

# **“Time is not a military rank”: The production of history and the liberalization of the Spanish railways**

**By**

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## Abstract

The argument that traverses this thesis is that the conflict between different forms of connecting the past to the present is central to understanding the recent transformations affecting the Spanish railways. I substantiate this argument across three sections that analyze dominant representations of the recent past, opposing syndical models and the development of high-speed rail. The liberalization process, as a distinct moment in the shift to the commercial railway, is not favoured equally by all historical readings, and the control over the means of historical production is essential to securing the legitimacy of future development plans. The field of possibilities in the present is built upon a specific interplay of silences and mentions, and understanding the constitution of these is essential to understanding the horizon of transformation of the Spanish railways. The argument is anchored by the proposition that the “production of history” focus, a distinct analytical lens at the crossroads of anthropology and history, is a useful instrument for advancing a materialist anthropology of memory.

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## Abbreviations

ACNP – *Acción Católica Nacional de Propagandistas*

ADIF – *Administrador de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias*

CCOO – *Comisiones Obreras*

CGT – *Confederación General del Trabajo*

CNT – *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*

FFE – *Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles*

GIF – *Gestor de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias*

LOTT – *Ley de Ordenación del Transporte Terrestre*

PDI 1993-2007 – *Plan Director de Infraestructuras 1993-1997*

PDM – *Plan Decenal de Modernización*

PEIT – *Plan Estratégico de Infraestructuras y Transporte*

PGF – *Plan General de Ferrocarriles*

PTF – *Plan de Transporte Ferroviario*

PP – *Partido Popular*

PSOE – *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*

RENFE – *Red Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Españoles*

RMH – *Movimiento para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*

SEMAF – *Sindicato Español de Maquinistas y Ayudantes Ferroviarios*

SF – *Sindicato Ferroviario*

SICRE – *Sindicato Independiente de Cuadros de Renfe*

UCD – *Unión de Centro Democrático*

UGT – *Unión General de Trabajadores*

## Introduction: In defense of a materialist anthropology of memory

*"We imagine the lives under the mortar,  
but how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?" (Trouillot 1995)*

### i. Introduction

For most of their 20<sup>th</sup> century existence, the Spanish railways were organized as an integrated state monopoly. The 1990s and the early 2000s were marked by increased pressure to dismantle this monopoly. This eventually led to the segregation of the public company into a service provider and an infrastructure manager, a separation followed by subsequent divisions of the resulting companies. The process that has most closely accompanied the breaking up of the railway monopoly is the introduction of competition into the sector. Largely overlapping, although not identical,<sup>1</sup> the division of the single state company and the introduction of competition are the processes that have most clearly determined the faith of the contemporary railways. The most common way to designate the process of opening up the railways to competition is through the term 'liberalization'.

This thesis is about this process as it is currently unfolding, and about the way historical representation figures in it. Or, put otherwise, about the way in which the liberalization process can be understood as a conflict over the past in the present. In order to understand the horizon of transformation of the formerly largest company in Spain, it is essential to understand the legitimation of the liberalization process as a historical argument. Opening up the national railways to competition is most of the time presented and analyzed as an objective rather than as a historical process the implementation of which requires constructing a vision of change. Looked at as a where from and a where to, the transition from the state owned railway monopoly to the competitive, commercial railway is

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<sup>1</sup> While liberalization is certainly a form of envisioning and planning market competition, the history of introducing competition into the railways (and more broadly into the state monopoly) extends beyond the history of liberalization. Internal company reorganizations, for example, have been similarly instruments for simulating a competitive environment in a non-market setting.

in fundamental ways about the ways in which we understand linking the past to the present, within a vision of the future.

Minimally, the liberalization process could be defined as the transition from the state owned railway monopoly to the competitive railways. But these end points are doubly illusive. They are illusive because they have always represented institutional abstractions more than historical realities. The national railways have a long history of being governed through an evaluation of the distance between the state of the railways at any point in time and their ideal desired or projected organizational form. But the endpoints are illusive also because the struggle to impose the model of the commercial railway is also a struggle over imposing a dominant understanding of these endpoints. The future of the liberalized railway depends, as I will try to show, upon the successful inscription of its past. The illusive term liberalization is an umbrella term for a commercial vision of the railways that requires an antagonist or minimally, a departure point. This, in turn, demands a certain historical vision. It is by now common to treat historical arguments as expressions of certain configurations of power. This thesis, in its engagement with historical memory, aims for more than that. It is specifically concerned with understanding how representations of the past become part of the conditions under which we struggle in the present. The anthropological analysis of historical memory cannot be content with linking history to power with an underdeveloped and timid vocabulary of ideology. An anthropological perspective must seek to understand the way in which historical knowledge becomes part of the lived history of productive relations, and the way in which uneven forces oppose each other in the process of recovering the past for the purpose of making discriminations in the present.

Most accounts of the liberalization of the Spanish railways will collapse the chronology of this process into a list of legislative turning points: in 2005 Renfe, the national railway company with a history of more than 60 years, was split into a service provider, Renfe Operadora and an infrastructure manager, ADIF (*Administrador de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias*). They remained public but independent companies. This coincided with the liberalization of freight transportation, which meant that access to national infrastructure was opened to freight service providers from across the European Union. In 2006 international passenger transportation was opened up to competition, and in 2013 Renfe

lost its monopoly on tourist rides. Finally, 2015 saw the very limited opening up of domestic passenger rides to competition, with the first high speed rail corridor opened to competition, the Madrid – Levante line. These changes followed major transformations in EU railway policy, which for more than 20 years has set as an objective the creation of an integrated European railway area; this is another way of saying that it has been aimed at introducing competition in the provision of domestic and international railway services.

Policy and academic commentators of the European railway liberalization process usually tell a story of EU railway policy acting upon national contexts (see, for example Robledo Morales and Redondo 2007). Reduced to an independent variable, EU legislation becomes an ahistorical policy instrument that acts upon national contexts. When we zoom in on the national contexts, we can see states falling short of implementing said policy or, on the contrary, being model states and disciplined implementers of EU level legislation. This view, of course, is implicitly criticized throughout this thesis. Erroneous and shallow to the degree it is pervasive, this mode of explanation completely misses the history of the evolution of the legislation and the way in which European railway policy has not only changed through the years, but the way in which it has reflected shifting regional, national and international interests. Institutional differences and different organizational responses to EU railway policy are reasonably documented (Beyer and Chabalier 2009; Chabalier 2006; Chabalier and Rogissart 2005), and it is clear that these are related to national histories as much as they reveal the contradictions inscribed into EU legislation and policy.

The liberalization of railways in the EU has a distinctly European flavour. Although few of those discussing institutional and policy changes on the EU level pay any meaningful attention to its specific form, EU railway liberalization policy has naturalized a peculiar organizational form which is rarely questioned. The introduction of competition across EU countries has been done on the basis of separating infrastructure management from service provision. For most of their 20th century history, national railways in Europe were organized in line with the view that they constituted a natural monopoly, and were therefore best run and administered by a single, integrated company. During the 1980s, in a climate that affected not only the railways but also concerned other networked industries, this view began to be contested. In the early 1990s the first piece of legislation that effectively

challenged the organization of the railways in line with the belief of them being a natural monopoly was passed.

