Frankenstein and the Monster: The Spanish State Left After the May Elections

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There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shadows and in miseries.

Julius Caesar, Act IV, Scene 3

ON 25 MAY local elections[1] were held in the Spanish state: a veritable rehearsal for the general elections scheduled for next spring. And for the first time since 1993 PSOE, the Spanish Socialist Party, won more votes across Spain that the neo-clerical[2] conservative Partido Popular (PP), in power in Madrid since 1996. A cause for celebration? A sign of change for the future? Not a bit of it. Although PSOE managed to win a marginal lead over the PP in terms of total municipal votes cast, the very narrowness of this lead fell far short of both the party's and popular expectations. The other left force, Izquierda Unida, failed to increase its vote. Viewed in context this was a truly miserable performance on the part of Spanish state social democracy, a performance, moreover, in its contours utterly predictable. Why this should be the case forms the substance of what follows below.

Aznar's Winter of Discontent

To say that Spanish state Prime Minister[3] José María Aznar has had a difficult last six months would seem to be stating the obvious.

In an unluckily symbolic fashion Aznar's PP government began its difficult winter last November, as the Greek-skippered, Bahamas-registered and Liberian-owned tanker *Prestige* sank off the northern Galician coast – site of some of the richest beds of shell-fish in Europe – taking 60,000 tonnes of Russian-owned fuel oil and seemingly the reputation of the Spanish government down with it. It wasn't so much that the PP mishandled the situation – although its dithering over whether to bring the ship into port or send it further out into the Atlantic did in the end prove fatal to the vessel as it broke up in heavy seas: it was that the government, both in Madrid and in Galicia – the latter itself an historical heartland of the PP, where the President of the regional government is none other than Manuel Fraga, a founder of the PP and a former Francoist minister – appeared indifferent to the impending ecological catastrophe. Fraga himself was away on a hunting trip as the *Prestige* went down, but took the time out to assure the panic-stricken Galician fishermen, who were seeing the possibility of the source of their livelihoods being destroyed forever, that "God would resolve everything", and that they had to put their trust in Him (in God, that is; not Fraga).

Nevertheless, despite both divine caprice and Madrid's soothing reassurances that the combination of sea pressure and the cold would safely solidify the oil that remained in the ship, an enormous slick that was to herald the worst ecological disaster in Spanish history was washed onto one of the most beautiful coastlines in Europe. As volunteers rushed to the scene from all over Spain, and indeed from all over Europe, to help clear the oil from the Galician beaches, the complacency of the government once again stood exposed as prime-time Spanish state television viewers were treated to nightly news reports showing volunteers clearing away the oil without even the most basic of protective equipment, at times even having to scoop up the highly toxic and carcinogenic heavy fuel oil, which has the consistency of sticky chewing gum, with their bare hands. With Fraga cast as Marie Antoinette, and his protégé Aznar as Louis XVI, the PP had seemed to have forgotten the first basic rule of bourgeois government: that, in a crisis, it is better to do the wrong thing that to be seen to be doing nothing at all.

As if this was not bad enough, more troubles were to come. Aznar had long harboured aspirations to play the role of world statesman.

His long and public courtship of whom he would refer to as "my friend Tony Blair" (the Blair and Aznar families had been long in the habit of taking their summer holidays together) had been followed by the bestowing of political favour by one George W. Bush, who, knowing a soft landing when he sees one, opened his first European tour as President with an official visit to the Spanish state on the reasoning that, no matter how tough things might get later, at least in Spain he was sure of a welcome and something of an easy ride.

Thus, as war loomed over Iraq, Aznar was keen to play a key role in the setting up of the international alliance in favour of military invasion. Aznar it was who authored the first draft of the "*Carta de los Ocho*", later redrafted by Tony Blair and subsequently co-signed by the governments of Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Denmark and the Czech Republic, in which, in frankly racist terms, the pro-war European faction nailed its colours to the mast of US militarism.[4] And it was Aznar who was invited by Bush and Blair to the Azores summit in April where the final decision to go to war was taken. So even if the final Spanish state contribution to the military effort was in the end negligible (amounting only to a few botched attempts to distribute food aid at its close) Aznar played a significant diplomatic and propaganda role in drumming up international support for it, for which services he has subsequently been obsequiously feted on both anglophone sides of the Atlantic.

But rarely has a government been so unsuccessful in taking its people with it. Although the anti-war mobilisations were huge all over the world, in the Spanish state they were truly enormous. On 15 February, probably the peak of the movement, if one tots up the total numbers who mobilised in Madrid, Barcelona and many other Spanish state towns and cities one comes to the figure of something around an unprecedented four million – one in ten of the population – marching that day in Spain, in a mobilisation hardly matched by anything seen since the days of the Second Republic.

Trouble had in fact been looming for Aznar as early as the beginning of that same month when the Goyas, the Spanish version of the Oscars, turned into a veritable anti-war protest as the Spanish cinema gliterati declared itself almost unanimously against the government. The Aznar government found itself almost completely isolated over the issue: not only did the major trade union federations and the Communist Party come out against the war, but the mobilisations of 15 February were also backed by PSOE. An opinion poll published by the conservative Madrid daily *El Mundo* at the end of March put the opposition to the war in Spain – and this before any military assistance had been committed by the government – at an astonishing 91 per cent.[5]

Thus by early spring, and only one year before general elections and barely three months before the recent local elections, Aznar's government – in power since 1996 – looked to be in fairly serious trouble. But the war over Iraq and the *Prestige* crisis were not the only harbingers of electoral difficulties ahead. Indeed, the PP itself has been hovering on the brink of a succession crisis for some time now, since Aznar has long since decided that he would not be leading the party in the 2004 elections.[6] Although no formal candidates have put themselves forward for the future vacancy, it is clear that there has been a sharpening of knives for some time now.

