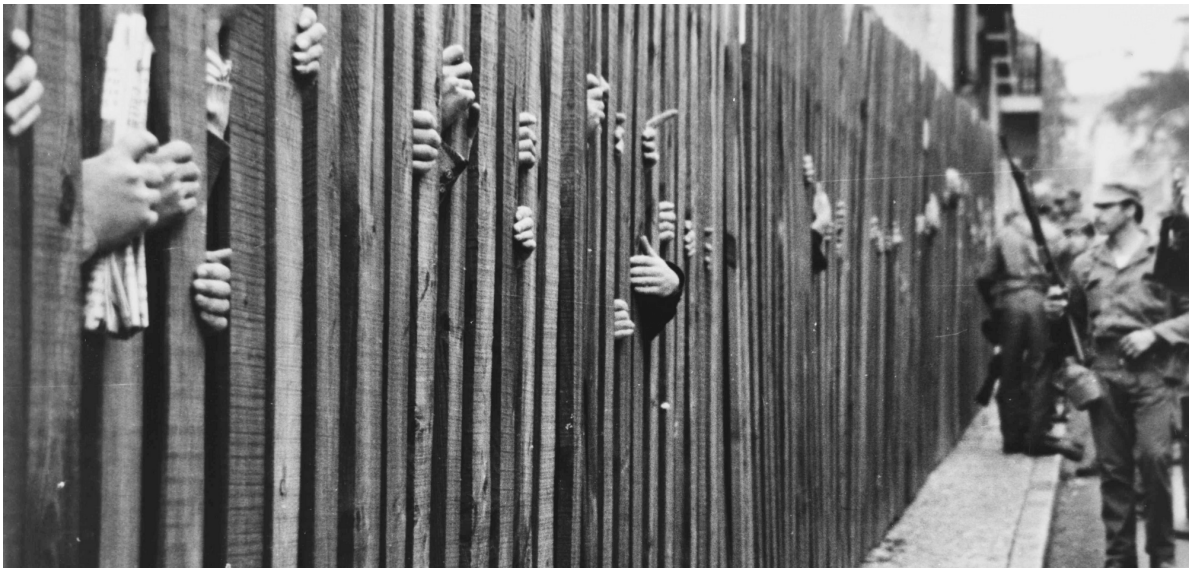
# Iberian transitions in the 1970s: collective action, state multidimensionality and tolerance band

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Cavalry, infantry and navy forces occupy the entrances to Rua António Maria Cardoso, where the headquarters of the International and State Defence Police (PIDE-DGS), the political police of the Estado Novo in Portugal during the Salazar and Caetano dictatorship, was located. Lisbon, 26 April 1974. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

Every transition alludes to a change process. *Transitions*, even without needing to add *political*, refer to the regime change processes towards representative democracies that many countries, previously ruled under all manner of dictatorships, have undergone from 1974 onwards, when the process started with Portugal and Greece. After the liberal revolutions that took place from the 17th to 19th centuries, and the democratisations and re-democratisations that occurred after the Second World War – whether linked to decolonisation processes or the military defeat of fascism – the 1970s marked the commencement of a third wave of democratisations. The geographical setting of this third wave is located in southern Europe – Spain is the third and last case – Latin America and East Europe, together with the former Soviet Union.

The Arab Spring would be a fourth stage of the wave that Samuel P. Huntington refers to in his book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991). Reviewing the transitions of the 1970s is not an insubstantial exercise if the aim is to understand the popular uprisings that have shaken the Arab-Muslim world since December 2010, and nor is it to remember the transitions of the 1980s and 1990s. That being said, just as our learning from recent European and Latin American transitions helps us understand the Arab Spring, the latter also allows us to ratify or qualify a number of conclusions consolidated in the literature on regime change processes.

Although some analysts and politicians have related demonstrations and popular rallies such as those of Cairo's Tahrir Square (January and February 2011) to the 15M movement at the Puerta del Sol in Madrid (from March 2011 onwards), the mobilisation in the case of the 15M was markedly regenerationist in its aim to deepen and improve – even morally – an existing consolidated democracy. On the other hand, the Arab Spring protests were pro-democracy and anti-dictatorship; they were rebellions against regimes that stood out for being repressive, exclusionary, corrupt, nepotistic and clientelistic. The rebels who defied the authoritarianism of Ben Ali, Mubarak, Al-Gaddafi or Al-Assad, like the Moroccans of the 20 February movement, demanded freedom and equality, and also justice, and not just jobs.

