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Talking about my generation

Spaniards in their thirties have grown up in enviable circumstances: democracy, a generous state, material wellbeing. Now the crisis has returned them to a cruel reality: that they may have to live with less than their parents did. Whether they alter their expectations or try to stop the clock will be decisive, writes Ramón González Férriz.

Nearly a quarter of Spain's active population, and more than half of its youth, are unemployed. What former prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero considered to be a "slowdown" rather than a crisis — he later admitted his mistake — and what the incoming prime minister Mariano Rajoy first thought could be fixed by mere "common sense" — he has since implied it might be harder than that — represents nearly half a lost decade. According to recent government estimates, Spain might be facing more than ten years of recession and massive unemployment. Cuts in education, public health, transport, infrastructure, science and culture and income tax increases — with VAT hikes expected soon — have failed to significantly reduce the deficit and the most recent setback will probably mean that the repayment targets set by the EU will not be met. Worse still, it seems that prosperity and stability will not return for quite some time to come. Though Spanish society has reacted angrily — two general strikes, a loosely organized protest movement, growing political disaffection — violence has been scarce and isolated, and the networks of family and friends Spaniards traditionally turn to in bad times are preventing more misery. While there are losers everywhere, the biggest are the young. Not only the young strictly speaking, but also members of my generation — people in their mid-thirties who have grown accustomed to a certain level of wellbeing and independence, who never imagined that their future might be shaken by a crisis of this magnitude and length. People who never anticipated they would have to struggle to make ends meet as their forebears did — somewhat less dramatically, perhaps, but all the worse for coming unexpectedly.

If our grandparents experienced the twentieth century as a time of slaughter, ideological fever and ill-fated intolerance, for many of the members of my generation it was simply the century of wellbeing. We have good reasons for thinking this way. It is possible that our infancy and adolescence were the most untroubled in the history of mankind. We grew up with democracy, as members of a middle class with access to commodities and experiences that not long before had been the privilege of millionaires. The biographical trajectory of my own parents is one that, in just under seventy years, goes from the mountain cave in which my father was born and the humid basement in the industrial city in which my mother grew up to an apartment with parquet floors and Wi-Fi, in healthy old-age supported by social pensions and public health

care. In a certain sense, the twentieth century, or at least its last third, really was the century of wonders.

This led us to believe that the recent past was irrelevant. It is a strange to say this as the citizen of a country as obsessed with its past as Spain — although this is true of every nation is in its fashion. The Second Republic, the Civil War and the Franco dictatorship are so present in our public debate that to argue that today's youth are disconnected with the past might seem flippant. However, I believe this is the case. As Tony Judt wrote, the past has become a matter of museums and memorials; but they have not been instrumental, at least for my generation, in transmitting the knowledge that the good times don't go on forever — and that, for most of the time, scarcity has been the situation for mankind, not abundance. I don't mean that historical ignorance might provoke a repetition of the tragic events of the first half of the twentieth century, but I think it has had a consequence that we only came to understand four years ago: that my generation is particularly ill-prepared to overcome a crisis like the one we are now facing. Not only because we grew up with an unprecedented degree of wellbeing, but because it never occurred to us that there was anything *but* wellbeing.



Demonstrations in Madrid, 19.6.2011
BarceX, source: Wikimedia cc3.0

Of course, this doesn't mean that many people of my generation have not experienced hardship in their childhood and youth. Over the years, Spain has had alarming levels of unemployment and job insecurity, has suffered serious crises — for instance, in the early Eighties and the mid-Nineties — and has been plagued by a poorly-run public education system. To assert that Spain is a country with a solid middle-class is true when compared to our history, but less so when placed alongside the rest of western Europe.

Nevertheless, during the years in which we grew up, there was a narrative that no adult challenged and which we therefore took for granted: that every generation has a better life than the previous one. Again, we had reason to believe this to be the case: almost without exception, our parents had lived a better life than our grandparents, and they in turn had lived a better life than our great-grandparents. The progress of the country, and what is more important, of individuals, was undeniable, not only in material but also moral terms. The world was improving. There were conflicts and short setbacks, but some kind of new historical law — which wasn't Hegelian, Marxist or even Christian, but a mixture of empiricism and bad memory — told us that the path of mankind, and particularly the path of our generation, was a stairway to heaven. What couldn't we achieve, if our starting point was infinitely better than that of our parents, who themselves hadn't done at all badly?