Directive 1991/440/CEE was asking for the establishment of individual accounting balances for service provision and infrastructure. These were the early steps in a set of legislative changes that represented a very specific transformation: the railways were no longer viewed as a monopoly, in the sense of the unity of “track and wheel”. The former dominant view was replaced by the belief that infrastructure was still best treated as a natural monopoly, but competition should be introduced in the provision of service. Otherwise put, if the infrastructure itself could still be run and administered as a monopoly, access had to be provided to the tracks to service providers competing against each other. This, when looking at railways globally, is a distinctly European solution to the problem of introducing competition in the railways. Even in places where the railways have been fully privatized, the belief that infrastructure and service provision should be integrated has remained largely uncontested. As such, the introduction of competition has often taken the form of competition *for* the market, rather than competition *in* the market. As I will discuss across the thesis liberalization as such is one moment, albeit a privileged one, in the broader history of how to deal with the problem of competition in relation to the organization of the railways.

Spain has followed the European policy in its separation of infrastructure management and operations, and has gone further than current EU level requirements. Although the possibility to simply separate the balance sheets existed at the time of the first division, the Spanish solution was to set up two different companies. Subsequently, the two primary companies were again divided. My thesis looks at the way this process has unfolded and at the way resistances have been articulated to it. The argument is that the successful introduction of competition in the railways requires constructing visions of change rooted in certain historical readings. Not all historical readings favor the case for competition equally. And, moreover, the efforts at introducing competition have been tied to the ability to advance certain types of historical representation over others. When looking at resistance to introducing competition in the railways, we must understand the way in which this involves contesting dominant historical explanations. Analysis must also account for actors’ uneven resources for producing accepted or acceptable historical narratives. As I will argue

in the last chapter, this is linked to the control of resources for producing what appear as historical facts that confirm visions of progress and decline.

Neither exhaustive, nor sufficient, the focus on historical representation is, however, indispensable for understanding a process of transformation that spawns several decades. The liberalization of the railways is intimately linked to the pressure to reorganize the railways on a commercial basis. This pressure, in turn, is connected to questions of indebtedness and the management of public deficits. Liberal policy makers have a long history of decrying the railways' resistance to reorganization along free market principles. For historical and organizational reasons, the railways have been indeed more resilient than perhaps many other sectors of the economy in the confrontation with free market ideologies. What is more easily forgotten, and must be recovered, is that they have also been less resilient than it is often assumed. While in a place like Spain it is still widely believed that the health system should be public, or that education cannot be submitted to profit seeking criteria, that is no longer the case for the railways. However, it is not too long ago that the dominant forms of organization of the railways still reflected similar principles, namely that the railways should be a public, social service, and that the role they must play cannot be expressed in terms of economic profitability, nor can it be adjusted to the demands of it. Liberalization, and more radically, privatization, express a definitive victory of the commercial railway over the social railway.

The triumph of the commercial railway in the liberalized model is not yet complete, in Spain or across the rest of Europe. It is questionable, for reasons that I will touch upon, whether it can ever be more than a provisional victory (more so than with other formerly state run sectors). The transition towards the liberalized railway is as complex as the old national railway companies were. Breaking up the state monopoly in railway transportation implies fundamental transformations, changes that can be seen in the immediate materiality of the infrastructure as much as in the legal categories in which new forms of property must express themselves. It is also a transformation that has been contested, resisted and welcomed, with various degrees of violence. But to the extent that the process has been successful, it has depended on containing the opposition to it.

Essential to constructing the legitimacy of this shift of paradigm have been historically phrased arguments about the past state of the railways and their possible future. Throughout this thesis I try to understand those arguments and the way they figure in concrete struggles. Images of decline and rebirth have been central to creating the conditions of possibility under which important transformations could be pushed through. If the liberalization is seen as a conflict between the defenders of a public railway and those favoring a private railway the political conflict is immediately transparent. But one does not encounter this process as such. Rather, what we are confronted with on the surface are the provisional resolutions to a conflict between different visions of liberalization. In Spain this has meant, for more than 30 years, that different historical visions of what the railways have been and what they should become have opposed each other.

Introducing competition in the railways is primarily presented as a remedy, but this remedy exists only in relation to a diagnosis. The diagnosis is an elaborate set of visions about the illnesses of the state integrated monopoly. It is neither univocal, nor is there consensus about what the remedy should actually be. But the relationship between the diagnosis and the remedy appears, importantly, in the form of arguments about the way in which what has been informs and conditions what should and can be. And the stakes in defining what has been are high. The silences and mentions that these historical visions are built upon are part of the conditions of possibility of a successful liberalization. Understanding the past in the present requires of both epistemological and methodological innovation. Before I move to a brief overview of how the arguments in the thesis unfold, I will try to situate the main arguments in a theoretical lineage that I believe to be fertile for pursuing such innovation.

## **ii. Towards a materialist anthropology of memory**

In shorthand, I have frequently referred to the analytic process that gives unity to the various topics in the thesis as an “ethnography of the past in the present”. Many years after its use by Samuel (2012 [1994]), I find the phrase to still be evocative, but its theoretical and methodological promise insufficiently worked out. The more ambitious formulation or reworking of this phrase is, in the context of this thesis, that of a materialist anthropology of memory. The meaning of what could easily be just another label is best clarified by a brief

disclosure of how I have arrived at using it and the authors that have been essential for working out the relevance of such an approach.

The origins of this thesis are to be found in a more explicit concern with politics of memory and their institutional articulation in the Romanian postsocialist context. Having written an MA dissertation about the Romanian Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship, I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the limitations of an approach that privileges official actors and favors the analysis of memory as public discourse or text. At the time I was also already beginning to see the limitations of trying to impose an impossible coherence on something known as “memory studies”. That dissatisfaction carried over into my initial forages into the relationship between historical memory and labour organizing in the Spanish context.

The early formulation of my research problem took up more explicitly the question of labour dissent. Initially, I started looking at the liberalization process through the history of workers’ protest in the railway sector. This preoccupation with the way ideas about the past are mediated through and constitutive of workers’ contestation practices slowly gave way to a more central place for broader disputes about the meaning of liberalization and the constitution of dominant historical representations. It became apparent that in order to understand the relationship between historical memory and organized labour dominant representations had to figure as more than background. My concern remains with the ways in which historical memory structures actual instances of conflict, but it now integrates a more focused preoccupation with those instances where struggle is not immediately visible.

It appears to me there is a meaningful overlap between academic discourse and everyday decrying of the decline of organized labour. Shared sadness seems to be rooted in a shared confidence about the easily accessible meaning of labour’s contemporary silences, and our analytic efforts have been overwhelmingly directed towards understanding or explaining the unlikely but fortunate instances of struggle. This is not to say that there has not been extensive research into what we could loosely refer to as labour’s demobilization. My point is that, too often, that scholarship has been burdened by the comparison to some unspoken measure of successful labour organizing and class solidarity. The meaning of that measure seems to be treated as readily available, if most of the times unspoken. In a way, the paradigmatic question for much critical scholarship about organized labour remains “what

explains labour's lack of unitary response? Why no class politics?" I find there are troubling underlying assumptions in such an approach. Politically, it appears rigid and anachronistic. Analytically, it projects the weight of dead abstraction upon a reality which keeps escaping the straightjacket of explanation. Ethically, it appears to suffer from the regretful consequences of an externality produced by the artificial inflation of the role of critical intellectuals.