According to Freedom House's 2014 report on political rights and civil liberties, Tunisia and Libya improved their rating by 44 and 33 percentage points, respectively, between 2009 and 2013. Tunisia, which was the country where the Arab Spring started, continued to be, according to this study, "the best hope for genuine, stable democracy in the Arab world" (Freedom House report, 2014, p. 8). Indeed, while it was still classified as "not free" in the 2011 report, by 2012 it was considered "semi-free", and qualified for rating as "free" in the 2015 report. Libya, on the other hand, has degenerated into a situation with a level of violence and instability on a par with the situations in stateless countries such as Somalia or the Iraq that has emerged from the military occupation by the United States after 9/11.

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Neither is it insignificant to refer to the State and differentiate it from the political regime in order to understand transition processes. In fact, it is a discriminating factor that allows us to understand substantial differences between the paradigmatic Iberian transitions: in contrast to the Spanish model, agreed and led by the same élites within the Franco regime (Linz talks of "agreed reform – agreed rupture"), the 25 April Revolution in 1974 in Portugal was an example of a rupturist regime change. Although both processes culminated in consolidated parliamentary democracies in countries that would become members of today's European Union, they evolved in such a way that Fishman has observed that the differences in the foundational moments mentioned earlier have brought about appreciable

differences with respect to the quality of the two democracies' functioning, that is, with respect to "democratic practice" (which is the title that Fishman has given to his latest book) within the two countries.

In contrast to the Portuguese transition – a transition that broke with the dictatorship and was socioeconomically revolutionary during its first period – the Spanish transition – a transition via transactions – has provided an international benchmark for the use of consensus. Indeed, the appeals to consensus have been a constant feature of public debate in Spain for years, not so much for the agreements reached as for the desire to reach them with the participation of the greatest possible number of agents. Putting together consensus and concord (the reference to the Civil War was and is obligatory), this spirit of transition to post-Franco democracy was reflected in *The Embrace*, painted by Juan Genovés in 1976 and ceded by the Reina Sofia Art Centre to the Congress of Deputies in 2016. This symbolic act took place at a politically turbulent time: with the 15M, the public sphere was marked by the rebuttal of the Transition, and the restored democracy was now referred to as the "regime of '78", pejoratively and in a kind of historical revisionism, by the movement of the *indignados* and Podemos, the party that emerged from it.

The Spanish transition, certainly *agreed* (by agreement between the authoritarian regime and the political opposition to the regime) and *from above* (controlled at all times by the authorities of the dictatorship from which it originated), was not without risks and pressures (*from below*, but also *from within*, on the other side of the political divide). Nor was it a case of a supervised transition in the manner of Chile. Beyond what individual case studies may help us comprehend, the best way to understand each one is by comparing the two experiences in the Iberian Peninsula, looking at what they have in common and the aspects in which they differ.

O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead are authoritative authors for understanding the significance of the élites and their contingency as factors for explaining regime changes. The occurrence and development of transitions is not confined solely to political élites, be they governmental or otherwise. Their importance is obvious: they are the ones who make – or should make – the decisions. However, decisions are not made only according to individual preferences, nor are they implemented only because there is political will. Aside from specifically domestic factors that explain them (the situation with the colonies in Portugal or the activity of terrorist organisations in Spain), the two Iberian countries were affected by an international economic crisis, beginning during the liberalisation phase, that acted in favour of democratisation. In addition, both processes took place against the backdrop of a consolidated authoritarian regime that was biased against the working class.



Demonstration by Portuguese workers in support of land reform in Lisbon, November 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

Furthermore, both dictatorships had lasted long enough for there to be two or more generations that had grown up without any direct experience of democratic processes or rights. They also have in common the fact that, during the dictatorships, the respective countries' social and economic structures underwent major transformations, in particular, thanks to the impact of the economic liberalisation policies implemented during the 1960s. And their trade unions, in line with the similar nature of the two dictatorships, were vertical and under the control of the authorities, at least in theory, since there were trade union elections and collective bargaining had been legalised. These measures had the effect of facilitating the growth of a clandestine, class-based trade union opposition that closely aligned with the directives received from their respective left-wing parties, especially the Communist Party. This trade union opposition had begun as workers' committees formed spontaneously to settle specific issues in their companies.

