

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to
Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Interpreting the Spanish transition to democracy

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to
Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to
Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Introduction

In his recent book, *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, Robert McNamara suggests that the problem with Vietnam was that we did not understand Vietnam; no one making decisions was conversant with Vietnamese culture; United States' leaders ethnocentrically assumed that Vietnamese values were the same as ours.¹ McNamara says he wrote his book so that we can “learn” from his (and our) mistakes. What he hopes we learn is that we should never enter into war without really *knowing* the country we seek to help, or are fighting against. An “expert” in that country should advise, and be in on the decision.

Interestingly, McNamara also said he could not have “known” this lesson at the time of Vietnam. He said it took him twenty years to write the book because the lesson was so long in coming.

From a culturalist perspective, McNamara's book is intriguing for several reasons. First, McNamara acknowledged something that cultural sociologists and anthropologists take as a given, but that most people tend to forget: that strategic decisions are made in a *cultural* – as well as historical, political, and economic – context; and that in order to understand your own or others' “strategic” interests one must understand the culture of which they are a part. Moreover, in arguing that he “could not have known then” what he knows now, McNamara implicitly admits to his own cultural immersion – as well as to the United States' infamous and long-standing cultural myopia. It was not simply “McNamara in the 1950s,” or “America of the 1950s,” or even “American interests in the 1950s” – but the specific symbolic frameworks in place in the 1950s and 1960s – that shaped McNamara's perceptions of Vietnam.

McNamara's book is intriguing too because the United States has been trying to “close” the painful and schizophrenic Vietnam event for a long time: through Hollywood movies, through the Vietnam memorials – and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Symbol and ritual in the new Spain

now, finally, through the “confessions” of one of Vietnam’s critical participants.² But although one often hears that we must not let Bosnia or the Gulf “turn into another Vietnam,” “the lesson” from Vietnam is not at all clear. Does Vietnam represent a nation divided? A lack of commitment to war? Does it mean that we should never enter a war we “cannot” win? A war with a people we do not “understand”? Or should we never interfere with someone else’s war at all?

Finally, McNamara’s book is intriguing culturally, because the process of “rethinking” a national tragedy is a general, global phenomenon. Just as McNamara seeks to understand the “tragedy” of Vietnam and to unearth its “lessons”, since at least the 1950s, Spaniards have been explicitly rethinking the “tragedy” and “lessons” of the Spanish Civil War. Yet, in contrast to contentious American attempts to “make sense” of Vietnam, the Spanish collective rethinking of the Civil War has been at once profound, transformative, and nearly universal.

Moreover, this cultural rethinking and reinterpretation of the Civil War has been part and parcel of Spain’s recent successful transition from authoritarianism to democracy. Scholars, laypeople, and political leaders alike all point to the Spanish Civil War as the cultural and moral backdrop to the Spanish transition. As the acclaimed Spanish historian Javier Tusell maintains:

In effect, what the totality of the Spanish people have done collectively in the moment of transition to democracy, is an exercise of looking back so as not to stay back. Throughout the transition, the memory of the civil war, whose fiftieth anniversary was coming close, has been planted on the national body, and there has been a will, more or less explicit, to avoid the reproduction of the war, including procuring the circumstances that contributed without a doubt to the previous destruction of the democratic system.³

For a cultural sociologist, the theoretical and empirical questions are clear. Where did this reinterpretation of the Spanish Civil War come from? How did the intricate divisions of the Civil War become subsumed into what has been called a “militant pacifism”?⁴ How did this – and other – representations actually inform the events of the Spanish democratic transition?

A New Beginning for Spain

The recent Spanish transition from authoritarianism to democracy is phenomenal not only for “cultural” but political and historical reasons. Historically, the recent democratic transition is phenomenal simply because it is the first time in Spanish history that parliamentary democracy has

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

worked; i.e. it is the first time that Spanish democracy has been self-sustaining.⁵ This is not to say that democracy had never been attempted before. On the contrary, parliamentary democracy in Spain has a long, albeit weak, record. The word “liberal,” as part of our political vocabulary, comes from Spain.⁶ It was first used to describe a group of radical patriots, cooped up in Cádiz as refugees from the French invasion of 1808. In 1812, they drew up a constitution, which, by enshrining the revolutionary doctrine of the sovereignty of the people, destroyed the basis of the old monarchy; it was to become the model for advanced democrats from St. Petersburg to Naples.