In opposition to this throughout this thesis I am interested in silences as much as I am interested in mentions. CGT's (*Confederación General del Trabajo*) defense of the public railway and SEMAF's (*Sindicato Español de Maquinistas y Ayudantes Ferroviarios*) alignment with the official company line cannot be understood in terms of distance from some elusive measure of working class consciousness. They are both equally important for understanding contemporary opposition to the organization of society in line with the imperatives of the market and profit extraction. To the extent we can speak about consciousness, it is as a dynamic relation between people who share a position in the production process as well as in relation to those who occupy antagonistic positions. Of course, we live under the impression that we are far from the days in which talking in crude terms about class consciousness was acceptable. It seems to me that too often the renovation has been cosmetic rather than substantial. Yes, one cannot say class consciousness without some sense of embarrassment or fearing immediate reprimand. But one can still comfortably ask why no class politics without much qualification, as if there would be a straightforward meaning and an implicit political agenda to that. As if consciousness was the ethereal expression of mysterious processes which as critical anthropologists or sociologists we must decode for the benefit of whoever is around to listen.

My point is not that we should discard organized class politics, but that organized class politics can only find its meaning when connected to a vision of transformation. The meaning of labour struggle cannot be uncoupled from the object it disputes. That, essentially, has always been a conflict over the control of resources that make possible collective life. And it has always been a conflict between different claims about the degree of control people should have over deciding what collective life should look like. We must reclaim the importance of understanding the different visions that clash at any given point, both in terms of what collective life is in the present, as well as its possible futures. Or, put otherwise, the

question is not simply who controls the resources necessary for the reproduction of daily life, but what kind of social existence do we imagine those resources should serve.

As I will try to show, the liberalization of the railways brings to the foreground a number of such conflicts. In the transition from the national railway monopoly to the commercial private railway, fundamental questions arise not simply about the control and production of an essential service, transportation, but also about its place in broader social structures. The conflict between the two has often been collapsed into that between the private and the public railway. While this distinction is an important category of practice, its utility as an analytical distinction is doubtful. Historically, the defenders of the public railway have imagined quite different forms and ends for a system described with the same word. Our analytical categories must allow us to differentiate between those different visions of organization that have been lumped under the words public and private. They must also allow to historicize the role played by workers and organized labour in formulating those visions, without assuming that every time labour has failed to defend the public railway it has somehow fallen short of its historical mission.

### **The production of history**

This thesis is then concerned with the role of labour in the liberalization process. But it is so from a specific vantage point, that of historical memory. There is, in the recent anthropology of class, a concern with the relationship between social memory and class. The calls for returning class and/or labour to the core of anthropological investigation (Barber et al. 2012; Blim 2005; Carbonella and Kasmir 2014; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Collins 2003; Friedman 2000; 2003; Friedman and Friedman 2008; Lem and Barber 2010) have been linked to questions about the relationship between representations of the past and modes of being political (Narotzky and Smith 2002). There have been calls to turn our attention to the “social memory of dispossession” (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008:17) and attempts to think through how to move from a discursive analysis of representations of the past towards their treatment as “historically produced conflict structures” (Narotzky 2007: 412). These attempts to bring together questions of class analysis and social memory have been central

to formulating my initial research questions. They have been, however, insufficient in dealing with questions regarding the constitution of historical memory.

Two properties of this literature stand out in the context of my research: first, the insistence that the interest in social memory and representations of the past is primarily an agenda *for* and *of the future* of anthropology. Secondly, the subordination of the interest in social memory to the analytical category of class. Rather than a programmatic outcome, the latter appears to be a side consequence of understandable theoretical and methodological hesitation. After all, there is no straightforward meaning to what it would mean to treat historical memory simultaneously as object and vantage point of analysis, nor how to proceed about it. There is, however, an interesting hesitation in the absence of a genealogy of such a focus in the contemporary anthropology of class.

In what follows I discuss what I find to be a mostly silenced moment in the recent relationship of anthropology and history. I believe this to have been a fertile moment the promises of which were not fully worked through, and the recovery of which can ground the analysis of “historically produced conflict structures” that appears today as an interest in the anthropology of class. I refer to this moment as the *production of history* focus. I must specify from the very beginning that this is a reconstruction which is neither genealogical, nor historical. The construction of this object that I identify as “the production of history literature” is primarily a heuristic device. It is born out of, and responds to, certain analytic necessities. If it corresponds loosely to a circumscribed body of work and authors belonging mostly to the early 1990s, and in this sense corresponds to a rather specific moment in the conversation between anthropology and history (and, it could be perhaps added, Marxism), it has never had the type of coherence that some could expect judging from its analytic reconstruction.

It would be no doubt interesting, and potentially very insightful, to understand the actual conditions of production of these works and recover more broadly the context to which they belong. This would be a story in which things such as the *Roundtables in History and Anthropology* or the perceived necessity to articulate a coherent disciplinary response to the “writing culture” moment of anthropology would have to figure centrally. But for the purposes of the arguments advanced by the thesis I treat this as a lens. It is my contention that it is both a valuable, and a broadly marginalized one in the contemporary

anthropological and ethnographic engagement with memory, history and labour. This conclusion rests on extensive reading of the contemporary anthropology of class and labour and literature on historical memory across various disciplines.

In employing this lens, although I maintain a certain a privileged connection to the anthropology of memory and labour, I do not mean to defend it as a unique disciplinary solution nor to carve it out as a recipe for anthropological revolutions. It is quite clear, as my occasional recourse to authors such as Rafael Samuel or Frederick Cooper clearly suggests, that the production of history focus is a bundle of doubts and concerns that transgress disciplines quite freely. For the purposes of this thesis and the type of analysis I do the strength of this lens comes primarily from the way in which it brings together an otherwise more disparate set of concerns in the by now long relationship between anthropology and history. The strength of the focus does not rely, in my reading, on the individual elements it consists of, but in the particular way in which it brings them together.

Whether there is something rather special about this focus that warrants calling it a moment, or putting a tag on it, is not something that can be decided by pedantically confronting labels and proliferating subdisciplines. Its meanings and potential utility can only be confirmed by employing it in analysis. To the extent it is helpful to look at things that would otherwise pass unnoticed or to spark alternative explanations, it has been useful enough in the context of this thesis. As for anyone interested in the broader history of the bundle of concerns captured in the “production of history” focus, and the relationship between those concerns and this particular lens, that conversation should, as always, go on with all the instruments available. The merit of this lens appears to me to be also a clear cut formulation of how narrowly academics have understood both the reach of the conversation, as well as the means available for advancing it.

There was, then, not too long ago, a moment in anthropology's engagement with the study of power, when a range of works that could be described as “production of history” literature coalesced. Many of the questions addressed by this literature are paradigmatically embodied in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Trouillot 1995), a book that has been essential to developing many of the arguments and ways of thinking through the problems I raise in this thesis. Two defining concerns mark this

work: an attempt to address head on the tensions inherent to thinking about the relation between the sociohistorical process and narratives about it and a critique of academics' limited view of the field of historical production. Trouillot was, at the time, extending the critique of the far reaching consequences of historical positivism while at the same time distancing himself from constructivism's denial of the autonomy of the historical process from its narrative articulation. In this, Trouillot was advancing the call for treating history as the practice of studying processes of historical production, against the hopeless search for answers about the essence of history. In his own words,

For what history is changes with time and place, or better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives. Only a focus on that process can uncover the ways in which the two sides of historicity intertwine in a particular context. Only through that overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others. (Trouillot 1995: 25)

Trouillot, of course, was not alone in his concerns, and quite a number of anthropologists were part of the same conversation (see Roseberry 1989; Sider 1996; Sider and Smith 1997). Importantly, this was a conversation that was occurring at the institutional crossroads between anthropology and history, and in which anthropologists and historians felt quite at ease raising fundamental epistemological questions that addressed the role of anthropology and history as practice without too much noise about interdisciplinarity or the institutional boundaries of the discipline. This was, most certainly, a conversation about the relationship between anthropology and history as practice, not as mere bounded disciplines but rather as fields of practice and specific bundles of epistemological concerns. When the question of the disciplines was taken up strictly as such, it was usually in an attempt to reveal precisely the broader social fields into which they are embedded (see Roseberry 1996). The approach, it could be said, relied on a clear cut understanding of institutional articulations, but critically engaged the meaning of institutional boundaries in the formulation of research problems. The question of the relationship between anthropology and history was primarily an epistemological and political question, and only consequently a question of the

relationship between disciplines.