And if all this were not enough, it is well known that, taking stock of more long term features of Spanish society, the Aznar government has been presiding over some of the worst social conditions in the European Union.

Labour insecurity is a chronic problem in the Spanish state: a little under one third of the entire Spanish workforce is on temporary contracts – around *triple* the EU average – a phenomenon that is naturally more pronounced among women, among young people, and in the private sector. As a consequence, nearly 40 per cent of women working in the private sector work with temporary contracts; with respect to young people, in 2001 the temporary employment rate stood at 63 per cent among the population aged 20-24, and 44 per cent among those aged 25-29. Of all new contracts registered with the Spanish state employment ministry, an astonishing 90 per cent plus are time-limited in some way.

The unemployment rate, even going by the heavily massaged official figures, stands at over double the average of the OECD area, and is rising. Spain is additionally a low wage economy: the last government increase in the national minimum wage, the Salario Mínimo Interprofesional, put its level to €442.20 per month (or €14.74 per day). This level, less than €2 per hour, is the lowest in the EU and is far below the EU average of €5.65. It is true that most workers are covered by compulsory employer-union agreements which normally set wage levels relatively higher, but it is still estimated that around half a million Spanish workers receive the minimum wage.

In addition to all this, Spain is in the grip of a fierce speculation-fuelled housing crisis: house prices have risen by over 63 per cent in the last four years. In 2001, the growth in the average price of housing property was 15.4 per cent while inflation stood at 2.7 per cent. That these rises are fuelled by speculation and not by a "normal" supply and demand imbalance – i.e. that they indicate that something is going awry in the economy as a whole – is illustrated by a growing homeless crisis, as a huge number of dwellings stand unoccupied: second and unoccupied homes at present stand at a total of 7 million dwellings,

34 per cent of the total housing stock.

As a consequence of the housing crisis, unemployment rates and job insecurity, over two thirds of all Spanish 25 to 30 year olds still live – through economic necessity – with their parents. And this startling figure is rising.

On the strength of all this – the government's clear incompetence over the *Prestige* crisis, the massive opposition to its position on the war, the structural difficulties in the labour market – it seemed as if the Partido Popular was set for an electoral comeuppance on 25 May. But it didn't come about.

The only source of good news for Spanish state social democracy on 25 May was their largely symbolic fractional lead won over the PP in terms of municipal votes cast on a Spanish state basis. But given the acknowledged fact that Spanish voters generally vote more "conservatively" in general elections than in local ones a fractional lead, in normal circumstances, would have been regarded as a scant victory. Given the developments of the last six months, however, anything less than a total humiliation of the right must be regarded as failure. Every PSOE electoral target bar one (and this only partially) was not reached. PSOE had counted on maintaining control of the *Comunidad Autonómica* of Baleares (they lost it), consolidating its hold on Barcelona (they lost seats, if not control), winning control in the Comunidad Valenciana (they didn't) and, in Madrid, wining both the *ayuntamiento* (they didn't) and the *Comunidad* (at the time of writing it looks as if they will be able to control the *Comunidad* – even though they were outpolled by the PP – through a probable governing pact with the Communist Party's electoral front Izquierda Unida).

The other branch of Spanish state social democracy,[7] Izquierda Unida (IU – United Left),[8] also has little to shout about. Again we can see a failure to capitalise on the misfortunes of the right. The 6.1 per cent of the vote won by IU on 25 May compares with the 5.5 it won in the general elections of 2000 and the 5.9 in the previous local elections of 1999. If, looking on the bright side, things are not worse, being realistic – and bearing in mind that IU publicly set itself the electoral target of turning the winter and spring mobilisations into votes in the ballot box – this is a pretty poor performance.

With the possible exception of Euskadi. Here, IU is – uniquely in the Spanish state – not run by the Communist Party. The independent group around its leader Javier Madrazo has charted an independent course, especially in relation to Basque politics (much to the annoyance of IU headquarters in Madrid). In the last elections for the Basque parliament in 2001 it was given to be understood by the leadership of PSOE and the PP that were their combined votes sufficient they would form a coalition – anti-Basque nationalist – government in Euskadi. As it happened, they narrowly failed: on a near record turn-out, the two moderate Basque nationalist parties, PNV and EA – who stood on a joint ticket – won sufficient votes to form a government. And – highly significantly – this government has been (quite correctly in my view) supported by the Basque section of IU: again to much horror at IU headquarters in Madrid (Madrazo is in fact the Housing Minister in the current autonomous government).

This story took another twist last summer. In August, the PP government in Madrid passed a new amended version of the law relating to the regulation of political parties which made it a crime *not* to condemn the actions of the armed radical Basque nationalist organisation ETA.[9] As a consequence, Batasuna, approximately the Basque equivalent of Sinn Féin, was banned, and its assets seized. An attempt to set up a new political formation to run in these elections – Autodeterminaziorako Bilgunea (AuB) – failed when it too was refused electoral registration under the new legislation. (There is a bitter irony at work here. A good part of PSOE's recent electoral campaign was marked by the claim that the PP were "threatening democracy": principally because they persisted in support for the war in Iraq when public opinion was solidly against it – as if bourgeois democracy didn't work in this way! But in fact the only place were the PP is indeed "threatening democracy" is in the Basque country itself, where the PP and PSOE share exactly the same political line.)

Thus it is highly significant that it is only in the Basque country – if we except the Communist Party's historical power base of Córdoba – that IU's vote significantly increased, by 3.5 per cent overall, resulting in a near tripling of its local council representation. (In addition, both moderate Basque nationalist parties – EA and PNV – increased their vote as compared to the last local elections, and the abstention rate rose by a factor of 10.[10])

Nevertheless, apart from this partial exception, overall in the Spanish state as a platform for building for 2004, 25 May offers little comfort for the left. As a failure to capitalise on government error and misfortune its failure has been truly colossal.

