

Workers' mobilisations during the Spanish democratic transition: discourse and representations of assemblyism (1976–1978)

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ABSTRACT

The following work analyses trade union and journalistic discourses on the role played by worker's assemblies during the Spanish transitional process with the aim of understanding how their mobilisation was subjugated and subordinated by political organisations and trade unions who were in opposition to democratisation. The worker's assemblies were not anecdotal events, and the marginalisation of their meetings was partly the consequence of public discourses that delegitimised them. Moreover, these discourses contributed to the construction of a specific political culture which rejects worker 'radicalism'. Thus, workers were asked to reject their own democratic structures and accept the monopoly of social representation by the trade unions.

Keywords: democratic culture, transitional process, worker mobilisation, worker's assemblies.

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INTRODUCTION

The convocation of clandestine assemblies emerged in Spain during the 1960s. They constituted a new form of worker organisation designed to overcome the social limitations of the *Organización Sindical Española* (OSE; Spanish Labour Organisation) which was often referred to as the *Sindicato Vertical* (Vertical Labour Union). In effect, various groups and activists with different political tendencies (mainly communists and Catholics) learned from the experiences of the 1940s and 1950s that it is impossible to keep a union hidden. Committees of workers emerged who tried to combine secret actions and activism within the legal platforms of the OSE (Molinero, 2011). Assemblies convened at lunchtimes or at the end of factory shifts,

and commissions were created to make demands and were then immediately dissolved. These extended through a great many companies, especially large and medium-sized ones, and led to the creation of a *sociopolitical movement*, the *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO; Workers' Commissions) [trade unions], which was officially born in 1967 after its first assembly in Orcasitas (Molinero, 2011, p. 149).

The appearance of the CCOO can be explained by practicalities linked to the need for secrecy and combat as a single union apparatus, taking advantage of the gaps that existed in the Francoist legislation (Miller, 2011, p. 148); the meeting of assemblies and the constitution of this sociopolitical movement became a central element

in the formation of new collective identities: assembly as a form of organisation came to mean ‘assemblyism’, and was used to characterise what today’s historians, as well as journalists and trade unionists of the time¹, called the ‘new workers movement’.² This movement was the fruit of assembly speeches connected with others that advocated the need for *union unity*. However, the CCOOs remained heterogeneous. This manifested itself in the strategic and political divergences of its members and the political groups that cohabited it (Hernández, 1972). Some organisations to the left of the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE; the Communist Party of Spain), such as the *Partido del Trabajo de España* (PTE; the Party of Labour of Spain), the *Organización Revolucionaria de los Trabajadores* (ORT; Workers’ Revolutionary Organisation), or the *Liga Comunista Revolucionaria* (LCR; Revolutionary Communist League), criticised [the PCE’s] ‘reformist’ stance;³ the greatest divergences were over whether or not to present themselves at the OSE’s trade union elections (Díaz, 1977, p. 146). Some defended anti-capitalist positions and rejected the idea of insertion into the Francoist union to obtain positions as trade union delegates. On the other hand, the majority of the PCE considered that the workers’ social demands should be articulated around a global anti-Franco struggle, bringing together all the social forces with the aim of establishing a provisional government in charge of making the ‘democratic rupture’ a reality. Therefore, [to them] this involved monopolising the union delegate positions in order to strengthen the CCOO.

Faced with the impotence of the Vertical Labour Union and the fragility of the structures of ‘class unionism’ (the trade union centres were not legalised until April 1977), the rise of workers’ mobilisations was accompanied by the generalisation and expansion

of assemblies. Thus, between 1974 and 1977, all of the workers’ conflicts were structured and organised as assemblies (Pérez Pérez, 2006). There were several types: company (or personnel) assemblies and section (or workshop) assemblies, which allowed debate and the delivery of demands. There were also general assemblies that were considered sovereign and which had the final power of decision. Finally, there were also assemblies or committees of elected delegates with revocable positions and whose objective was to negotiate with businessmen and coordinate conflicts between different factories. Thus, we were witnessing the construction of a “a certain open, participatory, and unitary assembly culture” (Pérez Pérez, 2001, p. 389).

With the death of the dictator in November 1975, the Franco regime crisis accelerated and the assembly movements became politicised, especially because they had been so repressed, and this was accompanied by the feeling of ‘class solidarity’.⁴ These movements were not only driven by trade unionists, but also by independent revolutionary groups whose political traditions come from council communism and anarcho-syndicalism.⁵ They understood assemblyism as the means to produce a new revolutionary process insofar as the sovereign nature of the assemblies guaranteed the autonomy of conflicts before parties and unions. These assembly strikes reached their peak at the beginning of 1976 (Amorós, 2008) and contributed to reinforcing collective worker identifications based on articulating the concept of class in the form of assembly organisations.

1 For example, see that of Nicolás Sartorius, leader of the PCE and CCOO, and journalist in the magazine *Triunfo* (Sartorius, 1976a, p. 34).

2 For the historian Xavier Domènech, Spain witnessed the emergence of a “new workers movement” in the 1960s (2012, p. 224).

3 For more on the political organisations to the left of the PCE, see Laiz (1995) and Casanellas and Martínez (2012).

4 For example, throughout the Basque Country there were 13 general strikes between January 1976 and May 1977, whose motives were essentially political and which made demands against repression. Moreover, ‘political’ strikes and strictly wage-based strikes in the Basque Country were confused in a movement whose characteristics increasingly resembled an attempted revolutionary rupture. See Molinero and Ysàs (1998, p. 240).

5 It should be noted that very few studies have been devoted to analysing the relationships between the assembly movements and revolutionary, independent, and anarcho-syndicalist political currents. In the field of historiography, apart from the work of José Antonio Pérez cited above, it is worth consulting the article by Vega (2011), as well as the one by Carnicero and Pérez (2005).

