftward turn resulting from the Socialist victory.

Those expecting radical departures in socio-economic policy should be less sanguine. Zapatero's cabinet is made up of men and women (equally represented, for the first time) with mainstream left-of-centre views on the economy. The Economy and

Treasury Minister, Pedro Solbes, is one of a number cabinet members recycled from the later González administrations and was until recently EU Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs. His macroeconomic objectives are unsurprisingly in line with both the previous administration and the rest of Europe: fiscal austerity, productivity gains through technological innovation and investment, and continued flexibility of the labour market are among the familiar mantras coming from this new minister. Should there be any doubt, the new president himself reassured the Spanish ruling class: 'I am confident the economic policy adopted by my government will give investors great confidence and peace of mind.'

The one arena where the new Socialist administration has already cashed in its promise to break with the PP is in foreign policy. The immediate honouring of the electoral commitment to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq unless there was a clear UN political and military control of Iraq, after 30 June, caught many observers by surprise. Although it is largely a symbolic gesture with more domestic than international repercussions, it has served to realign Spanish foreign policy with its more natural allies at the heart of Europe. Zapatero's swift rapprochement with Morocco after years of unnecessary tension between the PP government and its southern neighbour (the low point of which was the farcical military dispute over the island of Perejil, inhabited by one man and his goats) indicates a genuine willingness to engage with the kingdom as an equal partner – particularly on the issue of intelligence gathering which, *ex post facto*, might have proved especially significant in preventing or disrupting the 11 March attacks. The appointment of Miguel Angel Moratinos, former EU representative to the Middle East peace process, as Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs further signals an attempt once again to place the Arab world – together with Europe and the Iberoamerican community, the main poles of Spanish external relations – at the centre of the new administration's foreign policy.

This latter ambition to make multilateralism – be it through the EU or the UN – the strategic alternative to the Bush–Blair axis in international affairs is a major challenge to the internationalist Left. For, as Kate Soper has argued in the pages of this journal (*Radical Philosophy* 120, July/August 2003), the internationalist Left has to make up its mind on whether institutions like the UN Security Council are legitimate bearers of a 'democratic multilateralism'. Intelligence cooperation and international solidarity will only go so far towards tackling the sources of Islamist terrorism in the short term: there are likely to be further atrocities in future and a credible political response to such violence must be developed. A fundamentally undemocratic institution like the UN Security Council is an unsatisfactory forum for addressing this violence, much less so are the national security institutions of implicated states. It is necessary, therefore, to begin imagining and realizing alternative sources of international authority against indiscriminate violence – be it state-sponsored or transnational.

Finally, the internationalist Left should be uncompromising in its defence of secularism within an increasingly religiously framed conflict. Secularism is a progressive value that is not anti-religious but simply requests that religious beliefs – whatever their provenance or expression – remain subordinated to politics. The Madrid bombings were the product of religious fanaticism, and the sources of that violence have been further inflamed by the redemptive and militarized liberalism of Bush and Blair. Standing in between, the internationalist Left must continue confronting our own governments' imperial adventurism, but also analyse the often very local dynamics of Islamist terrorism, so as to offer viable political alternatives to such violence. The impressive worldwide mobilizations against war and occupation are in this respect a small part of the even more challenging task of developing democratic and socialist alternatives to the current world order.