Yet, between 1814 and 1931, there were no less than twenty-five *pronunciamientos* (uprisings) in Spain. Radical intervention by the armed forces was the standard means by which Spanish regimes alternated.⁷ Spain twice proclaimed republics – but both ended in civil war. The First Spanish Republic, declared in 1873, broke down into the second Carlist War even before a constitution could be written. The Second Republic, born in 1931 after the demise of the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera, survived five tumultuous years before breaking down into the infamous Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939.

As Esenwein and Shubert point out, the term “civil war” conjures up the image of a country divided in two, but the Spanish Civil War (and perhaps all civil wars) was far more multi-faceted.⁸ Often mythologized as “the last great cause” (particularly by the West), the Spanish Civil War was actually an intricate coagulation of splits between town and country, constitution-
alists and Carlists, new and old Spain, communists and fascists, and clericals and anti-clericals.⁹

The Spanish Civil War began on July 17, 1936 with an attempted military coup d'état (though Franco preferred to call it a “national uprising”). The revolters did not achieve rapid control, however; and the Republican government failed to respond authoritatively to their own army mutiny. Improvised anti-fascist militias began to spring up, sometimes abolishing or supplanting the local *ayuntamientos* (municipal governments). By the end of the first week the state machinery was in total disarray, and “power,” in the words of the Communist leader Dolores Ibárruri, “lay in the streets.”¹⁰

The Civil War ended with the Nationalists' victory in 1939, and Generalissimo Francisco Franco set up a traditional dictatorship that lasted nearly forty years, until his death in 1975. The regime consisted of three distinct phases: a first phase, roughly 1939–1951, dominated by fascist policy, including economic autarchy, military repression, unparalleled privilege of the Catholic Church, and the ideology of national Catholicism; a second period, 1951–1959, in which neo-capitalism replaced the out-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Symbol and ritual in the new Spain

moded and isolationist model of fascism; and a third period, 1959–1974, characterized by unprecedented economic growth, internal social, political, and religious liberalization, as well as renewed repression by the Franco regime.

Yet, since the death of Franco in 1975, Spain has not only transformed itself from dictatorship to democracy from the inside out; it has done it through a remarkably quiescent process of reform and “strategy of consensus.” The Law for Political Reform, passed almost exactly one year after Franco’s death, was “a law of the transition for the transition,”¹¹ which recognized the principles of popular sovereignty, universal suffrage, and political pluralism, and prepared for the legal abolition of the chief Francoist institutions. Other reforms followed shortly thereafter, and in June 1977 the first democratic elections took place without major incident. The elections were the first moment of a “period of consensus” that culminated in the ratification of the 1978 Constitution – “the first constitution in Spanish history that is neither the unilateral imposition of a particular party nor the expression of a single ideology.”¹² As Payne maintains:

The democratization of Spain that has occurred since 1976 constitutes a political transformation without any clear parallel or analogy in twentieth-century systems, for an established institutionalized authoritarian system – no mere ad hoc Caribbean military dictatorship – has been totally transformed from the inside out by means of the personnel, institutions, and mechanisms of the regime itself, led by the head of state.¹³

Spain and democracy’s “Third Wave”¹⁴

Since 1989, the Spanish transition from Francoism to democracy has taken on new meaning. Sociologists and political scientists look to Spain to explain not only why the Spanish transition was a “success,” but to explain how states transform themselves from authoritarianism to democracy. For many political scientists, Spain is “the very model of elite settlement” – a lesson in “consensual” transition from authoritarianism to democracy.¹⁵

Yet, regardless of our desire to make sense of our world by applying past “truths,” let me forewarn that the Spanish transition does not impart easy “how to” lessons on democratization. Spain is an exemplar – but an exemplar of an extraordinary cultural as well as political process, which is not particularly amenable to imitation.