Some [academics] sometimes allude to the existence of a 'labour union movement', while for other events we refer to an 'assembly movement'.⁶ However, assemblyism began to weaken in 1977 and, as a new framework of social relations between employers and workers was built within a model defined as 'neo-corporatist', disappeared from the landscape of mobilisation.⁷ Indeed, the construction of new institutions in the world of work during the transition (from 1978, the 'works councils' and 'union sections') contributed to the slowdown of the assembly movements. The statistics show that there were more strikes in 1979 than in 1976,⁸ but their nature and organisation had considerably changed. Whereas in 1976 the workers' social movements were characterised by the politicisation of their protagonists, by the radical nature of several specific strikes, and by general strikes, in 1979 the conflicts were mainly sectoral and they were often caused by [dissatisfaction with] the

negotiation of general agreements between unions, employers, and the government. They lost all their political content and union federations directed their course (Vega, 2011, p. 181). With the unions having acquired a preponderant role, practically no assembly dynamics remained.

In a recent article, the historian José Babiano (2012) wonders if social history, by focusing on the strikes during the Franco regime and the transition, contributed to building a form of 'epic narration' of the workers' resistance. In fact, historiography has given visibility to the workers' mobilisations and has shown their decisive role in the weakening of the Franco regime and in the arrival of democratic freedoms (Molinero and Ysàs, 1998). However, we would like to emphasise that these epic narratives are often inscribed within the teleological and normative narrative of the triumphant transition, which was undertaken despite using methodology from the social sciences and theory of social movements.⁹ Undoubtedly, this is linked to the fact that the conceptual structure used by many historians is based, on the one hand, on the idea of the individual rationality of profit-maximising and loss-minimising actors and, on the other, a sociology that privileges the 'structures of political opportunity'.¹⁰

Despite the introduction of new concepts to consider the role of cultural factors in the deployment and configuration of repertoires of collective action,¹¹ the oft-criticised dichotomy between 'old' and 'new' social movements makes it difficult to verify the complexity of the worker strikes during the 1970s in Spain. In effect, the seemingly anecdotal and ephemeral aspect of assembly practices has reduced historians' interest [in them], and they

6 The clandestine worker's press analysed at the *Fundación 1º de Mayo* in Madrid, between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, as well as the archives consulted in the *Pavilion of the Republic* and the *Fundació Cipriano García* in Barcelona in July 2012, show that during the course of several events (strikes in construction and metal-works in 1976 and 1977, general strikes in the Basque Country and Catalonia in 1976, etc.), there were struggles [in terms] of semantic appropriation with the objective of establishing a collective worker identity. Whenever it is necessary to designate the origin of one of the strikes with a political worker issue, one must also speak of the 'independent workers' movement', the 'assembly workers' movement', the 'union workers movement', etc. This semantic battle continued, to a lesser extent, within the historiographical field, with the use of the expression 'new workers' movement', which competes with the 'other workers' movement', used by the philosopher Santiago López Petit (2008) to account for a counter-current social reality.

7 The term 'neocorporatism' serves to define the new system of wage relationships that was implemented in 1978 to differentiate it from fascist corporatism, instead associating it with the corporatism practiced after the Second World War in numerous democratic regimes. For a study of the relationship between anarcho-syndicalism and neocorporatism during the Spanish democratic transition, see Bartolomé (2005).

8 In 1976 there were 1,568 strikes, 3,639,000 strikers, and 13,752,000 lost hours of work, while in 1979 the statistics included 2,680 strikes, 5,713,000 strikers, and 18,917,000 lost hours of work. Source: Yearbooks on Labour Statistics and Social Affairs, Ministry of Labour and Social Security, cited by García (2008).

9 For more on the relationship between history, social movements, and the theory of social movements, see Pérez Ledesma (1994).

10 This is the case, for example, of the works of Durán (2000).

11 For example, as in the case of Xavier Domènech, who introduces the study of cultural factors into his work and reflects on how new worker identities were built on the transmission of knowledge and experience.

have even ignored their existence when criticising and interpreting labour movements during the late Francoist and transition era (Vega, 2011, p. 176). This also explains the lack of interpretations regarding the issues of subordination and marginalisation of the workers' movements in the parties and in the opposition unions, resulting from a lack of contextualisation of key concepts. But the naturalisation of terms by historiography is totally understandable if we remember that the history of the transition began as a story of the transition itself, that is, a story of legitimisation of a model process.¹² Subsequent approaches that have reintroduced social movements as an important factor in [the transition] process use a 'classic' vocabulary whose false meaning is evident and did not question what these political categories ('class' or 'labour movement', for example) were in reality really mobilising.

Thus, trying to understand why and to what extent the assembly practices were discredited, leads us to ask ourselves if the evolution of these workers' mobilisations was determined in some way by discursive constructions that participated in the reconfiguration and resignification of these practices. Because, to find a way for the 'democratic movement' promoted by the opposition to be integrated into the new political framework built by the Francoist reformers, among other things, revolutionary and anti-capitalist aspirations had to be marginalised and the 'workers' world' partially demobilised. This meant that the opposition's ideological and practical changes, especially those of its two main organisations (Andrade, 2012), partly caused the subordination of the workers' social movements to [the party line]. Their relegation within the political space is not simply conjuncture; specific discourses [stating that] assemblyism is incompatible with democratic change were produced and disseminated during specific events such as far-reaching strikes or at times of workers' insubordination [because], within

the dominant discourses, these [manifestations] were perceived as obstacles to the success of the democratic process.

Discrepancies about the organisation and representation of the conflict, produced by the press to warn working-class society about the dangers of radicalising strikes in the context of the transition, reveal strong relationships between the grassroots and organisations, disagreements within movements, and the re-arrangement and restructuring of ranks.¹³ These strong ties and the willingness of journalists and commentators to specifically report on these mobilisations demonstrates the existence of 'conceptual fractures' (Nexo Autonomía, 2002) in the way the labour movement was understood and what its role should be during the transition.