As Sider and Smith note in the introduction to *History and Histories* (1997), this was a time when anthropologists were ready to critically build on but also distance themselves from the already existing rapprochement of history and anthropology. In the 1980s, historians such as Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davies had been strong advocates for historians' opening towards anthropological explorations of cultural distance and small scale interaction. However, the "production of history" literature saw the need for establishing the link between anthropology and history on a different foundation that would incorporate the advances in expanding the notion of the field of historical production. Capitalizing on the already well-established criticism of notions of cultural distance and the problem of subaltern history, the editors of the volume outline the contours of a project that aimed to move from working at the interface between professional anthropology and history towards expanding anthropological accounts as to incorporate a much wider range of historical producers. In a productive polemic with what the editors refer to as "historians' search for voices to give" (1997:14), this volume picked up a much more broadly spread anxiety, that of the adequacy of the pursuit of giving voice to the silenced.

The articulation of this debate and its relation to questions of the anthropological investigation of the production of history is beautifully illustrated in an earlier *Radical History Review* special issue, dedicated to the praxis of anthropology and history (Middleton and Sider 1996). In a polemic centered around the making of the memory of the 1912 "Bread and Roses" strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, anthropologists confront each other about the possibility of recovering silenced histories and the uses and abuses of history in the present. The debate is highly relevant as an illustration of the possibilities of an anthropological focus on the production of history. It reveals, in Trouillot's words, "the limitations of a study of the production of a historical narrative through mere chronologies of its silences", and clearly points to the fact that silences, "as heuristic devices, they only crystallize aspects of historical production that best expose when and where power gets into the story" (1995:28).

The main article advances the claim that the recovery of the history of Camella Teoli by Paul Cowan, as well as the broader memory making processes surrounding the "Bread and Roses" strike, are not simply riddled with factual inaccuracies. They are, to a large extent, excessively homogenizing, celebratory and glossing over the present history of Lawrence.

Separating the notions of hegemony and working class consciousness, radical labour historians, it is claimed, have produced a whitewashed account of history that fails to account for the ideological and structural ambivalences of working class lived experience. This adds up to the failure of an agenda of “uncovering silences”. In the multiple replies to the original article numerous questions are raised. Sider’s own knowledge of the events get questioned, but more importantly, the political imaginary that underlies theoretical representations of working class identity is brought into questioning. The debate cannot be reproduced at length here, nor can I do justice to all the challenges it raises in the space of this introduction. What I find more important for clarifying my use of the production of history literature is the broader agenda it speaks for.

The preoccupations at the heart of the debate are similar to those raised by the programmatic statements opening *History and Histories* or Trouillot’s work. These preoccupations are: a concern for the relationship between history as process and its articulation as narrative; a defense of an enlarged notion of the field of historical production; an insistence that the production of the past is essential to understanding power relations in the present, joined by a concern for understanding the inequalities that structure the field of historical production; and, finally, there is the question of how these previous problems speak to the disciplines of anthropology and history, and what kind of political leverage does such a focus have. More than the programmatic tone or the obvious agenda setting ambitions of some of the interventions at the time, these shared concerns do confirm the existence of a shared project. In summary, I find this to be the defining constellation of problems for what I further refer to as the “production of history” lens. This specific threading together of concerns finds only faint echoes in today’s ethnographic engagement with memory and history.

It is true that both people working more explicitly at the intersection of anthropology and history as well as individual authors that previously engaged questions of the production of history have carried further some of those questions in their individual work (Narotzky and Smith 2006; Sider 2003; Smith 2012; 2014). Overall, however, the potential programmatic unity of the 'production of history' agenda has disappeared. What I argue is its strength, namely the way in which it connects certain issues, has been lost in the unbundling of those concerns. Consequently, a significant narrowing of the theoretical and

political conversation that had taken place earlier has occurred. In place of the profound questions regarding the way we can recover the past and its uses in the present we have now diluted, if insightful suggestions about how to engage questions about the social memory of dispossession and how to tackle the problems of uneven resources for voicing the past. But even the formulation of many of these calls as incipient and their cautious under-formulation should alert us to the oddity of this situation. It is unlikely that this is simply the product of the failure to closely read across generations, if because of no other reason than the fact that some of the authors who are formulating these calls are the same who had been raising them under the production of history agenda. Why this situation has occurred is a question that formulated as such is beyond the limits of this introduction. Tentative answers can emerge from looking at the relationship between the analysis of the production of history and historical memory. Another useful resource is to read against each other the anthropological treatment of the production of history, hegemony and class. In the remainder of this section I take up the first question and briefly touch upon the second, in order to further tease out the implications of the production of history focus.

### **The production of history and historical memory**

The term “historical memory” has come to broadly designate that area where two modes of relating to the past, history and memory, overlap or interact. The interest in historical memory has seen its fortunes rise with the institutionalization of collective memory studies (see Climo and Cattell 2002; Fentress and Wickham 1992; Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Olick 2008; Olick and Robbins 1998; Radstone and Hodgkin 2003), but its broader history is entangled with longer developments in both anthropology and history. As a research area, historical memory has a special relationship with the disciplines of anthropology and history, because it captures quite precisely some of the key concerns which brought closer practitioners of the two. It holds special significance for history because it points to the methodological innovations tied to the rise of oral history. In the case of anthropology it reminds us of the contribution its practitioners have had to the study of the relationship between dominant historical representations and subaltern histories. While difficult to capture in one coherent line of study, whether it has appeared in the guise of an interest in the construction of national identities (Sider and Smith 1997; Watson 1994),

subaltern history (Paxson 2005; Trouillot 1995; Werbner 1998), rituals of commemoration (Spyer 2000) or public history (Khalili 2007), it is clear that the anthropological study of something known as historical memory has made a lasting contribution to diversifying the way in which we look at representations of the past and the socio-historical contexts in which they are articulated.