How did it come to this? Why is it that the Spanish state left is so incapable of advancing a clear march forward in what appear to be such advantageous conditions? To answer this question, we need to step back a little and take a longer term view of Spanish state politics.

The Unfulfilled Promise of the *Transición*

At the end of 1975, as the octogenarian dictator Franco lay dying,[11] whatever the differences that

existed within the ranks of the regime's apparatus and base, there was near unanimity on one point. The previous year, in neighbouring Portugal, the Caetano dictatorship had fallen in full-blown revolutionary crisis. That was not going to happen in Spain. What did in fact happen – universally an accurately subsequently dubbed *la transición* – was a remarkably seamless and bloodless process of self-reform of the Francoist state apparatus. The fundamental fact was that the dictatorship, having accomplished its mission of modernising the Spanish social structure (a modernisation carried out on the back of a defeat of crippling proportions for the Spanish state working class[12]) was deemed in effect no longer necessary, and reformed itself out of existence.

When Franco died, a transitional government, incorporating regime hard-liners and reformers alike, was rapidly assembled around Adolfo Suárez, the former general secretary of the *Movimiento* (previously *Falange*), the official – and only permitted – political party under the dictatorship; and the king, Juan Carlos, Franco's personally chosen heir. This government oversaw the drafting of a new constitution, and the first free elections since the days of the Second Republic in the 1930s. But it is significant to note that this reform process was carried out entirely under the tutelage of the old Francoist state bureaucracy: there was no revolution, no tumultuous overthrow of the old order; neither was there any kind of calling to account of anyone for the terrible suffering inflicted on the Spanish people during the civil war and dictatorship. And fundamental to the success of this operation was the enthusiastic support lent to the new regime by the Spanish Communist Party, the dominant oppositional force within Spain at the time (mainstream Spanish social democracy had proved itself incapable of maintaining an underground organisation of any note, and, although in its formal political positions stood well to the left of the Communist Party, had been forced to operate from outside of Spain). As the then leader of the Communist Party, Santiago Carrillo, was to tell Suárez in this period during one of their frequent private tête-à-têtes: "Adolfo, there are only two serious politicians in this country: you and me."

What lay behind the Communist Party's decision to throw its weight so unreservedly behind this new government of relatively unreconstructed fascists? The position of the Party was informed by the same popular-frontist policy that had determined their line in the civil war of the 1930s. For them, the dictatorship of Franco was not a dictatorship of Spanish capitalism *tout court*, but of only the most backward and reactionary sectors of it. This had two consequences. First, the dictatorship was seen as inherently unstable (even though it had long resisted the PCE's promises that it was on the point of collapse). Second, that there were in Spain bourgeois elements who had a vested interest in ending the dictatorship, and who could be won to a popular struggle against Spanish fascism – as long, of course, as the struggle remained politically within certain limits and did not become too radical. It was this approach that underlay the PCE's curious line, which dominated its positions from the mid-1950s, of "national reconciliation".[13] Of course, as in the civil war, that the forces of Spanish fascism were the principle enemy of the working class movement was incontestable. Where the line of the PCE was flawed was where it saw Spanish fascism as *anachronistic*. This was far from the case: once the radicalisation of the 1930s had displayed itself, the crushing of the working class movement became the precondition for the modernisation of Spanish capitalism, and this latter was the overriding concern of the Spanish bourgeoisie *en bloc*. That the "modern", "democratic" bourgeoisie could find common cause with the fascist apparatus of the Spanish state against popular anti-fascist struggle was ruled out of the Communist schema; but this is what precisely happened in the *transición*.

The irony of the PCE's position lay in the fact that its view that the very anachronistic nature of Spanish fascism made its overthrow obligatory was something it shared with the revolutionary left: where the revolutionary left differed from the Communist perspective was that it viewed the overthrow of fascism as a "socialist" task which could only be carried out by the working class, while the Communists clung, against all evidence to the contrary, to their popular-frontist proclivities. Nevertheless, the two perspectives clearly share a curious symmetry of form. What practically nobody predicted was that Spanish fascism, representing as it did the hegemonic interests of the whole Spanish bourgeoisie, could simply, once its historical modernising function had been completed, reform itself into "normal" bourgeois democracy. Yet of course this is precisely what happened: it is precisely this process that lies behind the way that the Spanish experience has been held up as a model of moves from dictatorship to democracy the world over.

In fact the only political current in Spain that had grasped the essential nature of Spanish fascism was the opposition within the PCE led by Fernando Claudín and Jorge Semprún, which was able to see the hegemonic role and function of dictatorship and, as a consequence, predicted that, under the right conditions, a project of democratic self-reform was open to it. It really is one of the tragedies of the Spanish left that the analysis of Claudín and Semprún appealed to so few of its ranks: within the Communist Party such views were simply regarded as heretical, and Claudín and Semprún found themselves ejected from the party

in fairly short order; to the revolutionary left, heavily influenced by radical Maoist-Guevarist models of revolution, or by the worst excesses of the impossibilist "socialism now" interpretation of permanent revolution then (as now) in vogue within the Trotskyist movement, the possibility of a peaceful transition to a normal bourgeois-democratic form of state rule appeared itself as authentic "Stalinist" popular frontism. That the transition largely passed the Spanish state left by – in the case of the Communist Party after it had played the role of legitimising the transitional governments of Suárez – was a function of its incapacity to understand the real nature and function of the very dictatorship it had aligned itself against. As we shall see, the legacy of this – a bitter one – makes itself felt all too strongly even to this very day.