FROM ASSEMBLIES TO ASSEMBLYISM: SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PROTESTS

Stereotypes of the middle class

When Adolfo Suárez was appointed president of the new Spanish government in July 1976, the newspaper *El País* published an article which defined this 'political man' as the representative of the middle class. The article's journalist stated that these classes, born during the Franco regime's economic expansion, could guarantee stabilisation of the process of political change in the face of the disturbances of the peace and threats posed by social mobilisations (*El País*, 7 July 1976, p. 9). As pointed out by Sánchez León (2014), construction of a collective imagination based on how the middle classes are represented comes from Francoist political cultures that had developed a mesocratic

12 On the construction of the myth of the transition model, consult Bazzana-André (2006) and Godicheau (2014).

13 This work is primarily based on the reading and analysis of four publications, chosen for their roots in the traditions of the left, and aimed to determine the evolution of political languages and ideological reformulations of the media organisations more closely associated with the democratic opposition than to the Francoist reformist sectors: *Cambio 16*, *Triunfo*, *Diario 16*, and *El País*. The work also consulted the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (PSUC; the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia) fund [records] (ANC1-230) from the *Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya* (ANC; the National Archive of Catalonia).

discourse.¹⁴ However, this historian also shows that these discourses are present in anti-Francoist ideologies and he illustrates it in an article that appeared in *El País* at the time of the inauguration of the new Suárez government in 1976:

A *Times* correspondent defines Mr. Suárez as representative of the upper-middle class and writes that, with his election, the middle class was in power. A modern and dynamic middle class that accommodated Franco while growing in wealth and sophistication, but *that now saw the need to change* to a more open and less artificial society (*El País*, 7 July 1976).¹⁵

The construction of new social representations led the immense majority of workers to feel that they no longer belonged to the working class, but rather, to the middle classes (Sánchez, 2014). This ‘middle-isation’ of society contributed to the attenuation of class identities within the collective citizen identity, and in so, these middle classes [became the] guarantors of civility and pacifism. Thus, while Suárez’s government started meeting with the democratic opposition parties and unions in July 1976, we simultaneously witnessed the marginalisation of the strikers’ movements in favour of one-off days of actions and partial strikes. This is the case, for example, of the national strike day convened on 12 November in the same year, not by factories and neighbourhood assemblies, but by the leading authorities of the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sindicales* (COS; the Trade Unions Coordinator), comprising the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT; the General Union of Workers), the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO; the Workers’ Union) and CCOO. In addition, the closure of companies and intensification of dismissals were accompanied by increasingly defensive strikes, while, from 1974 if not before, workers carried out

protest actions on the offensive which set out their political demands. This general decline in workers’ mobilisations, and assembly practices in particular, should be linked to the evolution of this semantic field in the written press, which itself was already a vehicle for new values and had been participating in the construction of a peaceful public space.

The ‘wildcat’ strikes

These transformations should be analysed taking into account that late 1975 and early 1976 were marked by a succession of workers’ mobilisations, general strikes, and social explosions that destabilised both anti-Franco political forces and democratic opposition organisations.¹⁶ Given the uncertainty created by this social and political situation, representatives of public opinion (journalists, politicians, intellectuals, etc.) proposed reviewing and analysing the assembly mobilisations in order to better understand and control them. This is illustrated by the intervention of a law professor, Juan Antonio Sagardoy Bengoechea, interviewed by the newspaper *El Correo Español-Pueblo Vasco* and republished by *El País*, in which he states that:

In Spain, all the strikes are now wild and the only way to civilise them is a profound mutation of the union structure, giving way to free and autonomous workers’ organisations that lead, maintain strikes and take responsibility for them (*El País*, 13 May 1976).

Assembly practices were associated with the idea of ‘wildcat strikes’, which new union structures—which also harmonised with the old ones—tried to ‘civilize’. Thus, unlike wildcat strikes, syndicalism is associated with the idea of *responsibility* in a period in which the increase in workers’ mobilisations was interpreted by the prevailing social groups as a destabilising factor: the anti-Francoist forces (which were still illegal in 1976)

14 In the Royal Spanish Academy dictionary, the term ‘mesocracy’ is defined as a political regime in which the middle class is predominant. In French, this term can be translated with the expression *régime politique bourgeois* (Petit Robert), that is, a regime that establishes a meritocratic logic embodied and legitimised by the same middle classes.

15 All the italics in the following citations in this article are the author’s.

16 Ferran Gallego (2008) pointed out that the two democratic opposition bodies, the *Junta Democrática de España* (JDE; the Democratic Junta of Spain) and *Coordinación Democrática* (Democratic Coordination), joined forces in March 1976 after their experience of the assembly movement in Vitoria and for fear of becoming overwhelmed.

were perceived as able to contain the radicalisation of workers' mobilisations and to ensure the success of the union transition process. Thus, with the right to freedom of expression in assembly, protest, and decision making, these labour collectives had to transform into structures capable of *orientating*, *guiding*, and especially, holding [its members] *accountable*. Responsibility was understood as the idea that non-conformists should stop organising an unlimited number of strikes and should eliminate strike pickets and confrontations between their collective-action repertoire and [law]-enforcement [services]; it was about *educating* them in negotiation.

These social practices, which had been approved by the workers themselves during multiple assemblies, were blamed for destabilising the country's political situation. This is because the strikers were concerned about politics but they damaged the democratic opposition organisations' objectives because they wanted to be the only ones authorised to speak 'on behalf of' the workers. Effectively, these strikes were 'wild' because they broke the practical and symbolic boundaries assigned to their functions, and displaced the sensible division between those with the legitimacy to speak and those without access to means of public communication.¹⁷ They were wild because they destabilised the representation established by Francoist powers and also threatened the anti-Francoist union and political leader's strategies.

Although the term 'savage strikes' was used by the government and by the intellectual and journalistic media, there were examples, such as that of the activist and CCOO theoretician, Nicolás Sartorius, who criticised the use of this term to refer to the strikers' movements:

¹⁷ For Jacques Rancière (2000), the division 'of the sensible' designates a system of evidence that defines the existence of 'a common' based on the division of parts and exclusive spaces. This common is destabilised when a political subject, understood as having an enunciative and demonstrative capacity, reconfigures the relation between the visible and the decidable. In our opinion, the workers displaced this division during the course of the 1976 social mobilisations.