The central categories of experience differ from one society to another; the weight of cultural, economic, and political factors vary in each democratic transformation. The most important difference between the case of Spain and the former Eastern bloc states is that far more is in transition in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to
Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

on-going post-communist cases. In Spain, the economic and cultural groundwork was laid before authoritarianism came to an end. Occidental capitalism had not only begun, but was institutionalized before Franco's death. Though Spain did experience a significant economic crisis during the transition itself, international economic support allowed the crisis to be deferred until after the consolidation of the democracy. In precisely the same way, regional, social, and international issues were not insignificant after Franco's death (they were very significant), but they were *defined* in basically the same way in pre- and post-Franco society.

By contrast, the post-communist states are dissolving convoluted politico-economic systems at once – before new systems have even been imagined.¹⁶ Whereas Spain was constrained (structurally as well as symbolically) by monetary support and mentoring relationships from the West, today's post-communist states are in a symbolic as well as institutional vacuum. In other words, whether one thought it “good” or “bad,” the transcendent goal of the Spanish “democratic transition” was to become a modern western European parliamentary democracy.¹⁷ By contrast, the former Eastern bloc states are neither here nor there: their identity lies in the past rather than in the future. In the cases of “the former Soviet Union,” “the former Yugoslavia,” and “the former Czechoslovakia,” they lack even a clear territorial identity. As Bunce and Csanadi maintain, fluidity is the essential characteristic of the post-communist states: “the structure of post-communism is the absence of much structure although there is a kind of logic to this fluid situation.”¹⁸

I hasten to add that it is not that the Spanish transition to democracy was simply “easier” than that of the post-communist states. Spain is not a case of a political system simply “catching up” with the economic and social system. The Spanish democratic transition was neither “natural” or “inevitable.”¹⁹ In point of fact, almost all of the problems that had resulted in democratic breakdown in Spain previously, were still in existence in the 1970s. While the wave of prosperity of the preceding fifteen to twenty years had attenuated economic divisions, the separation between rich and poor was still significant, and could have been used for political ends, even against the workers' economic interests. The regional problem not only remained; it had been made worse by the policies of the Francoist regime – a regime wholly opposed to all regional claims in favor of “centralism” (which, in fact, was not a centralism of Castile or even Madrid, but of the government).²⁰ In conjunction with threats from the nationalist and non-nationalist left, the far right and the armed forces remained an ever-present danger in post-Franco society.²¹ Indeed, several military plots were uncovered between 1977 and 1981; and on February 23, 1981, Lieutenant Colonel

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Symbol and ritual in the new Spain

Antonio Tejero Molina led a group of Civil Guards in an attempted coup d'état, which was, in fact, initially a success. It failed because most of the army did not at first respond, and the king persuaded the remaining forces to stay loyal.²² The Spanish transition is phenomenal precisely because so much could have – and historically has – “gone wrong.” The purpose of this book is to explain what did not go wrong and why.

Outline of the Book

This book is divided into three parts. Part I provides a theoretical and historical backdrop to the Spanish transition; Part II delineates the spirit of consensus at the heart of the transition; Part III demonstrates how this generalized system of meaning enabled the institutionalization of Spanish democracy.

Specifically, in the following chapter I critically analyze existing models of democratization – i.e. functionalist/modernization, structural/Marxist, and elite/rational choice paradigms. I will show that, despite the diversity within and between these approaches, they all tend toward the theoretical problem of rationalism, i.e. they overemphasize conditions and factors external to the individual actor. In the latter portion of chapter 2, I outline a cultural theory and methodology that is designed to correct this theoretical and empirical deficiency. This culturalist approach focuses on symbolization – the subjective, non-rational realm behind and within seemingly “rational” political processes and “objective” socio-economic structures.

Chapter 3 places the Spanish transition to democracy in historical perspective. This is a history rife with religious, regional, and class divisions, as well as a long but weak history of democracy. This history of division and democracy is epitomized in the Spanish Second Republic (1931–1936), in which Spain was literally split between a conservative/monarchist/religious right and a republican/socialist/anarchist anti-clerical left. The Second Republic ultimately broke down into the infamous Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), and the victory of the Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco.