Suárez attempted to organise the *ad hoc* coalition of forces behind the new regime into a new political party, the UCD, encompassing regime moderates and even a layer of social democrats, but, inevitably, what had been assembled was transitory and unstable and the UCD, although it won the first elections, haemorrhaged forces to its left and right: to PSOE on the one side and to the newly formed neoclerical conservative Alianza Popular, set up by Franco's former Minister of Tourism Manuel Fraga. It was the Alianza Popular that was to mutate, in 1990, into the Partido Popular, when Fraga was replaced by his protégé, a young former *Falange* activist by the name of José María Aznar.

The progressive disintegration of the UCD government at the turn of the decade opened up a vacuum at the heart of Spanish state politics; at the same time, it was becoming increasingly clear that the shift from the top-down state social management of the Franco era to a more open free-marketism – imposed in a context of a severe austerity programme as the government desperately tried to avert the free-fall into which the Spanish economy appeared to be heading by locking down wages and slashing social spending – was stimulating working class discontent. This twin process found its resolution in 1982: by a huge margin, the elections of that year were won by a PSOE which had been transformed at its last conference in exile (in 1974, in Suresnes, France) and which had won the Socialist International's Spanish state franchise in 1976, and which was now led by a new young generation from the interior – figureheaded by the charismatic and photogenic young sevillano Felipe González, but in reality driven by the eminence gris of Spanish social democracy, the irascible but brilliant Alfonso Guerra (a Spanish Mandelson if ever there was one). This was the first time in history that Spain had had a socialist government: and the memory of 1982 still lives on in Spanish state social democratic circles much in the same way as the mythical legacy of 1945 does in British ones.[14]

Yet – and it is important to register the following in order to grasp the dynamic of events – the PSOE landslide had been preceded one year before by a curious event. On 23 February, as the Spanish Parliament was sitting to confirm Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo as Suárez's successor as Prime Minister[15] (the latter having resigned – a symptom of the centrifugal forces gathering force within the UCD – at the end of the previous month), Antonio Tejero, a colonel in the para-military Guardia Civil police force, led a group of fellow officers into the chamber. As his colleagues blocked the doors, and as astonished deputies looked on, Tejero marched up to the speaker's podium, and, firing his revolver wildly in the air, ordered everyone to the floor. It seemed that Spain's democratic experiment was going to be short-lived. But the attempted coup won little support among the upper echelons of the military: only General Jaime Milan del Bosch, commander of the Valencia region, responded, ordering tanks onto the streets of the capital of the Spanish Levante; and within 24 hours Tejero and his followers had surrendered, and the deputies released.

The coup made legends out of three people. Out of Suárez and Carrillo, who, legend had it, were the only deputies who refused to move from their seats and hit the floor as they had been ordered. Both men thus emerged from the incident having displayed almost superhuman courage, and covered in glory. Emerging equally blessed by events was the king himself, who, after a little (still unaccounted for) hesitation, had appeared in the small hours of that night on state television to denounce the coup and call on military units loyal to the government to put it down: something that, as we have seen, was not in the end necessary. Juan Carlos was thus transformed by the coup into something of a saviour of Spanish democracy; significantly, any remaining stain left by his association with the dictatorship had been removed.

Nevertheless, alongside the emergence of this triumvirate of saviours of democracy, the idea had been rammed home that the fascist threat had not been completely extinguished, and the idea that undue radicalism could awake the slumbering fascist beast had been impressed on all (a point that Carrillo was to repeat again and again in his copious memoirs of the transition).

Which was very convenient for all concerned, all in all. Now, there is insufficient evidence that the whole event was a put-up job, even if evidence has subsequently emerged that CESID, the Spanish secret service, had been heavily involved in its preparation. It is certainly true as well that the ring leaders of the coup escaped especially heavy sentences (for a crime which, in lesser countries and in recent times, would have got them shot, or worse). And its timing, with the possibility of

a resurgent working class radicalism and a disintegrating government, was certainly fortuitous. Nevertheless, no final judgement can be made on the question of whether 23 February was a grand conspiracy or simply an extraordinary fortuitous stroke of luck, even if the former view is increasingly widely held in Spain.[16] But from this point, everyone operated as if there was a slumbering fascist giant ready to be awakened; whereas in fact the entire logic of preceding events indicates that this view was absolutely false.

To return to our story. The economic scenario facing the new PSOE government was far from encouraging. Franco had in fact chosen an unfortunate time to die, at least from the economic point of view: the *transición* had to coincide with the explosive quadrupling of world oil prices, and since Spain imported 70 per cent of its energy, mostly in the form of Middle Eastern oil, it was hit hard. By the end of 1982, as PSOE took office, inflation was running at an annual rate of 16 per cent, the external current account was US$4 billion in arrears, public spending was ballooning and the foreign exchange reserves had become dangerously depleted.

To deal with this the policy framework adopted by the new PSOE government was essentially a continuation – and a deepening – of that pursued by Suárez, what today would be called "Thatcherite": privatisation, restructuring and lay-offs, hiking the prices of public goods, slashing pensions and sickness payments.[17] The record of the government would be a familiar one for many Europeans in this period, but it was not what had been expected from the until recently "Marxist" PSOE as it took the reigns of a country blinking into the new democratic dawn.

There was one particular measure taken by the government that was to have particularly and insidiously deleterious consequences over the long term: the 1984 *Reforma del Estatuto de los Trabajadores* sought (ostensibly at least) to facilitate the creation of new employment by liberalising what was considered an especially rigid labour market (inherited from the dictatorship). Temporary working, as we have seen, has subsequently become a structural feature of Spanish employment (I say "structural", since it bears little relation to typical patterns of seasonal work or gender distribution of employment, towards which the reforms of 1984 were ostensibly aimed). The fundamental point to register here is that the reforms opening up the Spanish state labour market to "flexibility" were introduced by the Socialist Party government, not by the right; and in 1996, at the end of the PSOE government, temporary contracts stood at around 40 per cent of the private sector entire workforce.