The impropriety of the application of the term "wildcat strikes" to unemployed workers is that here the union structure has not changed since its corporatist, Vertical Labour Union origins, and workers usually find that their aspirations are not channelled (Sartorius, 1976b).

This term was not legitimate because the very nature of the Francoist Vertical Labour Union did not allow workers' aspirations to be channelled; therefore, it was understood that democratic unions were capable of [this type of representation]. Evoking and analysing the Madrid metro strike in January 1976, Nicolás Sartorius denounces the very idea of wildcat strikes:

The first harsh word that jumped into the press—in the *ABC* and *Ya*—if I remember correctly, just after the start of the conflict, was the one of wildcat strike. With it perhaps they were trying to use modern language, [like] a European [voice], picking up the term which in Europe defines the strikes that the workers undertake without their union's [authorisation]. *But for that we [...] would have to have European unions* (Sartorius, 1976b, p. 14–15).

It is not the term which trade unionists were attacking, but its use [which was] marked by a political context in which unions and democratic parties were still illegal. While the government chose not to legalise workers' organisations, it would be impossible to talk about wildcat strikes, meaning that it was [only] possible to use this concept in a 'democratic' context in which union and legal structures regulated social relations in the world of work; only with this condition could this term be referenced.

Whether by law professors or intellectual trade union activists, we saw the construction of a common conceptual framework based on the idea of a democracy in which the workers would no longer play a political role and would be limited to the category of 'social subjects', expressing their discontent through the unions. The construction of a democratic political culture also encompasses the idea that the right to strike is legitimate if it is not exercised in a wild manner,

that is, without regulation or representation. Requests for regulation were promoted between intellectuals and the written press, which perceived wildcat strikes to be the result of the absence of democratic organisms acting as regulators between those involved in the conflict, and so they were able to marginalise them.

Depoliticising the world of workers

Constructing the feeling of 'social belonging' to a particular class through assembly practices leads, as we mentioned above, to the politicisation of the strikers. New forms of democratic participation were built, but these were combated because they [seemed to promote the] idea that politics should be the exclusive property of elites. That [democracy] must be exercised in places such as parliament and not in factories and neighbourhoods, as this quote from September 1976, when the trade unionist Cipriano García was received with a CCOO delegation by the Minister of Trade Union Relations, Enrique de la Mata, shows:

The negotiating process could be slow, it would have to be advanced by the trade unions. For us, those dangers are real, but it is precisely the lack of freedom that sharpens conflicts, lengthens them, *puts politics inside companies when it should have another arena* [...]. The labour movement has shown signs of maturity, it is not out of control, we are aware that we must understand how to control conflicts and end them successfully (Sartorius, 1976c. p. 16–17).

We observe that the unions assure the minister that the social movements are controlled—contained in any case—in order to guarantee the good results in the process of political negotiation between the opposition and the government. To control these dangers, the trade unionist proposes the idea of establishing democratic freedoms, and these must lead to the depoliticisation of workers' social movements. The dominant discourses show the will of the political and union elites to preserve their monopoly on the expression of the 'social [elements]' of factories and to destroy other forms of understanding [these movements]—the ones which rejected the way the process of political change was being directed. Simultaneously, several

commentators and reporters, as well as politicians or intellectuals, directly addressed the protest leaders to tell them that they must accept the institutional and governmental framework through which the transition was being deployed, and that they should leave aside possible alternatives; an example, is the advice of the university [professor] and politician, Luis González Seara, printed in October 1976 in the pages of *Diario 16*: "This does not seem [to be] the moment for revolutionary ruptures or for political utopianism, but of a pragmatism leading to democratic change and alternatives of power through elections" (González, 197, p. 4).

This quote contributes to the relegation of a series of political alternatives to the [category of] 'unrealisable'—to the field of utopia. The idea was that democratic change must be associated with pragmatism and uniformity for future parliamentary elections to be organised in the long run. The effort to generally discredit revolutionary political cultures and assemblyism in particular, was linked to ideological changes in the journalistic and intellectual media and opposition political organisations, [a change] we could define as a 'linguistic transition' (Fernández, 2008), produced by constructing negative representations attributed to assembly strikes.

However, through 1976 and 1977, starting from assemblies, the strikers continued to organise themselves. Trade union centres were still illegal, but assemblyism still maintained a certain legitimacy because it had participated in the fall of Arias Navarro's government. However, the spread of the term wildcat strike, created by the Francoist elites, found its equivalent in the opposition, and especially in trade unionists, with expressions such as 'indefinite strikes' or 'unlimited strikes'. While it is evident that these two ideas do not have the same meaning, they converge in that they both consider the radicalisation of workers' movements to be negative for the future. For their part, trade unionists criticised these strikes, which were prolonged from assembly to assembly and which acquired an indefinite character; they also considered

that they jeopardised possible negotiations, whether at the national and governmental levels or at the local level, in some professional branches or companies. They took the position that these strikes were mobilisations approved by assembly agitation, without prior debate via the political and union organisations which were supposed to be leading them. Thus, this could create a situation of general conflict between the democratic opposition and the anti-Francoist unions, as the *Federació del Metall de Catalunya* (the Metal Federation of Catalonia), [which formed] part of the CCOO, stated in January 1976:

We are aware that only MOBILISATIONS of workers in their different forms (demonstrations, strikes,...) can be the instruments that impose their demands but remembering that these mobilisations have to be in a responsible, unitary and coordinated way, that show employers our strength; and not with the call for indefinite strikes, without any way out, that hinder our struggle and help employers to take workers into a social pact.¹⁸