Part II of this book explores the core symbols of the so-called “period of consensus” at the heart of the Spanish transition. In chapter 4, we will see that four core symbols: “a new beginning,” “national reconciliation”/“*convivencia*,” “democracy,” and their symbolic opposite “Civil War,” emerged and penetrated Spanish society after Franco’s death and became generalized throughout that society. We will also see that these core symbols provided the ground rules of the “politics of consensus”; in addition, they represented the ritual process of transition. In short, following

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to
Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the model of Victor Turner, who first pointed out that all rites of passage (or transition) contain three stages – separation, liminality, and reaggregation – I will argue that representations of “a new beginning” symbolized separation from the old social state (authoritarianism); “national reconciliation” and “*convivencia*” (“living together with others”) represented the communality of the liminal phase; and “democracy” represented reaggregation to the new social state (parliamentary democracy).

Chapter 5 explores the first critical transitional “moment of consensus” – the democratic elections of June 1977. We will see not only that the newly emerging core symbols enabled the successful resolution of this pivotal event, but that the core symbolic framework affected the outcome of the elections. Moreover, I will argue that as the “debut” (or “new beginning”) of democracy, the June 1977 electoral event symbolized separation from Francoism in the ritual process of transition.

Chapter 6 focuses on a second critical consensual moment: the drafting of the Moncloa Pacts in October 1977. The Moncloa Pacts were a set of important political and economic agreements, designed as temporary palliatives until a new constitution could be drafted. In this chapter we will see that the drafting of the Moncloa Pacts was both enabled by and reaffirmed the emerging Spanish transitional symbolic framework. The specific generalized strands of shared meaning of a “new beginning,” “democracy,” and “national reconciliation” engendered the very notion of a “strategy of consensus” (the process of elite negotiation used to construct the Pacts as well as the 1978 Constitution). In other words, pacting “made sense” – given that “democracy” was the ultimate (sacred) goal, and violence was an unthinkable (profane) means by which to achieve it. Moreover, the Moncloa event, in which former enemies sat side by side in the Palace of the Moncloa in order to resolve historically volatile politico-economic issues, ritualized (or acted out) “national reconciliation” and the communal state of liminality, in the ritual process of transition.

In Part III we see that the construction and maintenance of a shared symbolic framework is neither automatic nor easy. Chapter 7 focuses on the complex and polemical process of drafting the 1978 Constitution. We will see that the drafting of the 1978 Constitution was far more complicated and volatile than the drafting of the Moncloa Pacts. Yet, once again, the core transitional symbols helped resolve crucial political debates, including the historically explosive issue of the role of the Church in Spanish society. Moreover, the “new beginning” of “democracy” and “reconciliation” was institutionalized in the 1978 Spanish Constitution. The successful drafting of the Constitution symbolized the closing of the ritual process, and the “success” of the Spanish transition.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62885-3 - Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to
Democracy After Franco

Laura Desfor Edles

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Symbol and ritual in the new Spain

Yet, the crucial exception in terms of Spain's historic "politics of consensus" is the Basque nationalists, who did not in fact embrace consensual bargaining, and who did not endorse the 1978 Constitution. Chapter 8 focuses on this crucial exception, by exploring Basque nationalist transitional symbolization. We will see that while the core transitional symbols of a "new beginning" of "national reconciliation" and "democracy" emerged also in the Basque Country, this symbolic framework was complicated by Basque nationalist representations, which at times directly opposed the dominant symbolic framework of the transition. Specifically, in contrast to the Catalan nationalists, who tended to link "autonomy" with "democracy" and the core transitional symbols, Basque nationalists tended to portray the recuperation of the Basque *Fueros* (historic local laws) as symbolically opposed to the "democracy" embodied in the 1978 Constitution. Nevertheless, we will also see that this exception underscores the central theme of this book – that the previously discussed (Spanish) transitional symbolic framework was hegemonic in the post-Franco period.

In sum, this book shows how the dominant symbolic framework of the Spanish "period of consensus" enabled the successful resolution of key democratic moments, and thus the success of the Spanish transition. It also shows the way culture works in processes of social order and social change. Chapter 9 recaps these empirical, theoretical, and methodological points, and provides a brief synopsis of Spanish culture and politics since the ratification of the 1978 Constitution.