Nevertheless, the 1982-96 PSOE government effected the stabilisation of the Spanish economy, but a stabilisation carried out at the expense of the working class, and nowhere is this clearer than in relation to "labour flexibility". A complaint heard from time to time by older people is "we lived better under Franco"; and in relation to job security we are obliged to say that by and large they are right. That it was a government of the left that was responsible for this state of affairs rather than a government of the right is a fact whose consequences we are still having to deal with.

Its job done, however, PSOE found itself discarded by Spanish capitalism. In 1996, by the slenderest of margins, and with the support of the moderate Basque and Catalan nationalist parties, the PP was able to assemble a government.

The end of the PSOE period was ignominious. It wasn't so much that the government was rejected by the people than that it collapsed under the weight of its own dashed expectations. The resounding memory that people have now of this period is one of corruption. This is a little unfair: corruption is in Spain – as in many countries – an endemic and almost accepted feature of everyday life. All the major parties, including the parties of the left, operate on the basis of clientage networks. But corruption is something that can normally be lived with: dirt only sticks when there is a reason for people to want it to (as a certain Tony Blair has been finding out recently). Thus with PSOE: as its project ran out of steam, and the government out of momentum, the abiding popular memory remains one of something of a governmental kleptocracy.

(There is one "scandal" that is worthy of further comment: "*el caso GAL*". Between 1983 and 1987 the government – a "socialist" government, let's not forget – organised a secret commando, recruited from the French criminal underworld, under the name of *Grupos Antiterrorristas de Liberación*, specifically to target the Basque nationalist organisation ETA, which was organising itself from southern France. Dozens of people were killed, not all of them ETA sympathisers. And as time has gone on, it has become apparent that GAL was organised right from the top echelons of the government. As yet, the then prime minister Felipe González has not found himself the subject of legal process in relation to GAL, but, following the circumstantial and anecdotal evidence, that he was in full knowledge of it is beyond any doubt whatsoever. In the later '80s, as Franco-Spanish intergovernmental and inter-police relations were regularised, and extradition agreements normalised, GAL was dropped as a weapon against Basque nationalism. But it indicates the thinking of Spanish state social democracy on the matter of Basque national rights and self-determination for the non-Spanish nationalities in general: the present PSOE leadership's support for the illegalisation of Batasuna is of a piece with

the "GAL method".)

How can we characterise the period of PP government, begun in 1996 and consolidated by the more convincing parliamentary majority won in 2000?[18] The first thing that is necessary to reject is the idea, prevalent among some sections of the left outside of the Spanish state, that the PP government is in some sense "fascistic".[19] True, through the upper echelons of the party we can trace a lineage back to Franco, both literally[20] as well as politically, but this is to miss the point of the nature of the *transición*: today the PP is as much an orthodox bourgeois-democratic party of the right as the Spanish state is itself a bourgeois democracy. Evidence of, for example, "undemocratic" practices in Euskadi is not evidence of fascism: all bourgeois democracies kill and ban oppositions in times of difficulty (Northern Ireland!). To perceive this as evidence of a "creeping fascism" is not only to underestimate the dangers of real fascism but also to display illusions in bourgeois democracy itself.

Neither is the Spanish state under PP rule the economic wreck it might appear to be at first sight. Although growth has slowed since the sustained period of expansion in the late 1990s, it stands well above the Eurozone average. And while it is true that unemployment is high, so too is the rate of job creation: nearly 1.4 million jobs were created between 1996 and 1999, accounting for nearly a quarter of aggregate EU employment growth. And while temporary contracts – probably the fundamental "bread-and-butter" issue in Spanish politics – constitute a phenomenal proportion of the workforce, overall the level now is lower than it was under PSOE, [21] and it was the latter who introduced temporary working as a structural feature of the Spanish economy in the first place. And while at the beginning of 1996 Spain did not meet any of the economic convergence criteria required by the Maastricht treaty, and many doubted it would be in any way prepared for entry into the Eurozone in 1999, Spain sailed comfortably into the EMU, much to the delight of the powers that be within the EU, who are even, in moments of insobriety, inclined to bandy around phrases like "economic miracle". The only cloud on the immediate horizon is Spain's above European average rate of inflation, but as any A-level economics student will tell you, a little inflation can be the indicator of a certain economic buoyancy.

Thus when Aznar says, as he was wont to do during the late 1990s, that "España va bien" (Spain is doing well), from the point of view of bourgeois politics he is right: España va muy bien indeed. And this is the fundamental difficulty faced by the left in general, and PSOE in particular. For there is no criticism that they can in truth make against the PP for which they can produce supporting evidence. When the PP attacks the working class – in relation to labour flexibility, for example, or cutting benefits, or in relation to the repression it metes out in the Basque country – it does nothing that PSOE has not done in office, and PSOE's record on these matters is in fact often worse than that of the PP. In terms of the management of the economy, given that the days of Keynsian pump-priming are long gone, and as long as PSOE does not seriously challenge the present set-up of the European Union and its present convergence and enlargement, it cannot argue with any credibility that it would deal with the problems facing the Spanish economy in a fundamentally different way. The only issues on which PSOE can challenge the PP are contingencies – such as the *Prestige*, or the war, when all it can say really is. "Trust us, we would do this differently if we were the government" – or by raising the perennial question of the PP's fascist roots. The former is simply not credible election material, and the latter is either pure demagogy, or indicative of the fact that the PSOE in its modern incarnation simply does not understand where it has come from.

"But Where Are All the Captured Guns?"

In August 1914, as the German armies rolled across Belgium and France practically unopposed presaging a stunning military victory in only a matter of days, in the German High Command in Berlin the Chief of General Staff, Helmuth Moltke, was worried. "But where are the prisoners?" he would ask his junior officers. "Where are all the captured guns?"