Thus, assemblyism was accompanied by indefinite strikes, accused of playing the bosses' game. Faced with some strikes that rejected or criticised the slogans of democratic opposition organisations, the union leaders developed a discourse based on responsibility and the need for negotiation and planned ends to strikes: "Strikes also end and perhaps the most difficult thing is to know how to conclude them well" (Sartorius, 1976b). These types of statement also appeared in the widely-circulated written press, although for other reasons. In effect, the unions wanted to maintain a general situation of mobilisation so that it could put pressure on the government. For its part, the written press was in favour of democracy and collaborated by reinterpreting explosive social situations to try to normalise them. This translated into the characterisation and definition of what

a strike should be in a country that calls itself democratic. For example, in November 1976, the writer and Spanish intellectual, Francisco Umbral, stated in *El País* that:

The strike is the most democratic, *the most peaceful* and the most rational thing that has been invented for the proletariat to speak its language of silence in the face of the eloquence of money. [...] Strikes, in short, are a necessary evil in the dialectic of surplus value, a resource, not an ideal or a utopia, but [one] which, like all great limited resources, becomes the pathetic, unanimous and almost Brechtian expression of destiny (Umbral, 1976).

Thus, strikes were defined as a rational, democratic, and peaceful practice. However, whether considered as an end or a means, they were not at all synonymous with pacifism when the article was published in November. This declaration was made on the day of the 12 November strike in relation to the legitimisation of new modes of action—one-off partial strikes, exclusively organised by unions, peaceful demonstrations, etc. In 1976, social struggles in the form of demonstrations and occupations of factories and churches were still the victims of repression by police forces.¹⁹ The actions deployed by strikers in public spaces, such as distributing pamphlets or setting up pickets, were synonymous with conflicting practices which were not at all peaceful. Therefore, if the reality of strikes was not peaceful, insisting on this characterisation aims to normalise indefinite strikes whose representations, based on the class struggle, were accused of fomenting violence and radicalism. Strikes are legitimate if they form part of a *democratic* framework with an institutionalised function.

18 ANC, PSUC (ANC1-230), *Federació del Metall de Catalunya* of CCOO, 03.01.40.43. CCOO. Trade union activity in the metal sector, 1968–1982.

19 The repression that especially marked 1976 was that in Vitoria, where police used tear gas against strikers who were gathered in a church. When they left the church, the police opened fire on them, killing three workers and causing numerous injuries. However, the historian Sophie Baby points out that, between 1975 and 1982, the violence of the rebels (of the extreme right, of the revolutionary left, and of radical nationalism) caused 536 deaths. While, on the other hand, state violence caused 178 deaths (Baby, 201, p. 54).

The assembly could create new languages that put the role trade unions wanted to have in directing these movements at risk. These were counter-current languages used by political subjects who were themselves subject to the democratic opposition guidelines—revolutionary activists, trade unionists, or simply strikers who were utterly determined to win new rights—languages that destabilised the projects of reformation undertaken by the political and trade union elites. To avoid this, several journalists directed their writing towards the workers' world, advising them to limit their protests so as not to hinder the process of political transition.

Workers—and Spaniards are demonstrating their serenity and clarity of ideas—think that “the strike for the strike itself” may not be of interest in a conventional approach and *they prefer to limit themselves to exercising their rights, preferring, in this case, other forms of negotiation*. Going from there to concluding that strikes are a resource limit is a leap, because ultimately the strike is, before anything, the genuine way to set working conditions (Villa, 1976).

This discourse urged homogenisation of the proletariat by insisting on its protagonists' position, in what they really want. From then on, the emergence of indefinite strikes, that is to say, strikes that were prolonged from assembly to assembly, became synonymous with a strike for the strike itself, or, wildcat strikes. The lexical field is eloquent: *clarity* and *serenity* are feelings associated with the idea of self-limitation and negotiation in the context of the exercise of the right to strike. In addition, one must also point out that the quoted fragment speaks on the workers' behalf without actually giving them the floor. Strikes are understood as a legitimate right, but workers must be aware that they must be used properly, without hampering negotiations between the government and the opposition.

Some subjects struggle against submission and the imposition of subjectivity. Thus, subjectivation processes are derived from power relations and can be defined as ways of behaving [when faced

with different] possible actions (Foucault, 1982). Therefore, it can be assumed that the dominant narratives have allowed a space of collective action, legitimised by a moral space, to be created from the diffusion of terms and lexical fields that insist on good behaviour. This makes it possible to neutralise workers' social conflicts [by labelling them as] counter-current and thus, discrediting them. In this way, values and principles such as pacifism, civility, or even responsibility become the product of a moral economy (Fassin, 2009),²⁰ transmitted by a regime of repression adapted to one of humanisation. Perhaps we might think that if these values come at least in part from rules which themselves depend partially on values, then the political instrumentalisation of the emotions of these events will be inscribed in declarations that would send these assembly practices back to the past, accusing them of pursuing an anachronistic struggle and not adapting to the new democratic realities.

THE MEANINGS OF ASSEMBLYISM

Assemblyism and moderation

Throughout the 1970s, the trade union and political organisations of the Francoist opposition maintained the workers' assemblies but questioned assemblyism. The assemblyism that called strikes but did not seem to require parties and unions to be able to function, especially because its delegates were elected by the assembly. Thus, the legitimacy of these delegates was superior to that of the CCOO's trade union delegates who were present in the Vertical Labour

²⁰ Indeed, in [my] opinion, the values and norms imposed during the course of the transition were linked to moral sentiments promoted by discourses and languages. Thus, as the anthropologist Didier Fassin explains, the introduction to the analysis of the concept of 'moral economy' aims to show that there are various forms of political subjectivities that are shaped by historically-located moral configurations. The heuristic resources of this concept can show that words such as *consensus* or *disillusionment* are the result of social norms imposed by values transmitted through the instrumentalisation of moral feelings such as fear, phobia, etc. (Fassin, 2009).

Union apparatus.²¹ Support for the assemblies by the political and union organisations was, therefore, nuanced and ambivalent, as evidenced by this PCE statement, published in *Nuestra Bandera*, 81 (October 1975); according to J. A. Pérez: “[The assemblies] control the union positions, but do not drown them” (*apud* Pérez Pérez, 2001, p. 390).