Discussing the problem of historical memory in the Spanish context raises rather specific issues. The most important is perhaps the fact that in the Spanish case, historical memory does not simply correspond to an academic field of study. The main bearer of the language of historical memory has been a social movement commonly designated as the Movement for the Recovery of Historical Memory (*Movimiento para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, or RMH), which has positioned itself against the pact of silence of the Transition years and demanded the recognition of the repression carried out during the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship (see Acosta Bono et al. 2007; Gutiérrez Molina 2007; Jerez and Silva 2015; Valcuende del Rio 2007). The relationship between the academic study of historical memory and this social movement is a tight one, and even when prominent historians have chosen to detach themselves from it they have had to recognize its existence implicitly or explicitly (see Juliá 2011; Juliá and Aguilar Fernández 2006). In Spain, then, it would not be erroneous to speak of a certain organic language of historical memory, given its links with a bottom up movement which has demanded transformations at the level of governmental policy. This is a rather exceptional situation in the European context, and it could be said almost the reverse of Eastern Europe, where the language of historical memory has been primarily advanced by conservative political and intellectual elites (see Buier 2010; Poenaru 2013). The critical literature on historical memory has been respectful of this reality, and in its use of the term it has tried to recognize the contribution made by the movement to destabilizing dominant historical representations and their structural silences. Otherwise put, it has acknowledged its dependence on this movement and it has also taken seriously the question of what it can do to further its struggles (see Bono et al. 2007; Jerez and Silva 2015).

Within this general context those looking to problematize the relationship between history and memory and perhaps reassert that which divides the two, rather than what unites them, have had to employ a certain degree of caution. Most of the times this has

produced a much welcomed refinement of the arguments and a substantial deepening of the stakes in the conversation. An illustration of this can be found in the volume *Las políticas de la memoria en los sistemas democráticos: poder, cultura y mercado* (Valcuende and Narotzky 2005), where the editors of the volume argue that:

However, the essential in the distinction between memory and history is not that one is popular or from below and that the other one is elitist or 'from above'; it is neither the distinction between internal/external to one's life observed by Peguy (2002[1932]) and Halbwachs (1968), therefore reinforcing the idea of the insurmountable distance between the object of study of the historian and his own experience; not even the distinction between winners and losers – the first imposing an official history while the others preserve their personal memory for a future in which it can be shared and raised to the level of 'historical truth'. The essential is the lesser or higher degree of willingness to transcend the particular, the concrete, specific reality, connected to experience, in order to produce abstractions that can allow to 'give meaning' to *unique* experiences, by incorporating them into a broader process or articulated movement. In this regard the production of histories – from above or from below – is always political. (Valcuende and Narotzky 2005:11; my translation)

Commenting on the diffusion of claims to truth based in experience and memory, the authors open and address a valuable invitation to debate:

In this regard, the collapsing of history into memory and consequently the disappearance of Gramsci's organic 'movement' intellectual, substituted in his 'authority' by all the testimonies of the world, brings forward challenges for the political practice that we are still unable to imagine in their full magnitude, but which in either case are worth debating. (Valcuende and Narotzky 2005: 14; my translation)

Here we have then a straightforward formulation of the distinction between memory and history that nonetheless leaves room for acknowledging, or at least debating, the potential consequences of the "memory boom" and leaves open the question of the changing relationship between memory and history, without denying the specificity of either. The question remains though whether this openness can be carried to its logical conclusion, and whether discussions on historical memory truly treat the question of the organic intellectual *versus* the multiplicity of memories as an open one. I argue that this, in fact, is a question that cannot be resolved easily with recourse to the language of historical memory. But more central to my argument is the idea that the reason a conflict between the vanishing organic intellectual and the authority of plural memories appears to begin with has less to do with

the realities of knowledge production and more with the epistemology implicit in the language of historical memory.

In this thesis, similar to Valcuende and Narotzky (2005), I maintain that there is indeed a difference between the experience of the past as memory and the systematic formulations of the relationship between the past and the present at a higher level of abstraction, namely history. What, however, I take odds with is the idea that the authority of history corresponds to that of the organic intellectual or that it is threatened by the proliferation of alternative memories. Otherwise put, I reject the implicit or explicit assumption that the difference between history and memory corresponds to a difference between the practice of professional historians and the formulations of a relation to the past based on immediate experience. This is something that the authors might share themselves, but I further problematize the language of historical memory by rejecting the recourse to the language of the organic intellectual. The figure of the organic intellectual, I argue, is an inadequate instrument for capturing the tensions inherent in the process of historical production and an insufficiently historically sensitive device to allow us to capture the real movement between memory as immediate experience and history as the systematic formulation of explanations about the relationship between the past and the present. This implies two things which, borrowing the language of Trouillot, are: the need for enlarging our understanding of the field of historical production (something that could be argued is also served by recourse to the figure of the organic intellectual). Secondly, it means treating people that we aim to reinsert into this process not simply as actors (“in constant interface with a context”), but also as agents or occupants of structural positions and subjects, or “voices aware of their vocality” (Trouillot 1995).

If we employ Trouillot’s triadic understanding of the way people figure in history, the conflict between the specialized historian and the “other voices” loses its centrality. It does not, however, lose its importance, since the production of history focus is centrally about the power differentials that enter this process, and consequently it must always account for the different means that we have in order to advance authoritative formulations of the relationship between the past and the present. It is quite logical that any good investigation will therefore rediscover the conflict between academic formulations of these relations, the interpretations put forward by so-called “organic intellectuals” and the struggles of people

to reinsert themselves into history by claiming the authority of their experience, to the extent these systematically produce different types of visions of the relation of the past to the present. But this approach makes it much easier not to sneak in through the back door implicit assumptions that naturalize the division between memory and history as an epistemological one that corresponds to a specialized division of labour. This does not mean that the production of history focus does not acknowledge the division, but that it treats it as a historical power differential and avoids the murky waters of the “work of the organic intellectual”.

Some of the merits or contributions of the production of history focus to the debates surrounding historical memory are also usefully captured by comparison with the work of an anthropologist such as Johannes Fabian (1996; 2001; 2014 [1983]). Fabian has been, quite unjustly, frequently classified as another postmodernist more interested in semiotic analysis and the circulation of symbols than in understanding the actual articulation of social and discursive formations. This type of reading is a rather tendentious reading of a body of work that has engaged very seriously the question of the relationship between memory and history. Fabian’s insistence that the relationship between anthropology and history should be rethought as a triadic relationship that should include popular historiography (Fabian 2001) is not the result of some postmodern whim that levels all claims to truth, but the serious consideration of how to think about the representation of the relationship between the past and the present in a postcolonial context. His insistence that expressions of popular culture can also be forms of addressing the relationship between the past and the present on par with academic work is the expression of a critical engagement with Western historiography. Whether this is fully reflected in his own ethnographic work is another question, but it is quite clear, as also reflected in his proposition of recuperating universal history (Fabian 2001), that accusations of postmodernism will not illuminate any of the issues at stake.

Fabian’s solution to expanding the field of historical production, a concern shared with the production of history focus, bears the roots of its postcolonial origins. In practice, the triadic reformulation, anthropology-history-historiology, is an instrument suited for an analysis that aims to challenge the assumptions of Western historiography and expand not only the range of legitimate historical sources, but the range of those legitimately classified

as historians. This leads him to a questioning of disciplinarity and to deepening what he calls the problem of the “postcolonial crisis of disciplinarity”. The work of Fabian is of course of limited use for my actual research in as much as the conclusions he extracts from this so-called triadic reformulation, either as illustrated in his own ethnography or in the proposition for a universal history, fall quite far from a materialist analysis of the production of historical representations. But his propositions for extending the field of historical production remain truly interesting. In a way, this is a solution that stems from the same type of doubts and anxiety that the highly influential *Europe and The People Without History* (Wolf 2010[1982]) responds to, namely, how to confront the enduring reality of writing people out of history by rendering them as “the people without history”. For Wolf, and those who have pursued analysis in his footsteps, this essentially became a question of reinserting “the people without history” into a processual global history of capitalism. Otherwise put, his interest was primarily with how to study and understand global capitalism in a way which was truly historical, namely one that understands the dynamics through which people and populations assigned to the “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991) were actually implicated in processes of capitalist accumulation at various scales.