No less significant is the fact that the growing labour unrest during the final years of both dictatorships, organised by workers' assemblies in companies, had considerable operating freedom with respect to the instructions from the central union organisations and the corresponding left-wing parties, which were all illegal. The platforms through which workers channelled their demands were also similar in both countries, which prioritised satisfying labour and wage issues, to which were usually added demands to reverse reprisals taken by employers.

In both cases, during the period prior to democratisation – that is, during the Arias Navarro

government in Spain and the Marcelo Caetano government in Portugal – the forms of protest were not different or more radical than those that took place (and continue to take place) in Spain after Adolfo Suárez's accession as president of the Government: strikes, demonstrations, concentrations and sit-ins, walkouts, etc., of varying intensity, duration and extent. In contrast, from the very first moment, after 25 April in Portugal, there were many cases where the workers occupied manufacturing facilities and even took over their management (that is, assumed control of production), temporarily or permanently replacing the owners' administrations. It was also common for pickets to stand vigil at the factory gates to prevent owners from removing machinery, documentation, raw materials or any other item necessary for maintaining production, and even prevented managers from entering or leaving the premises. The *saneamento* (purging or removal) of such staff was expressly mooted in one fifth of the labour conflicts recorded during the first ten months after the captains' coup.

> Both dictatorships in Spain and Portugal had lasted long enough for there to be two or more generations that had grown up without any direct experience of democratic processes or rights

In Spain, there were no practical cases where management authority was questioned and labour conflicts never evolved toward anti-capitalist attacks on the right to property. In Portugal, on the other hand, this *de facto* revolutionary logic infiltrated the labour and student movements and the social mobilisation in the countryside and the cities led to occupations of large estates and empty dwellings, respectively. We would stress the term *de facto* because in Spain, as in Portugal, both the militant publications of class-based trade unionism and those of the left-wing parties, whether regular or circumstantial, shared the same critical view of their respective dictatorships and also advocated a regime change in the socio-economic sphere, in line with their Cold War anti-capitalist ideology.

In both Spain and Portugal – in the latter case, until the spring of 1975 – the state authorities and the leaders of political and trade union organisations urged moderation while reaffirming their commitment to transitioning toward a parliamentary democracy comparable to the European democracies of their neighbours. In both countries, the government authorities regularly reiterated their intention to use the state's forces of coercion to impose law and order whenever this was subverted. It was also common in both countries to appeal to people's maturity to avoid disorders that could only benefit reactionary elements. In this respect, the memory of the Civil War still held considerable power in Spain as a force for contention, while in Portugal the national rhetoric would make frequent reference to the coup d'état that had recently put an end to democracy in Chile.

With this description of the will of the two Iberian countries' élites, particularly of the public authorities, in order to understand how events unfolded, we should not underestimate the capacity for both making and implementing decisions, even in a context of uncertainty such as that which accompanies any regime change. And this capacity is

directly related, not to the regime, which is in a process of transition, but to the State's institutions: the Government, the civil service, the judiciary, the army and the police, who were expected to enforce the existing legal framework and, in the case of the latter two, to respect hierarchies and obey orders. Ultimately, while any political transition occurs as a result of a crisis of the dictatorial regime, its subsequent evolution will vary depending on whether it coexists with a crisis of state, a sort of power vacuum, and, if the crisis is temporary, the transition's outcome may vary depending on the crisis' intensity and duration.

Despite the similarities between Spain and Portugal, and despite the fact that Spain's turbulent history stoked fears of a violent conclusion of the process that had started, it was in Portugal where the social mobilisations were radicalised from the outset. The political authorities of the Portuguese democratisation –unlike the neighbouring country – did not make use of the tools and mechanisms of state power that could have prevented the political uncertainty inherent in regime change processes from becoming a power vacuum. Indeed, in the case of Spain, the State was not hampered in the performance of its functions as a consequence of the regime change.