However, many sectors of the CCOO were subject to the PCE’s political rhetoric, and so many trade unionists decided to support and defend the sovereign nature of assemblies, their decision-making power, and the legitimacy of their elected delegates. In contrast, other central trade unions openly refused to consider these delegates as true representatives of the workers. This was the case with the UGT, which tried to establish its own space for union action in 1976. Above all, it feared a “process of assembly institutionalisation” (Perez Perez, 2001, p. 390) that would harm it as an organisation: “Avoid institutionalising the Assembly as a decision-making body, and thereby falling into an absolutely pernicious *basismo* for the organisation’s effectiveness” (*apud* Pérez Pérez, 2001, p. 390).

However, although there were differences in positions in (and between) organisations in terms of the role of assemblies, the trade union centres were integrated into the official bodies of the opposition and, as such, opted for a strategy based on [leveraging] citizen pressure within interclass movements. This implied restricting the political space associated, up until then, with social struggles. These were incorporated into opposition organisations that contributed to spreading the idea that the workers’ world was fundamentally peaceful, moderate, and followed the political and union leaders’ discourse to the letter. Thus, several witnesses at the time contributed to extending the idea that all the democratic forces were working to create new legislation based on pacifist order and mobilisation:

The democratic political forces demand, without exception, order and legality, to them peaceful mobilisation seems the ideal instrument for democratic change [...] the world of work shows a remarkable moderation, both in the means that it uses and in the objectives that it fixes (Vidal-Beneyto, 1976).

The sociologist José Vidal-Beneyto insists that this “remarkable moderation” seems to be an echo of these “democratic political forces” which based their actions not on a possible social transformation or political rupture, but on the principles of order and legality. In this excerpt, everything happens as if the proletarian world, united and gathered behind its representatives, had deliberately opted for the self-containment of its political and union objectives so as not to hinder the ongoing negotiations at the top levels of the state. Thus, the myth of a model and peaceful transition was constructed based on a common ground in which the workers were a stabilising factor thanks to their moderation (Fernández de Castro, 1980). Far from having been the object of question, the idea that a world of workers trying to destabilise the Francoist regime before submitting to the parties and unions, conceals a series of statements that contribute to discrediting assembly action based on values that neutralises social movements that do not rely on the hegemony of democratic trade union centres.

Working and middle classes

From the end of 1976, many editorialists dedicated themselves to altering the classical interpretations of workers’ organisations based on the class struggle. Some authors tried to demonstrate that the left should have re-establish its general political program and stop relying on a social base exclusively comprising the working class. Rather, [they argued] that it should be open to other social groups:

The left cannot be limited to these class proposals, because nobody can doubt the progressive, renovating, leftist character of broad sectors of the middle and lower bourgeoisie. Professionals, officials, executives, small businesses, etc. (Muñoz, 1976, p. 4)

21 Sometimes, these union delegates were also elected by the assembly and, thanks to their status, could open the union premises to allow workers to meet inside the factory and not in outside places, such as churches.

The concept of the 'bourgeois left' allowed a group of individuals that did not specifically belong to the proletarian world to be integrated into the democratic field. This term reveals the will that some Spaniards had to dissolve class identities within a new political subject based on the imagination of the middle classes, into which the working class must be integrated. Therefore, we were witnessing the installation of a speculative game between, on the one hand, a working class linked to the ideas of radicalism, violence, and disorder and, on the other, middle classes charged with principles such as progress, change, and renewal. This made the transformation of the country possible if the latter were endowed with the means to build a political force that would move away from the Marxist and revolutionary interpretations that characterised the workers' and democratic organisations:

The absence of a "bourgeois left" explains to a large extent the failure of that element in Spain to [the] change and renewal represented by definition by the left. While in other European countries the parties of the so-called bourgeois left contributed during the last part of the last century and the first third of the present [one] to the energetic transformation of structures and the modernisation of society, here there is nothing similar (Muñoz, 1976, p. 4).

The underlying idea in this editorial is that progress must be the work of society in general, and not of a particular class. The representations transmitted by the text are structured around the definition and characterisation of new forms of social relations that integrate all citizens in forms of collective participation within which struggle based on class alone could no longer be imagined. Thus, to build a new society, it was important to insist on the fact that: "The left cannot be the heritage of any group or of any kind, it must contain all who aspire to make this country a freer, more egalitarian society and more fair" (Muñoz, 1976, p. 4). From the Franco dictatorship until the arrival of the transition process of political change, the continuity of a mesocratic and 'mesodemocratic' discourse influenced the transformation of class identities and, at the same time, contributed to

discrediting the socialist workers' movements when they elaborated specific directions for their assembly practices, accusing them of fomenting violence and confrontations instead of promoting dialogue and negotiation.

Assemblyism: a negative reflection of democracy

On 27 September 1977, *Diario 16* published an editorial entitled 'Assemblyist Radicalism' in which workers' social movements based on assembly were criticised. The legalisation of democratic parties and unions in April 1977, followed by legislative elections held in the same year and the organisation of future union elections planned for the end of the year and at the beginning of 1978, were accompanied by a series of news items addressed to the proletariat [asking them] to stop carrying out strikes not organised by the central trade unions. Thus, on the one hand, this editorial reveals the will of the dominant discourses to put an end to assembly strikes considered to be wildcat strikes, and on the other, to establish a uniform reading of the political situation in which assemblies, within the framework of factories, had lost their place inside trade union organisations. This text also shows that the union transition and the normalisation of the body of socialist workers was not achieved without setbacks. Because the problems that lasted until 1977 showed that the political situation was still unstable and that the mesodemocratic discourses that contributed to the construction of a new framework of pacified social relations collided with the workers who criticised these hegemonic representations. This editorial criticises the term assemblyist [when used] to oppose the existence of assembly movements:

The assemblyism, which was the resource used by the workers against the Francoist trade unions, as a substitute force and in support of the unanimous request of "we want trade unions", now seeks to supplant those same unions that it claimed [to represent] (*Diario 16*, 1976).

