

## *Spanish Politics: Democracy after Dictatorship*

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In this book, Omar Encarnación unravels - in an analytically insightful way - the experience of a country with one of the most successful democratic transitions in Europe, namely post-Franco Spain. Although the 'paradigm' in the literature of 'Transitional Justice' emphasises the cathartic function of trials, policies of lustration, truth commissions and more generally a comprehensive scrutiny of a society's violent past, the book 'Spanish Politics' puts forward a refined and provocative theoretical argument that democratic consolidation can be achieved without 'coming to terms with the past', provided that strong democratic institutions are established in the emerging democracy which, subsequently, offer the basic instruments for prospective truth-seekers.

The Spanish Civil war (1936-1939) left the country in ruins with approximately 500,000 dead, a deeply divided society, and the beginning of a remarkably long-lived dictatorship under Franco (1939-1975). The death of Franco (1975) signalled the beginning of a successful process of democratic consolidation, which became known - sarcastically sometimes - as '*Santa Transición*' (Holy Transition). The book focuses on tackling two puzzling and interrelated questions: How can a deeply divided society with virtually no previous democratic experience set the founding tenets of a successful and widely recognised democracy? Subsequently, why does an established democracy remain reluctant to debate the traumatic experiences of its distant past related to the legacies of the civil war and the dictatorship?

'Consensus' was the central ingredient of the Spanish recipe for democratic consolidation. But how did it become possible for groups formerly in conflict to reach fundamental consensual agreements ranging from the recognition of the Communist Party, the granting of pardons to the 'enemies of Franco' to the remarkable rapprochement of former arch-enemies (the Catholic Church, the Communist Party and the army)? In his effort to reply to the stimulating question, Encarnación draws on the concept of 'political learning', pioneered by Nancy Bermeo (1992).<sup>1</sup> Based on the premise that political elites are capable of altering both their objectives, priorities and their tactics on how to best achieve these objectives in view of their previous traumatic experiences, the conception of 'political learning' constitutes an analytically useful instrument in explaining negotiated transitions. In Spain, the disappointing experience of the Second Republic (1931-1936)

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1 Nancy Bermeo (1992) 'Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 273-291.

to establish democracy which ended in the bloodiest civil war of this century on European soil, coupled with almost forty years of Francoist indoctrination, served as the twin sources of political learning. The previous experiences of polarisation and violence informed the objectives of political elites in a critical juncture in the transition process (1977), prioritising the stability and viability of democratic institutions through the inclusion of a wide range of political groups in the project of democratic consolidation, instead of a comprehensive screening of past abuses.

As a result, Spain, an established democracy, the world's eighth largest economy and a member of the most important international organisations, presented a remarkable reluctance to 'open old wounds' and discuss the painful experiences of the past (the Spanish civil war and the Francoist repression). The theoretical question logically deriving from this assumption is whether this culture of consensus can have a long-term negative impact on the quality of the emerging democracy – known in the literature as the 'frozen democracy' thesis. The very articulate argumentation of the author points to the recent reactivation of the recovery of historical memory as an illustration that the 'frozen democracy' argument is not valid in Spain. Since 2003 Spanish (civil) society has been uncovering the veil of oblivion, with exhumations of mass graves containing the remains of the victims of Franco, the withdrawal of monuments referring to the Francoist repression, the epitome of which was the Law on Historical Memory (2007). Therefore, a vibrant civil society challenging the founding tenet of Spanish politics over the last thirty years serves as the perfect illustration not only that a transition to democracy can be successful without a scrutiny of the past, but also that democratic institutions may provide the fertile ground for the retrospective recovery of truth – the best indication of an established democracy.

Why would the readership of Cypriot studies be interested in a book tackling such a specific, in time and space, phenomenon? The prioritisation of a settlement to the 'Cyprus issue' not only has set the agenda in policy-making but also demarcated the basic lines of academic research, dominated by Conflict Resolution and International Relations approaches. Therefore, only scant attention has been paid to the processes through which previous experiences of (intra-communal) violence served as 'lessons' for the Greek-Cypriot political elites. Could we imagine an alternative analytical approach to the Cyprus problem, such as that offered by Encarnación, which would elucidate the impact of the 'negotiated' type of democratic transition in 1974 (in the aftermath of the short-lived coup d'état and the Turkish invasion) to the institutions of the Republic and the preferences of the political leaders, as well as the reluctance of the Republic to proceed to a comprehensive recovery of historical memory? An interesting lesson deriving from the reading of the book is that contrary to the emphasis of the transitional justice literature with cathartic solutions (trials, lustration, truth commissions), a successful democratic consolidation is possible even if it is based on 'forgetting'; so long as the main focus is the establishment of strong democratic institutions that will subsequently – even thirty years after the transition – be used by those who want to challenge the official version of the past. Finally, the meticulous examination of the grassroots initiatives concerning the recovery of historical memory in Spain contains a valuable

analytic example related to the role of the civil society in the recent processes of truth recovery in Cyprus.

The author's argument could have been even more instructive if he had incorporated in his theoretical discussion comparative evidence from societies with similar experiences such as Mozambique, Northern Ireland, or even Cyprus. Overall, though, Omar Encarnación's book 'Spanish Politics' constitutes a very instructive reading for those interested in transitional justice in general, and explaining the recent resumption of activity on the recovery of historical memory in Cyprus, in particular. Its clarity, the bold argumentation, the rich empirical evidence as well as the insertion of useful analytical tools to the study of transitions, qualify this book as a point of reference.

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