This analysis, as valuable as it is, only partially engaged with the tensions of the process by which “what happened becomes that which is said to have happened” (Trouillot 1995:115). It had to engage them, in as much as the dominant readings of capitalism and the insertion of the non-Western world into them were ultimately historical representations. But Wolf’s interest in his seminal work was not only to reinsert people into history, but to fundamentally question dominant interpretations of capitalism. In this, he was not distinctly preoccupied with the conditions under which different historical representations gained legitimacy or turned into material forces. His primary objective was that of challenging dominant historical representations by way of putting forward an alternative one. With Wolf, therefore, we are on the terrain of the conflict between clashing historical interpretations, not so much caught in the analysis of the actual unfolding of these conflicting interpretations.

Fabian, on the contrary, is interested much more in a different side of historicity, namely that of the representations through which the relationship between the past and the present comes to be known. The reason this remains important once we pursue a materialist analysis of the way in which historical representations become a force in the present is

because they are key to reformulating and understanding the conditions under which people struggle. If in order to understand and resist capitalism we have to scale up from the level of experience to formulating systemic historical accounts of the way in which unique experiences are implicated by structural forces, we already have good reason to believe that this is a necessity that all those who question the capitalist organization of society face. Otherwise put, producing autonomous accounts of the alternatives to the existing order necessarily brings about the question of how experience relates to structural conditions. Quite naturally, the means available for producing these accounts are not equally distributed. Consequently, the various assessments of the relationship between the past and the present, but also the forms through which memory becomes history, will correspond to a range of historical accounts that in turn are not equally distributed.

This has two straightforward implications: first, uneven access to the means of historical production implies that those who control these resources are favored in their ability to produce and circulate historical interpretations; second, that the specialized account of the historian is a privileged terrain only in as much it monopolizes some of these resources, not by virtue of some unspecified, but almost always implied predisposition for abstraction. When we approach the problem from this angle, it becomes of little importance whether we have one, two, three or an infinite set of elements in this supposed extension of the field of historical production, as long as we ultimately tend to think of this as a question of a range of producers, not as a process of production. And this is where the production of history focus is fundamentally different, by insisting that our understanding of historicity, in its dual capacity as process and account, must be treated as a process. Critical historical memory studies, in as much as they have resorted to the figure of the organic intellectual, have not provided a solution for a full processual account of the conditions under which history is produced.

### **The production of history and hegemony**

The space of this introduction does not allow for a broad engagement with the problem of hegemony, the discussion here is meant only to tackle the problem of hegemony in its relationship to the production of history focus. Hegemony has been an essential tool in thinking about the relationship between discursive and social formations, and it has widely

accompanied Marxists efforts to understand ideas as structuring and structured material forces (see Crehan, 2002; Kurtz 1996; Roseberry 1994; Smith 2004). But the question that is relevant for this discussion is what kind of instruments the concept of hegemony gives us for analyzing the political importance of struggles on the terrain of historical representation. Quite obviously, critical anthropologists who have resorted to it when approaching questions of historical memory are aware of two things: first, that the challenge to dominant historical representations has come not only, and sometimes not even primarily, from the academic sphere. Secondly, that we cannot trust traditional intellectuals to fully take upon themselves the critical work of connecting the particular to the systemic or the universal and therefore to free history from its official formulations. The solution to this, by way of the language and instruments of the concept of hegemony, has been to resort to the figure of the organic intellectual. Otherwise put, when confronted with the need to account for processes of historical production outside the boundaries of the traditional institutions, the specific solution of those centralizing the concept of hegemony has been to identify those producers who can be classified as organic intellectuals or to immediately classify this type of historical production as the work of organic intellectuals.

In practice, resorting to the figure of the organic intellectual has led to different results. This is a figure that has been summoned as both analytical tool and political savior, in the sense that it has been used to explain certain processes of knowledge production outside the traditional institutions, but also as the carrier of a political project. In my reading, regardless of the intentions behind his invocation, most of the times his figure emerges what we actually encounter is a rather facile fallback on the role of the traditional intellectuals. Otherwise put, although rigorous anthropologists have raised the question “what is to be done?” in full awareness of the bottom up struggles that have advanced the same question in their confrontation with historical silences, they have ended up posing that question as traditional intellectuals theorizing the role of the traditional intellectual (see Smith 2014; 2005; 2004). No degree of reformulation of the role obscures the fact that the question, in essence, remains “what are we to do as intellectuals/anthropologists?” More infrequently, or almost exceptionally, the figure of the organic intellectual has been summoned in deference to those engaged in producing history from below and in acknowledgment of them as historians outside the established hierarchies of institutionalized disciplines. An

illustration of this can be found in Susana Narotzky's work. Teasing out the implications of differing conceptualizations of class, she writes:

The people I talked with during my fieldwork approach class in terms of their long experience of workers' mobilization and their thorough knowledge of the classic Marxist literature and more recent work, including academic debates. They know of or have been involved in the debates and confrontations in the second half of the twentieth century that transformed Communist and Socialist parties and unions in Western Europe and, of course, in Spain. *My own analysis is based on a less intimate knowledge than theirs*, but reflects a different perspective, from which two things stand out that appear to contradict each other [...] I want to try to make sense of these contradictory ethnographic facts in terms of some others. (Narotzky 2015:66, emphasis added)

What is surprising about this intervention is not only its exceptionality, but precisely the non-exceptional tone that the description takes. Otherwise put, we have here an account that is informed by the expectation that autonomous processes of anticapitalist knowledge production are not only to be expected, but that they must become part of our analysis. This does not seem to me so different from the proposition that we must begin to take seriously something labeled as "historiology", namely history produced outside the confines of the traditional disciplines. The question is rather whether this is facilitated by the language of hegemony and its extension into the theory of the organic intellectual. The case I make for a materialist anthropology of historical memory is rooted in the argument that it is not. The lens of hegemony, when taken to the terrain of the confrontation between dominant and oppositional historical representations, actually hinders making sense of the "contradictory ethnographic facts", primarily because it does not accommodate an interest in the conditions under which the actual work of the so-called organic intellectual takes place.

Just like in the case of Fabian's triadic reformulation, we might end up with a much broader universe of people producing history, but not pushed to make sense of the conditions under which they do. If taken to its full logical conclusion, Fabian's framework gives us a universe of infinitely diverse objects that can be called history, while similarly the recourse to the figure of the organic intellectual might end up populating our accounts with a potentially infinite population of historians. But as opposed to both of these perspectives, the production of history framework, by shifting the question from what is history to what

are the conditions under which history is produced, allows us to acknowledge power differentials while not naturalizing, implicitly or explicitly, the figure of the intellectual.

As seen in Susana Narotzky's work, the analysis can escape unscathed the confines of the resort to the figure of the organic intellectual. However, the relevant question appears to me whether the analysis is advanced by it, or rather the merits belong to the anthropologist and the lens is auxiliary. This, in the case of a focus such as the one of this thesis, becomes more complicated. The reason this is so is that once the actual confrontation between different historical visions becomes the central object of investigation, the plurality of these representations cannot be captured as merely the "work of organic intellectuals". It is a framework that not only obscures the constant production of historical interpretations, but it is also a framework that shifts focus from process to object, from relation to synchronically carved out structure. In the production of history focus the constant confrontation of historical visions is not the exception, but the norm. The actual form of the historical confrontation cannot of course be anticipated by it, this can only be known once the question of the uneven distribution of the means for historical production is taken seriously.