According to the author, assembly was only a practical means when the trade union organisations were clandestine and, therefore, could not pretend to make the same demands as the unions that the proletarian world

unanimously did. This quote conceals the set of conflicts that participated in the construction of a new form of ‘worker legality’ based on the coordination of assemblies, by professional branches and/or provinces, and that rejected any form of union and/or political mediation. At the same time, it collaborates in the homogenisation of all its worker protagonists. They all seem to be guided by the same will and political objectives. The text offers a mechanical vision of the social and political change in which the assembly practices should voluntarily pass its position onto the democratic unions. Thus, assemblyism is seen as an obstacle to the proper functioning of the political process: “Assemblyism is reluctant to understand that its heroic era of struggle against Francoist unionism has passed. That now others must take a lead, the free unions” (*Diario 16*, 1976).

In this new democratic scenario, members who encouraged strikes and conflicts had to be replaced by others to ensure the proper progression of the transition process. But, what exactly about assemblyism would they reproach, and how would they define and characterise it within journalistic discourse? First, the principle of the assembly’s sovereignty was put into question, and secondly, they claimed that its power of decision should be attributed to the central trade unions:

As the assembly is sovereign, without thinking twice it goes to strike. The environmental emotion that a mass call always attracts, the vote by show of hands, the looks, the lack of responsibility that by deciding between everyone, no one will answer and the fact that the assembly is a body that ceases to exist at the end of the meeting, often favours more radical decisions [...]. The assembly is sovereign for everything except for thinking and debating the pros and cons of decisions beforehand (*Diario 16*, 1976).

The words expressed during the sovereign assemblies are relegated to emotional terrain and to a lack of responsibility derived from such decisions. According to the newspapers, the excitement caused by the collective agitation favoured the unleashing of impromptu strikes that disrupted the dialogue and negotiations. The author conveys the idea that far from promoting discourse, the meeting of workers in assembly reduces

their responsibility, as represented by voting by a show of hands. This democratic practice is interpreted as favouring more emotional than rational decisions, making them guilty of playing into the hands of radical forces. In addition, [this idea] is intimately linked to the principle of the assembly’s sovereignty, which allows it, rather than the unions, to grant decision-making power. Therefore, assemblyism is synonymous with disorder. The text denounces the persistence of practices that reject union hegemony. Therefore, it attacks the principle of the sovereignty that some workers refused to grant to the newly legalised unions. Thus, the article reveals the meanings that different participants gave to assemblyism.

We can state that assemblyism hinders the proper functioning of the democratic process because it brings some participants who refuse to submit to the words of the political and union leaders to the public stage. This *Diario 16* editorial plays the role of the ‘police’ (in the Rancièran sense of the term) insofar as it establishes a symbolic frontier between those who ‘understand’ and who are, consequently, authorised to speak, and those who only express discontent, noise, and fury and whose speech is inaudible.²² To support this idea, a series of negative features were dedicated to assemblyism in order to discredit it; for example, the absence of rules about how assemblies were to function and their [potential openness to] manipulation because of the absence of a quorum when voting on decisions. All of these aspects triggered strikes which were disastrous for the workers themselves. Thus, be it during the construction sector conflict in Asturias, or that in 1977 among the shoemakers of Elche in the province of Alicante, the workers: “Did not foresee that with their strike they would cause the closure due to bankruptcy and consequent unemployment of numerous subsidiary companies” (*Diario 16*, 1976).

22 For Jacques Rancière, the police do not only designate repression and social control, but also the activities that order individuals in society in terms of the functions, places, and titles they occupy. Thus, “the principle that the police have always divided humanity into those who show discontent, anger, and hysteria and those who are simply thought to” (Rancière, 2009, p. 114–116).

It is important to emphasise that this declaration participates in the inversion of responsibilities: the political and employer elites were no longer responsible for the economic crisis, but rather, the workers and their strikes, were contributing to increasing unemployment and causing the closure of their employers' companies. The editorial concludes with a call to organise union elections in order to institutionalise new forms of social relations within company frameworks which would be capable of neutralising the radical potential of assemblies.

Trade unionism and assemblyism

With the signing of the Moncloa Pacts in October 1977, we witnessed the promotion of a new type of wage relationship similar to those of other European countries and whose neocorporatist character was based on social dialogue. Trade unions no longer had a function in social transformation, but rather, played an official and institutionalised role in the distribution of wealth and the definition of a legal framework for workers. This model of social dialogue has its origins in collective bargaining, whose best expression was the agreements made between social actors and the state. But, contrary to the dominant perceptions of that period, the union transition, that is, the transition from a dictatorial unionism to a democratic unionism, did not occur without fears and uncertainties. The political and union forces were aware that they should impede the other political alternatives present in the world of factories. This implied the mandatory integration of assembly work into a new kind of trade unionism²³, as can be seen in the *El País* editorial on 22 October 1977: “Mr. Camacho is in favour of a controlled assembly because he considers that the Commissions have sufficient experience, skill, and strength to exercise such control. But it is not at all certain that this optimism is confirmed by the facts” (Various Authors, 2004, p. 37–38).

After the union elections of late 1977 and early 1978, the CCOO held its first conference in May the same year. This was a year of transition in the process of democratic

change, with the approval of the Spanish Constitution in December. At the same time in the world of workers, the establishment of works councils allowed any form of assembly to be marginalised. During this conference, union members debated their next actions to guarantee this new institutional framework. From this perspective, the link established by the outgoing management emphasises the risk represented by assemblyism:

When speaking about assemblies, a fundamental element in the CCOO's trade union practice, we must clearly specify the character they must have. *It is very easy to fall into assemblyism*, which most often causes the withdrawal of worker participation, and therefore *we must flee from this danger*. Because the assemblyism occurs when a serious and peaceful discussion of problems is not guaranteed, such as when assemblies are convened in which no clear issues or ones of little importance are dealt with.²⁴

Therefore, assemblyism is synonymous with threat and danger. Its meanings are linked to the construction of a framework of mesodemocratic citizenship, which tends to build a social space of protest whose legitimacy is based on attitudes characterised as ‘responsible and civic’ and distances itself from any form of confrontation. In 1978, assemblyism was still accused of fomenting violence through indefinite strikes. The same criticisms were made about it in 1976, but this time they were more direct and less ambivalent and took into account the importance acquired by the unions in general and by the CCOO in particular, since their legalisation in April 1977:

The indefinite strikes ended with their only support, that of the pickets, and no longer exercise their authority and “moral” pressure, but rather, physical coercion (that is, the action is no longer taken with the agreement of the assembly, but through the act of physical coercion), which ends up being an element which loses them prestige.²⁵

²³ The leaders of CCOO use the expression ‘a new type of unionism’ to refer to unionism that integrates assembly practices into their organisation.