My parents, like the parents of most of my generation, are contemporaries of the baby-boomers and *soixante-huitards*. However, they missed a great deal of what the latter had experienced. They knew nothing about relaxed sexual mores, pop music, avant-garde literature or radical politics. Partly (in my parents case) because they were instinctively conservative, but also, to a great extent, because they were more concerned with getting on in a social environment which, due to unique political, demographic and economic circumstances, opened up a world of new possibilities. While their life has been a story of modest success, seen from our point of view it was also a huge period of boredom. A certain sense of self-sacrifice and a titanic determination

that their children should have what they did not: life for our parents was supposed to be a straight line drawn from birth, covering studies, courtship, military service, marriage, children, retirement. No doubt some did know about pre-marital sex and divorce. No doubt many were politically daring and deeply committed to their beliefs. And, no doubt, many experienced sudden ruin or fabulous wealth. But, no doubt, they were also a minority. In the most of the West, the consensus that guaranteed material progress in return for moral orthodoxy came to an end in 1968; in Spain, however it lasted until the end of Francoism, if not longer. We, the children of democracy, had families that were mostly traditional, mildly Catholic and deprived of great experiences.

In what may be the greatest paradox of my generation, many of us wanted to have it both ways. On one hand, we longed for seemingly endless material progress. On the other, we wanted to have fun. We wanted to have many more things and many more experiences. We wanted to study abroad with the Erasmus program; to travel around Europe in summer by Interrail; to sleep with exotic people. At last we were Europeans! We decided to prolong our studies with masters and doctorates, to enter the job market very late, to put off marriage, to enjoy a few years living with our partner before having children, and then to have only one or two. Many of these things were not exactly decisions: certainly, it was hard to start working at the age our parents had — and, of course, there is nothing wrong in postgraduate studies, on the contrary. But it is true that, generally speaking, my generation had much more fun than our parents. We decided — as others had done in the Sixties — that youth is the time for fun, and that it must last for as long as possible. Perhaps this did not translate into great experiences, but certainly in small habits that made a huge difference: restaurants ceased to be a luxury reserved for Sundays, going to concerts and clubs was common, soft drugs were available, pop culture was massively influential, consumption — of records, films, books, brand-name clothes — enormous. On top of all that, we expected stability and modest yet progressive enrichment. Once again, we did not ask ourselves the right question: were those two things compatible?

We did not ask ourselves that question, but had we done so, the answer would have been yes. Because, if we took anything for granted, it was that our decisions — about our studies, our way of life, or procreation — were not going to have real impact on the economy and society as a whole. I don't mean that one should face vital decisions thinking about demographic balance and macroeconomic stability. But I do think that an adult should consider the cost of their present and past decisions, and the circumstances in which they took place. When we planned our lives — I am talking about people who could go to university, because those who left school early to work in construction and its associated industries have even worse prospects — we did not take into account the possibility of a crisis like the one we are now facing. This is not remotely extraordinary: if the economists did not foresee it, how could we have done, busy as we were with choosing our degree or breaking up with our girlfriend? However, had we read the right history books, we would now know that the current crisis is similar to those that assaulted many generations — and that to get out of a crisis you need cunning, luck, to take risks, and above all to embrace change. Instead, the present feeling is, quite simply, one of being ripped off: *we have been robbed of something we were entitled to*. Why aren't we going to have a job for life, like our parents? Why aren't we going to enjoy early retirement, and pensions? Why isn't the state going to be as generous with us? On one hand, the answer is simple: besides making sacrifices, our parents had the fortune of living in burgeoning times, and together created laws and allowances that essentially benefit them. The second

answer is more laborious: because we have made it impossible through our decisions.

I am not advising returning to our parents' values: not only would that in many cases be undesirable, it would also be impossible. Like most people of my generation, I find my life freer and in some aspects much richer. Yet we must assume the incredibly complex consequences our way of life has had and will have in the future. Not all citizens have the same degree of responsibility for the crisis — least of all those who belong to the generation that comes after mine, who are starting their adult life at a particularly grim moment. But to represent the present calamity and its imminent consequences as the invention of a group of privileged people, and the victims as everybody else, may be the most supreme act of irresponsibility of all. No: we — the generation who are now in their thirties — helped to create this crisis with our way of life, with our choices in education, our consumption, our excess of expectations. We combined a certain conservatism with a kind of progressivism — everything must continue to be as good as it is now, even if we change almost everything. This political illusion is the cause of our present discontents and will make us vulnerable for the rest of our lives. Less state, less stability, more working years, a less golden retirement — to say that we asked for it would be a repulsive form of morality. But to believe that what is gained in good times is a right that nobody can dispute in bad ones has devastating psychological and social consequences.

The most immediate is the threat of populism. Not of the neo-Nazi variety, as has emerged in Greece, or even of anti-European sentiment, as exists in parts of eastern Europe. I think that possibility can be discarded in Spain. But we face a more benign populism that is also dangerous: that an entire generation — my generation — decides to stop the clock and prevent the reforms it believes will move it away from the idealized economic and legal circumstances that, over the last thirty years, have benefited its parents. Unfortunately, these circumstances will not return soon. But unless we alter our expectations and the economic and even the political system, we might never see them again.

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