Finally, regardless of one's emotional response to a language developed in relation to the strategic questions of the Italian communist party a century ago, it becomes clear that the production of history focus forces one to historicize the figure of the intellectual. If the framework of hegemony has made it possible to advance our understanding of the questions of cultural hegemony in relation to capitalist institutions, it does not seem to be equally useful for advancing our understanding of the production of counter-hegemonic histories. The analysis I pursue throughout this thesis is an illustration of this. It also appears to me that the strength of our theoretical tools is not best assessed at the points where their premises are confirmed, but in those cases where their utility is brought into question. Those moments should not only make us search for alternative instruments, but they should provoke a revisiting of our previous findings in the light of the emerging doubts.

If the processual analysis of the history of capitalism has reinstated "the people without history" into a global history of capitalism, the production of history focus takes

seriously the challenge to historicize the uneven distribution and control of the means of knowledge production. Trouillot's reminder is a timely one:

We may want to keep in mind that deeds and words are not as distinguishable as often we presume. History does not belong only to its narrators, professional or amateur. While some of us debate what history is or was, others take it into their own hands. (Trouillot 1995: 153)

If the violence inherent in apologetic whitewashed histories of capitalism is today obvious, this is less the case with the violence inscribed in the struggles over how to capture the relationship of the past to the present, in light of future political transformations. The political lesson in this is rather straightforward: if ideas do matter, as those who resort to the language of hegemony insist, then the urgency of socializing the means of knowledge production is clear.

Equally, no number of qualifiers added to the term intellectual will modify the urgency to acknowledge that where capitalism is being denounced or resisted, people have not been in need of intellectuals to translate their experience into structural accounts, whether we call those theory or history. What has been, and keeps being at stake, is reclaiming history as dual process, not on behalf of the people, but by them. The proposition that a discipline with a contentious relation to the question of *representation* could benefit from taking seriously the lessons learned in rethinking colonial history appears then as less extravagant and certainly more than postmodern whim. The politics of representation is as much a stake in class politics as it has always been in anticolonial struggles across national divides. There is no reason it would be less central to the theoretical apparatus that we claim to be indispensable to class politics.

### **The production of history and the anthropology of class**

The analysis that I pursue through the lens of the production of history also stands in a specific relation to the anthropology of class. As previously discussed, there are streams in the current anthropology of class which have taken a closer interest in questions of historical memory, and my work is indebted to those. This interest, however, is not evenly distributed across the contemporary anthropology of class (Barber et al. 2012; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Kalb 2015; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Lem and Barber 2010), but is most clearly visible in those works which could be said to belong to a historical materialist type of analysis

(Narotzky 2015; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Narotzky and Smith 2002; Smith 2015). In line with these works, the analysis in this thesis treats class as a lens (Smith 2015) rather than a problematic, and assumes that class is a relationship of social antagonism organized around the contradiction between “the garnering of value through the use of property on the one hand, and the translation of value through the sale of labour power on the other” (Smith 2015:87). This extends to saying that the class quality of a relation is given by exploitation in production and expropriation in circulation (Narotzky 2015:53). This is a perspective that assumes that capitalist social formations are necessarily structured in class ways.

However, this is not a viewpoint that assumes that the class character of a social formation is exhausted in identifying these central contradictions. Rather, the type of angle I adopt maintains that this can be fully understood only by identifying the ways in which contradictions in the social process “are transmitted into the forming of social subjects” (Smith 2015:82-83). This, otherwise put, is a perspective that assumes that the class character of any social process can only be understood when the mediations between the logic of production relations and lived experience are treated as an indispensable part of social reality and our analysis of it. Rodríguez López’s reflection on the working class as a historical subject in the Spanish Transition perfectly captures the central emphasis of such a perspective:

The working class was, therefore, something different from the ‘sociological’ class. When the approach is historical and not simply ideological or sociological, the images of social subjects turn much more complex. That which the working class was is not exactly explained by the relation with the means of production -dispossession, exteriority-, the position of subordination-economic and political subalternity-, its condition of alienated productive subject -exploitation-, or the image of it as an aggregate of income positions, cultural capital, or work qualifications. In its constitution as an actor in the Spain of the Transition, the working class was made and remade starting from the conflicts in the factories and the neighborhoods. (Rodríguez López 2015:346-7;my translation)

“Sensitive to the disjunctions between the frameworks of past actors and present interpreters” (Cooper 2005:19), a historical materialist anthropology of class must then ask what role is played by the difference between history as social process and representation in the constitution of historical subjects. The specific emphasis that the production of history focus brings to the anthropological treatment of class is the insistence that historical arguments are not the *post hoc* elaborations of specialized producers of discourse, but

material forces actively involved in the structuring of experience. However, the active representation of change as historical process does not take place in a socially neutral space, but in a space of uneven access to the means of historical evaluation and representation.

The case in favor of a materialist anthropology of memory does not entail a one-way relation between the production of history focus and the anthropology of class. This becomes clearer once the emphasis is put on the *materialist* aspect of the analysis. I employ this term to designate a “historical understanding which acknowledges that the products of social activity, the forms of social interaction produced by human beings, themselves become material forces” (Meiksins Wood 1995:26). The corollary of this is the proposition that the material is irreducibly social, which in turn is intimately linked to a view that acknowledges the *conscious* component of production. A materialist analysis of class is one that treats class as a social *relation*. This entails a concern for the mediations between production relations and class, and their particularities, be those historical or cultural (Meiksins Wood 1995). These, to a large extent, are the underlying assumptions that inform the analytic approach employed in this thesis. In terms of actual analysis, the historical materialist treatment of class, with its emphasis on *experience* and the processual treatment of the articulation of relations of production and class formation, becomes immediately relevant once the question of conflict and struggle as constitutive elements of relationships of exploitation is brought up.

The processes that underpin the production of history become a central concern when the question of the anthropological investigation of conflict as a central mediation arises. And here the emphasis that the production of history focus brings to the analysis is that historical representation is an essential part of the conditions under which people struggle on a daily basis. Historical arguments, evaluation, and representation, as structured accounts of the way the past relates to the present, are essential to understanding the particular historical form that the relation between class and relations of production takes at any given moment in time. However, this is matched by a cautious formulation of the relevance of this perspective for different types of investigations of class. The ground on which the production of history focus reveals its strength, in relation to the anthropological investigation of class, is that of the analysis of conflict.

Finally, following the assumption that a mode of exploitation is always also a relation of power, another question arises: how does this active component of power dynamics stand in relation to the culture of the dominant and the dominated? The observation that “the customs, rituals and values of the subordinated classes can [...] ‘often be seen to be intrinsic’ to the mode of production in a way that the dominant culture is not, because they are integral to the very processes of reproducing life and its material conditions” (Meiksins Wood 1995:65) is met by an important qualification in dialogue with questions about the production of history: customs and values, understood as practice, are not autonomous features of class experience. The relationship between the cultural expressions of the dominant and the dominated is always a matter of historical investigation. Critical points, I argue, following Rodríguez López, are those moments in broader processes of struggle at which “history could have been otherwise” (2015: 357). A materialist anthropology of memory has as a central focus the investigation and identification of precisely such critical moments, in their double capacity as socio-historical process and representation. In the ongoing struggle for imposing legitimate readings of the social, the capacity to erase or to recover these moments is central to the way in which future alternatives are formulated. This raises the political possibility and challenge that anti-capitalist history might necessarily be counterfactual, to the extent that it is aimed at recovering the possibility that things could have been different from what they are.