The Spanish *transición* is a little like this. In a way surprisingly but absolutely unforeseen (dogmatic thinking has weighed especially heavy on the Spanish state workers' movement) the Francoist state apparatus effected a seamless process of self-reform and ushered in a bourgeois-democratic system virtually indistinguishable – understood in both positive and negative senses – from those obtaining elsewhere in western Europe. To say that this caught the left unawares would be to severely understate the matter. Unguarded, the left found itself at the mercy of bourgeois democracy at its most clinically efficient.

That bourgeois rule follows the path of least resistance has become something of a truism on the left, but it reveals a profound truth. Bourgeois democracy is no mere sop to the workers, a compromise dispensed by a grudging bourgeoisie. For the parliamentary system operates something as does the sand-trap on a motorway. It absorbs the momentum of the runaway vehicle, leaving it stranded and with nowhere to go. If the Spanish *transición* stands as a model of anything, it illustrates with unprecedented clarity how effective a measure bourgeois democracy is at absorbing popular radicalisation and mobilisation. The efficiency with which Spanish state parliamentarism was brokered stopped any

radicalisation of the *transición* period dead in its tracks.[22]

The effect of the *transición* reduced the Communist Party – historically the predominant opposition to Francoism domestically – to a rump, a status it enjoys to this day; and to call what is left of the revolutionary left a rump would be too kind.

The only force to emerge relatively intact from the whole process was the more pragmatically-minded PSOE, but its turn to be sucked in and spat out by Spanish capitalism was to come. The record of its governmental period stands clear. Elected on a popular wave of hope for the future by a people recently freed from the shackles of dictatorship – and remember that up till the late 1970s PSOE was still openly calling itself a "Marxist" party: its electoral slogan in 1982 was "*Por el Cambio*", "For Change" – all that it did was open up the Spanish economy to the cold winds of free-marketism, "labour flexibility" and austerity, along with managing the entry of Spain into both the European Community and NATO. PSOE effectively "bedded in" Spanish bourgeois democracy on behalf of the bourgeoisie; it is unlikely that an unreconstructed government of the right could have achieved so efficiently a package of measures so consonant with the untrammelled operation of capitalism so soon after dictatorship itself. For Spanish capitalism the services of the PSOE government have thus been of inestimable value. That the PP government of Aznar (and his successor to come) can now proceed as they are doing – consolidating the operation of neoliberalism as well as, and it is fundamental to grasp this, *ameliorating some of its worst excesses* – is due entirely to the foundations laid down by the left in government, and in the last analysis explains the PP's continued and dogged electoral robustness.

For, if we cast Aznar's PP as the monster, the Spanish left plays the role of the good Doctor Frankenstein: the resurgence of the neoliberal, neoclerical right in Spain is entirely the creation of the left, and until it can understand this there is no way out for the latter of the labyrinth of despair it has created for itself. No amount of *renovación*, of shiny young photogenic leaders, can make up for this deficiency. But for the left, to challenge its role in making the monster would be to challenge everything that is noble and good in its history: the *transición* remains untouchable in Spanish politics, especially among the left – the totemic representation of everything that is progressive and modern, the anti-pariah to dictatorship itself. This is the fundamental difference between Zapatero and Blair, however much the former may like to model his approach on the latter's transformation of British Labour. For the Blairite *renovación* was precisely predicated on a break with a dark past – the Labour governments of the 1970s and the consequent (so the story goes) period of 1980s and '90s opposition and unelectability – with reference, in however a distorted and perverted way, to a prior period of halcyon glory rooted in 1945 (no wonder is it that the NHS, that ridiculous and inefficient dinosaur, remains an inviolable in Labourite mythology). But for Zapatero the dark days from which he has to break and the halcyon days of glory are one and the same, and no amount of ideological and demagogic gymnastics can break this bind. The seed of Blairism cannot nourish itself on such barren Spanish soil, and for this reason Zapatero's reign will itself be seen as something of an interregnum by the future *renovadores* to come.

In its fundamental contours the same kind of process is underway with respect to the Spanish Communist Party. If Spanish capitalism "needed" the left cover of PSOE to implement the first wave of neoliberal free-marketism, it "needed" too the left cover of the Communist Party to legitimise the very *transición* itself. In turn, and by the same token, the Communist Party too will need to rethink its past role in order to be able to face the challenges of the future: but yet again, to do thus would require thinking the unthinkable, such is the status of the *transición* and the Party's role within it in its ideology.

What, then, is to be done? If, as Brecht said, in the contradiction lies the hope, the fact is that the present position in which the left finds itself is unsustainable. Already, within the Communist Party, the opposition Corriente Roja has begun, in a limited and timid way, to raise at least questions about the role of the party in the *transición*. Should, as seems likely, Zapatero fail in 2004, PSOE will have to address why: although the pressure will be to move the party further to the right, opportunities will emerge to address the fundamental questions engaged with here. And – most importantly – it is undeniably and demonstrably the case that the Spanish state working class, although politically bloodied, remains unbowed. The massive mobilisations of the last six months stand clear testament to that.

But to capitalise on opportunities that may arise in the future the left has to begin to focus itself a little more on the recent past, in order to better avoid repeating its own history. Nevertheless, until these tasks are addressed, the left remains trapped by the tentacles of the system it helped create. It would be a foolish man who would bet on there not being a PP Prime Minister occupying the Moncloa Palace this time next year. And the left finds itself still stuck in the sand-trap, without momentum, and going nowhere. Unable to understand that it was he who created the monster, Doctor Frankenstein finds himself incapable of killing it.