²⁴ General Report to Congress presented by the outgoing secretariat, 12–15 May 1978.

²⁵ See the previous note.

These prestige-giving or discrediting categorisations show that the labour world of 1978 no longer enjoyed the legitimacy the anti-Franco struggle had given it. At that time, they had to convince public opinion of the validity of their actions. Anti-Franco values referred to outmoded assemblyist practices, while trade unions relied on new democratic principles to justify their sectoral strikes. From that moment on, the institutionalisation of a new wage relations framework within factories was based on the idea that a strict model of union action that moves away from assemblyist practices had to be built. To legitimise these new social practices and discredit those that were inherited from the anti-Franco struggle, the discourse insisted on the fact that radical forms of mobilisation made the control of strikes possible:

Experience shows us that, not infrequently, claims that do not correspond to reality have led to actions that have been a failure for workers. [...] The strikes, which are the highest form of workers' struggle, should not be indefinite, especially in our current circumstances, but of a fixed duration before their beginning.²⁶

To ensure this new framework for union action would be compatible with the arrival of a new democratic regime, trade union activists also insisted that assemblies should only be called by the unions, because these had the legitimacy to promote calls to strike. In addition, where certain practices seemed to be an essential component of class identities, their integration into a field of citizen action was accompanied by the loss of prestige of various types of participation and decision; the first of these was the secret vote instead of voting by show of hands: "The preparation of assemblies is the responsibility of the union, not only in its content but [also] to achieve a massive participation. And especially, in times of conflict, the use secret votes".²⁷

²⁶ See note 25.

²⁷ See note 25.

From 1976, if not earlier, the indefinite nature of strikes was already the subject of fierce battles within labour movements. In 1978, these types of strikes were put into doubt by the main democratic union because they were accompanied by physical pressures—violence—which was incompatible with democracy. Likewise, although they had achieved their main objective, the establishment of democratic freedoms, the workers' movement searched for a new legitimacy when executing new mobilisations in 1978 and 1979. In the future, if strike movements were to take place and people were to welcome them, they would have to adapt to the new rules of the game, which excluded [the possibility of] violence or any kind of physical pressure. The presence of the concept of 'discrediting' in the subsequent quotation must be interpreted within this scenario. If a social movement now wanted to be legitimate, it had to win the favour of public opinion, thus showing that the flag of the anti-Franco struggle was no longer the order of the day and that assemblyism characterised by indefinite strikes had to disappear. For the CCOO this meant that, in the sphere of businesses, to avoid orienting assemblies towards other forms of action, their preparation had to precede their convocation:

Preparing assemblies and guiding them is an essential task of our work in the company. Hence we make company assemblies very effective instruments within which the decisions that most interest workers are taken [...]. If this is not done in this way, the assembly may degenerate into confrontations that divide the workers, into achievable or non-achievable agreements, etc., which would discredit this instrument of discussion and agreement.²⁸

Here we can observe the same arguments proposed by the trade union organisations since 1976. But in 1978, the criticisms directed at assemblyism were accompanied by the willingness of unions to precisely define the scope of their in companies, thus also

²⁸ ANC, 'Organic structure and role of the different areas of CCOO', Internal Document, 1978.

obliging them to explain what assemblies should be, while organising and ritualising their calls to action and objectives.

CONCLUSION

The meritocratic discourse supported by representation of the middle classes was linked, in the world of workers, to a hegemonic project that aspired to monopolise social representation with the aim of guaranteeing the success of the transition process by subsuming the workers' protest assemblies. Thus, the political challenges linked to the meanings associated with the term *assemblyism* seemed to be inscribed into the construction of a democratic political culture whose function was to normalise and regulate conflict situations. The emergence and centrality of new representations based on the middle classes were served by the diffusion of values and principles which allowed the political alternatives that resisted to be discredited, with the exception of discursive colonisations.²⁹ Thus, as the transition progressed, reporters from the intellectual and political media, as well as journalists and union

leaders, built a new conceptual sphere accompanied by discourses that discredited assemblyist practices and accused them of destabilising the political process in progress.

Terms such as *wildcat strike*, *moderation*, *negotiation*, *reform*, etc., were introduced in the lexical repertoire of Spanish democratisation, founded on a morality that took possession of the languages' signifiers so that it would influence the course of collective action. Thus, from 1978, the institutionalisation of a new framework for social relations in the world of work and the containment of the social movements of assembly workers, were not the mechanical result of economic, social, and political conditions nor their speculative transcription from cultural factors, but rather, because their meanings became inscribed into discourses which [were able to] mobilise values and principles, allowing the legitimisation of new norms and the marginalisation of practices considered incompatible with democracy. During the 1970s, and even more after the death of the dictator, learning to become a democracy was a multiform process, marked in the world of workers by the plurality of opinions, ideas, and political projects. Subsequent teleological readings have contributed to us leaving behind the idea that this learning was based, in part, on power relationships and the will to establish hegemonic political projects which crossed the invisibility of words into the counter-current.

²⁹ The term *colonisation* comes from postcolonial studies and was adopted by historians such as Jesús Izquierdo Martín (2012). The concept means that some narratives that subsume experiences and institute subjects as subordinates are imposed upon the community.

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