Mural of the Socialist Left Movement (MES), Lisbon, 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

Spanish workers staged an escalation of strikes that had to be stopped (in the opinion of the dictatorship's softliners) by involving them in a different, necessarily democratic political system. In Spain, as a result of the evolution of political events, workers perceived the possibility and opportunity to mobilise themselves as they had never done before, and many

more did so, in more companies and for longer, during the conflicts in 1976 than in any of the preceding years. However, at no point did these conflicts reach the point of transgressing the existing order – not public order, but the socio-economic order, and employers' space and power – beyond the tolerance band allowed for their mobilisation. This was largely because, in spite of the opportunity offered by democratisation to increase pressure and protests (as the liberalisation had before it), the balance of forces continued to be in favour of the State, from which, the transition was undoubtedly and cohesively controlled. And this is what workers perceived and denounced.

Perceptions are grounded on realities, and the Spanish reality did not allow the democratisation to be perceived – either by the workers' movement or by the opposition to the dictatorship – as a liberation (*libertação,* in Portuguese terminology); it was a transition towards democracy, but complying with the legislation in force at the time, and the process was controlled by the heirs of the authoritarian regime and, if required, without reducing its will or capacity for repression. Compared with what happened in Portugal, in Spain the authorities gave no reason to perceive a lack of unity and congruity within and between the different bodies of state power. Neither was there any confusion regarding these bodies' hierarchy, nor, ultimately, did they show any signs of mistrusting the recourse to coercion by the security forces. The Government's discourse became reality, that is, its action was consistent with its narrative; in other words, no implicit official discourse was perceived that was different from the explicit discourse.

> Whereas in Portugal the State provided an opportunity through its authorities' inaction in repression, in Spain these same authorities inhibited and constrained the nature of collective action

Whereas in Portugal the State provided an opportunity through its authorities' inaction in repression, in Spain these same authorities inhibited and constrained the nature of collective action; more specifically, they continued to do what they had already been doing. Here in Spain, there continued to exist an authority that effectively controlled the State's levers and instruments to determine the degree of tolerance accorded to social mobilisation, the degree of public disorder that it was prepared to allow in order to gain access to freedom, in accordance with the law of the time, and to make use of consubstantial rights. Mobilised workers (both in Portugal and in Spain) did what they were not prevented from doing or, rather, they undertook the actions that they initially perceived, and then confirmed in practice, would be tolerated and not repressed.

The reasons for this coercive inaction in Portugal and the covert realities of the authorities' discourse, as perceived by the individual social agents of interest to us, are diverse and complementary. The opportunity for radicalisation would have been made possible by the ambivalence of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and by the resulting internal division – and between each other – experienced by the different bodies of political and military power. It was also made possible by the confusion regarding these bodies'

hierarchical articulation – because of this confusion, the orders initially received by the police forces to intervene were followed by counter-orders to withdraw – and by the new authorities' distrust of the security forces, in spite of the disbandment of certain forces, the purges and the imprisonments that had been carried out. Symbolically and additionally, it would have meant using instruments for coercion that had been identified with the dictatorship by those who had fought against it. In short, the possibility for radicalisation existed not only because the workers and other social groups perceived the State's weakness but also because the State authorities perceived the strength of the sectors that were mobilised, and the workers' movement in particular, and repression became the costliest option.

In Portugal, the demonstration of the silent majority (*maioria silenciosa*) on 28 September and the attempted coup on 11 March confirmed the perceptions of the workers and other mobilised groups. Not only were they not constrained within any tolerance band (certainly not a tolerance band like the Spanish case) but they were even portrayed as guarantors of the Revolution against "fascism". After the *Verão Quente* (Hot Summer) of 1975, when the political transition became an institutionally social and economic transition, 25 November marks a watershed in the process. Both politically and in terms of social mobilisations, from that date onwards, with the 6th Provisional Government headed by Pinheiro de Azevedo as Prime Minister, the Portuguese experience abandoned radicalisms and embarked upon a path that was more similar to the path that the regime change in Spain had never left. One ineluctable factor accounting for the new situation, and specifically the change in the nature of collective action, was the authorities' regained capacity and willingness to use state instruments for social control, and how these instruments could be used – and from that point onwards, they were indeed used – to enforce law and order – of which the authorities now claimed to be its guarantors – anywhere where it was not upheld. The workers' organisations even criticised the *saneamento à esquerda*, [1] providing further evidence of the new mood in government circles that was shaping perceptions in the opposite direction to those that had predominated until then.