León, 31 May

Notes

1. There were in fact a number of simultaneous elections on this day: on a Spanish state basis municipal elections, for what are called *ayuntamientos*, roughly equivalent to the British local council, which include the enormous councils of Madrid (population around 3 million) and Barcelona (population roughly 1.5 million), down to tiny villages where the population may be only measured in tens of people; and for the governing bodies of 13 of the 17 *comunidades autonómicas*: a region of government between the *ayuntamiento* and the state dating from the late 1970s and early 1980s when a regional structure of devolved government was established with the aim of assuaging rebellious national minorities – in Galicia, Catalunya and, especially, Euskadi – by creating an all-Spanish state structure in which powers could be devolved to these nationalities without acknowledging them any special "national" status. The structure of *comunidades autonómicas* sometimes follows accepted national or regional logic, such as in the cases mentioned above, but also includes such administrative absurdities as Castilla-La Mancha and Castilla y León, in which previously unrelated regions have been roped together in a way akin to, for example, creating a unitary authority out of Yorkshire and Lancashire. There were also elections for the Spanish-held enclaves in Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla, which hold a position in the Spanish state constitutional structure similar to the *comunidades autonómicas*. *Elecciones Autonómicas* were not held in Catalunya (scheduled for later this year), Andalucia (next year), and Euskadi and Galicia (both scheduled for 2005).

2. Aside from the traditional Catholic Church, which in Spain is in part financed through the public tax system (direct payments to the Church in 2001 amounted to some approximately €120 million, not including state funding for religious teachers in public schools, military and hospital chaplains, and other indirect assistance), we also have to take note of the influence of the fundamentalist and highly secretive sect Opus Dei, which enjoys a heavy influence in governmental circles. The Defence Minister Federico Trillo, for example, is an Opus Dei "supernumerary", a member of the organisation's elite who tithe it a share of their earnings. Other prominent Opus supporters include Spain's Attorney General Jesús Cardenal, the former police chief Juan Cotino, and three former ministers, Isabel Tocino, José Manuel Romay and Loyola de Palacio, the last of these now a European commissioner. The present Foreign Minister, the deeply strange Ana Palacio, attended last year's canonisation of Opus Dei founder José María Escriva in Rome. Aznar himself sent two of his children to Opus Dei schools and his wife, Ana Botella, a political figure in her own right, is at least openly sympathetic, if not an actual member.

3. His official title is the rather grand-sounding "President of the Government", but since Prime Minister is effectively what he is, that is what we shall be calling him here.

4. The full text of the letter in English can be read at http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110002994.

5. *El Mundo*, 27 March 2003.

6. Aznar had in fact threatened to do the same thing before the general elections of 2000, but, that time, had been persuaded that his presence at the helm of the party would be essential. It is perhaps surprising that a character so singularly lacking in charisma – his deadpan delivery style is only exacerbated by a congenital if relatively minor facial paralysis, which he conceals in part with his trademark moustache – should be so highly regarded as a political figurehead. But it was precisely Aznar's plain-man, common-sensical persona that had appealed to a good part of the Spanish state electorate as a refreshing change from the flashy politics of glamour – and corruption – of the PSOE governments of Felipe González in the 1980s and early '90s.

7. Some would characterise IU as "Stalinist"; I insist on the term "social democratic". For the reasoning behind this see my notes at http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w52/msg00148.htm and http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w52/msg00149.htm.

8. Izquierda Unida was set up by the Spanish Communist party in 1987 as a broad left coalition out of the popular mobilisations against the governing Socialist Party's move to win Spanish NATO entry. The project has been a spectacular failure: practically every founding organisation bar the Communist Party itself has left the organisation, and although it managed to win around 10 per cent of the popular vote in the mid 1990s, nowadays it is unable to break out of the five/six per cent position – which is what the Communist Party was getting before it set up the IU project. Effectively, IU is these days simply the Communist Party under a different name.

9. The position held by Izquierda Unida in Madrid was to abstain on the illegalisation of Batasuna. IU's president, Gaspar Llamazares (the PCE chief in Asturias) – trying to have his cake and eat it – explained the decision to abstain in these terms: "We are abstaining because while we repudiate Batasuna's connivance with ETA, we don't think that the Parliament should involve itself in something that pertains to the judges", i.e. that illegalisation should now have been a legal and not a political matter. (See *El País*, 21 August 2002.)

The only currents within IU outside of the Basque country who rejected this position and called for IU to oppose illegalisation were Corriente

Roja – an opposition led by Ángeles Maestro that emerged within the PCE at its sixteenth congress in March of last year – and Espacio Alternativo – a rump formation that originated from the old Spanish state USEC section.

Thus, aside from this very small opposition, IU outside of the Basque country effectively lined itself up – once we allow for its own nuance of abstention – alongside the PP and PSOE in their offensive against the *abertzale* left. Indeed, both IU and PCE have a long history of Greater Spanish chauvinism: denunciation of ETA as "fascists" is not only routine from the leadership of PSOE and PP but is also the preferred characterisation of present PCE general secretary (and former leader of IU) Francisco Frutos.

10. In Spanish state elections voters have an opportunity to cast a "no vote", the *voto en blanco*. By "abstention rate" here is referred to this vote plus *votos nulos* – spoiled ballot papers.

11. In Raymond Carr's description the fundamental juxtaposition of modern and antediluvian inherent to Francoism is neatly expressed: "The dying Caudillo was plugged into every modern medical device; on his bed was the mantle of the Virgin of Pilar and grasped in his hand was the mummified arm of St. Theresa of Ávila." (*Spain 1808-1975*, Oxford, 1982, p.769.)

12. I am not here talking only about the civil war itself, although this was bad enough, nor the compounding process of terror – imprisonment, summary execution, torture – that followed it, but also of the impact of the dreadful material hardships inflicted on an entire generation of ordinary Spanish people during the years of the regime's autarkic period. Raymond Carr quotes Ronald Fraser, writing on rural Spain: "The people ate anything they could find: thistles and weeds.... Our skin burst open with ulcers from not having enough to eat, from not washing. There wasn't any soap ... When they saw me giving food to my dogs they began to cry ... A lot of others died like that, not directly of starvation but from eating only cabbage leaves and things." (Carr, ibid., p.742, ellipses in the original.) Talk to any Spaniard over the age of 50 and you will see that the bitter experiences of these years are far from forgotten.

13. Joan Estruch: "Se trataba, pues, de arrinconar la política sectaria de los años de la Guerra fría y de recupera la política de Unión Nacional que el PCE había defendido durante la guerra civil. La política de reconciliación nacional no era, pues, tan novedosa como parecía." (*Historia Oculta del PCE*, Madrid, 2000, p.197.)

14. The way that within PSOE 1982 still resonates as halcyon, and consequently Felipe González as a totem, was illustrated very graphically in the 2000 leadership elections that followed the disastrous electoral campaign of the same year. The winner (and present incumbent), the previously unheard of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, was the only candidate to combine the necessary balance between modernisation and affinity with the past. Zapatero's campaign, although he presented himself as an out-and-out moderniser (with more than a passing borrowing from Blairism – his cabal of supporters within the party operated under the rubric of *Nueva Vía*, a conscious assimilation of "New Labour" and "Third Way") was also assiduously replete with fawning references to Felipe González. The other modernising candidate, the Basque Euro deputy Rosa Diéz, famously began her campaign with the words "I was not at Suresnes" – i.e. "I am not of the Felipe generation". Diéz, as a consequence of this presentation of herself as a *break* from *Felipismo*, performed miserably in the membership ballot. The more astute Zapatero, on the other hand, understood perfectly that any project of modernisation that did not present itself as in some way under the paternal tutelage of Felipe González would not be acceptable to the party. The consequences of this we shall examine below.

15. See note 3 above.

16. As the chamber of deputies was in full session the opening sequence of the coup had been filmed, and fascinating viewing it makes too. Watching the scenes one is struck by a curious observation: Suárez, as outgoing Prime Minister, was seated not 15 metres from the podium as it was stormed by Tejero. As the latter begins to fire his revolver, one cannot help but notice that, as the surrounding deputies hit the floor, not only does Suárez not move (thus confirming the legend referred to above), he does not even move a muscle – not even a flinch. Anyone who has been in close vicinity of a revolver being discharged, especially in a confined space, will know how difficult this is to achieve. Nevertheless, it is not possible to conclude that this strange, almost unnatural, behaviour can be put down to the fact that Suárez knew not only what was going to happen but that what was going to happen was only for public display, and that he consequently was in no real danger, or whether supreme personal courage had indeed moved him to complete insensibility. Perhaps we will never know, but the circumstantial evidence is sufficient to provoke a certain incredulity.

17. There was in fact a certain precedent for this approach: the 1978 Moncloa Pacts, signed by amongst others PSOE, the Communist Party, UCD and the Alianza Popular, broached a well below inflation wage freeze along with a series of measures aimed at restricting credit and reducing public spending. In the words of Paul Preston, one of the more honest if hardly left commentators on this period: "The Pact [of Moncloa] was ... virtually the only way, *short of revolutionary measures*, of confronting the inextricably linked problems of the burden of Francoist economic imbalance and the unfavourable international situation." (*The Triumph of Democracy in Spain*,

London and New York, 1990, p.137, my emphasis.) Preston, of course, does not say this to advocate the "revolutionary measures".

18. In 2000 PSOE and IU stood on a joint ticket. Essentially what happened was that the then leader of IU, Julio Anguita, whose political trajectory had been characterised by a visceral anti-PSOE sectarianism, was taken seriously ill just before the election; his place was filled by the Communist Party General Secretary Francisco Frutos, who comes from a current more open to working with the Socialists, who brokered a deal with the PSOE leadership that, in return for endorsing the latter's programme, IU candidates would be entered into PSOE lists. Supporters of both parties, recognising a behind closed doors stitch-up when they saw one, voted with their feet and handed the PP an immediate ten-point lead.

19. This is also the characterisation held by a good part of the *abertzale* left in the Basque country. Indeed, the *a priori* characterisation of the post-*transición* set-up as still "fascist" would seem to be about the only way that ETA's increasingly lunatic "armed struggle" can be politically justified. Once again, profound political errors in the present find their root in an incapacity to understand the nature of the *transición*.

20. "Literally" in the sense that a roll-call of the surnames of the upper layers of the PP and the state structure reveals that they are in good part peopled by the children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces of the great Francoist families.

21. It should be noted that although in the workforce as a whole the figure is coming down, in the public sector, where the figure has been historically lower, the proportion of temporary workers is rising. This is indicative of the PP's strategy. In general, working conditions in the public sector are qualitatively better – in terms of job security, if not salaries – than in the private; trade union affiliation is also significantly higher here too (which goes some way to explaining the conservatism and craftist elitism of the Spanish state trade union movement). By attacking conditions in the public sector what the PP is achieving is something of a levelling down, rather than up. The same thing can be seen in the overall workforce: the mechanism of choice deployed by the government with respect to lowering the level of temporary working is a cheapening of dismissal costs for time unlimited contracts – again, a levelling down.

22. Again, with the possible exception of Euskadi, where the mix of social and national discontent provoked a popular radicalisation and mobilisation that did threaten to break out into a crisis of revolutionary proportions. Hence the urgency with which the structure of the *comunidades autonómicas* was established: without recognising Basque nationhood, a structure was put in place which allowed the transfer of significant devolved powers to a Basque parliament. That this strategy has been only partially successful is indicated by the persistence of radical Basque nationalism, in both its armed and political manifestations. The devolution of powers to a regional level was also key in keeping the Catalan bourgeoisie on board of the *transición* too.