Spanish workers were not only discouraged from radicalising their protest and/or pressure mobilisations by the imposed order, but also by a fear of a future going back to the past. Workers are not self-employed or independent; their specific condition as workers does not alienate them from political contingency. Workers are also citizens. This fear was instilled and given credibility for at least four main interrelated reasons: first, the belligerently involutionary rhetoric of those calling on the army (and the security forces) to take action, justified, in their opinion, by the prevailing disorder; second, the violent actions of groups associated with the far right against mobilised workers and, in particular, against those who were identified as their representatives; third, the attitudes and behaviours of certain clearly reactionary military sectors and individuals; and, fourth, the fact that government action was not seen as limiting the risk of involution. Thus, the State became multidimensional: in Spain, workers perceived the existence of a power vacuum with respect to other sectors, without this affecting the strength deployed by the State toward them; in short, they perceived the high cost of radicalising their mobilisations, and the unwiseness of not restraining themselves.

In contrast to Spain, while weak against the radicalisation of collective action, the Portuguese State showed strength, and this was how it was perceived, in counteracting reactionary attempts. At least until the autumn of 1975. Until then, reactionary escalations in the form of attacks and strengthened opposition to the proposed revolution favoured by the Communists did not intimidate the mobilised workers' groups nor inhibit them from undertaking revolutionary actions. However, with the Sixth Provisional Government, their perception changed: in workers' and union circles, there was even talk of the risk of civil war, propitiated by the State itself because of the measures it was taking, allegedly in collusion with reactionary and right-wing forces. All around the country, workers' committees and union organisations issued statements, and there were also demonstrations and concentrations to denounce the new situation, but the monthly number of labour conflicts fell from 36 in September to 33 in October and 15 – less than half – in November. In that same month, November, the percentage of radicalised cases fell to the lowest percentage of the entire democratisation period until then (50%).

The threat not only of State repression – fulfilled – but even of civil confrontation beyond the attacks of the far right and the resurgence of employer reprisals, protected by the authorities, was now perceived among the ranks of the workers as a reality. The imbalance of forces had swung against the workers who wished to mobilise in defence of labour-related or other demands. And so, far from being an opportunity for action, it became an indisputable reason for contention. The cost-benefit ratio of mobilisation had been inverted. Fear, always present in Spain, absent until then in Portugal, became a reality. The 25th of November signified the definitive ratification of all the fears perceived and accusations made during September, October and November. From then onwards, with the workers' collectives afraid to act, the characteristics of labour conflict in Portugal came to resemble the Spanish model.

> The depth of the assembly and self-management movement and the saneamento that marked the early period in Portugal could be legacies that explain why the regime of 1978 has been challenged in Spain, but Portugal's transition has yet to be questioned

In Spain, as in Portugal after the 6th Provisional Government, insofar as the possibility of a civil war and/or return to dictatorship became feared realities, seeing the division within and between the different organs of State power, the mobilised social groups in both countries chose, respectively, not to radicalise and to constrain their forms of struggle in order to avoid the costs of the opposite behaviour. After having spurred the transgression of social and economic order during more than a year of democratisation in Portugal, after September 1975, the State's multidimensionality (now more complex, given that it is not a "homogeneous conglomerate of action", as Palacios put it, who highlights the "territorial differentiation of the organisations that comprise it") seems to have contributed to creating perceptions conducive to moderation.

Vertigo may well be the necessary cause of the balance between aspirations and possibilities, the two Weberian ethics. The transition via transactions that characterised the Spanish experience ran from start to finish along a path that ended up converging with the Carnation Revolution. It is 50 years since that 25 April and 45 years since the approval of the current Spanish Constitution. Both countries today are liberal regimes in political and economic terms, and comparable with their neighbours. They are both members of the European Union. They even share the unexpected parliamentary presence of the radical right, as they do with other countries that are EU member states. However, the depth of the assembly and self-management movement and the *saneamento* that marked the early period in Portugal could be legacies that explain why the regime of ’78 has been challenged in Spain, but Portugal’s transition has yet to be questioned.

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*The institutional violence addressed in this article on transitions in democracy connects with that of consolidated democracies in the project “The condemnation of the excluded: institutional frontiers of human rights” (PID2021-122498NB-I00), co-directed by the text’s author, Rafael Durán.*

## REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

1 — During the first 18 months of the Revolution, and especially after the failure of the counter-coup of 11 March 1975, there were numerous purges in the communication media, companies and schools and universities to expel people inclined politically toward the centre or the right.



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