### **A case in context**

The meaning of the case for a materialist anthropology of memory can only be fully articulated by returning it to the context of the investigation. The production of history focus, and its relevance for questions of historical memory in the Spanish context, builds upon and advances a number of rather specific historical arguments. The way I set up the relationship between the production of history, historical memory, class and hegemony only acquires its full significance when connected to debates about the recent past of Spain. Most of the events that I describe and analyze throughout this thesis belong to the post-Francoist context. However, these are events in which, I argue, the more distant past and broader historical representations figure centrally. The transformation of the railways that I analyze

contributes to clarifying the way in which the debates surrounding historical memory have contributed to the representation of the recent past.

The analysis and militancy surrounding questions of historical memory in Spain have quite heavily relied on the image of the “pact of silence”, a grounding metaphor at the level of both emic and etic language. They have, at the same time, contributed to challenging the dominant view of the Transition as a negotiated and peaceful one. This dominant view, as commentators have noticed, is “a part of the actual transition, it is its main justification system” (Godicheau 2015:7). “Consensus”, “agreement”, “pact” have been key qualifiers of this process. Through the lens of historical memory this view of the Transition has been significantly questioned. The Transition was neither consensual, nor the product of a non-conflictual transaction. This perspective has clearly established that the Transition years were marked by a violent suppression of the recovery of the past, and that this suppression has been protected by the institutional articulation of pacts between elites.

However, in its focus on the memory of the Civil War and Franco era repression, the struggle for the recovery of historical memory has relegated the actual history of the Transition years to a subordinate position. To the extent this figures centrally it is mostly from this subordinate position, namely that of an era in which the pact of silence is put in place and where the origins of a malaise are to be found. But at the same time the autonomous history of the Transition as a conflictual period, but also as one of radical ideological confrontation and rich experimentation on a social level, has been frequently sidelined. As Rodríguez López (2015) shows, the left has been instrumental in advancing readings of this period that centralize explanations in terms of the weakness of the workers’ movements or the debility of the left. To this it should be added that much of the literature on historical memory is comfortable with the recourse to culturalist explanations<sup>2</sup> about the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in an otherwise very interesting article, Izquierdo Martín argues: “Looked at from this perspective, *the moderate opposition to Francoism during the transition* was not only due to the fear of crossing certain red lines, such as opening the monarchy/republic debate, but also attributable to the support for the growing culture of consumption shared by the largest part of the generation of the sons of the civil war.” (Izquierdo Martín 2015: 21; my translation, emphasis added). In opposition to such a reading, my work builds upon a view that rejects the thesis of the moderate opposition to Francoism and assumes that explanations of cultural continuities between late Francoism and post-Francoism can only receive their meaning when connected to the class structure and class experience of the generations of the Transition.

continuities between the Francoist and post-Francoist eras. Often these are the same type of explanations which couch the struggle for the recovery of historical memory in the language of human rights, and construe political actors almost exclusively as “citizens” and “victims”.

While acknowledging the contribution that the investigation of historical memory (in its broad meaning that cuts across the distinction between academic analysis and militant engagement) has had to destabilizing dominant readings of the Transition, the analysis I pursue here questions some of the key tropes of leftist readings of the Transition. I follow a perspective according to which the years of the Transition were years of experimentation that cannot be understood merely through projecting upon them the conflicts of late Francoism. Moreover, a politically salient history of the Transition must not take for granted the centrality of the middle class, but must ask what kind of sociological reality this corresponded to and what kind of ideological function it has served in the articulation of the dominant political projects of the post-Francoist years. The historical reading of post-Francoism that I side with argues that “the working class was the ‘subject of rupture’ but not the protagonist of ‘change’” (Rodríguez López 2015:355). In this reading the fear of a return of Francoism or the symbolic power of the attempted military coup<sup>3</sup> are insufficient explanatory devices.

The leftist interpretation of working-class reformism, analogous to that of the <<responsibility of the Spanish people>> (Rodríguez López 2015:357), “barely scratches the mere description of the facts” (p.357) and is instrumental for the official history of the Transition. In Rodríguez López’s reading, upon which I build my arguments,

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<sup>3</sup> A paradigmatic formulation of this type of reading is offered by Jerez and Silva (2015). While their overview of the evolution of the movement for the recovery of historical memory is excellent, their view of the social articulation of opposition during the Transition years is severely limited: “23F was the end of a road, a heart attack that necrotized and disconnected the return of democracy from everything that the *citizens’ struggle for the human rights of the victims of the dictatorship* could have brought to it, the construction of new referents; it represented the displacement of the democratic paternity from those who sacrificed even their lives for the defense of freedoms to those who drew up, in a luxury hotel, a demobilizing constitution.” (Jerez and Silva 2015:4; emphasis added). For a reading that breaks down the category of citizen and recovers the social articulation of oppositional movements during the Transition years, see Carmona Pascual 2012, Espai en Blanc 2008; Rodríguez López 2015. Following these works it becomes obvious that the language of human rights and citizenship is an ideological imposition upon the events of a past where protest and demands were articulated in much more diverse and often times more radical categories.

the Transition was an age rich in proposals, experiments and alternatives. From this point of view it was also a missed opportunity. The institutionalization of the new regime, at the time of the devastating effects of the economic crisis, provoked an immense frustration of the expectations created barely a few years before. (Rodríguez López 2015:357; my translation)

The analysis of the Spanish railways that I pursue here is aimed as a contribution to a perspective that recovers the Transition years and the recent history of contemporary Spain as not only relevant to questions of historical memory, but as periods in themselves marked by a contentious historical recovery. The story that unfolds in the pages of this thesis is proof that events become constructed as the past faster than we tend to assume. Revisiting the history of the so called “transition to democracy” and treating the present as a legitimate object of historical inquiry necessarily complicates accounts about a politics of silence. The events that I follow here show that the “fear of stirring the past”, while a powerful political instrument of the right, has never quite found a correspondence in a stable social consensus. And to the extent it has been rooted in a social consensus, the pact of silence has never achieved the sweeping hegemony often attributed to it.

Rather, the “pact of silence”, much like the institutional articulation of what is today often referred to as the “Regime of 78”, is founded not on the cultural articulation of consensus, but on systematic violence, erasure and repression. The struggles that mark the social articulation of historical memory are not adequately captured by analysis that divides social process and the representation of it into the history of the left and the history of the right. Moreover, the depolitization of history that has been made possible by the convergence of political elites on the left and the right has operated with mentions as much as it has relied on silencing. The interplay of silences and mentions that supports the dominant readings of the recent past does not confirm the existence of an anonymous, and most of the times featureless, political subject. To images of subjectivity stripped of memory and knowledge (Izquierdo Martín 2015:24), I oppose an analysis that works toward understanding a social space marked by struggles over turning the past into history.

### **And finally, a broader influence**

The research in this thesis is profoundly influenced by the work of E.P. Thompson (Thompson 1964; 1991; 1995). I side with Ellen Meiksins Wood's reading and her insistence

on the still profoundly contemporary character of Thompson's treatment of process and capitalism as a social system as opposed to a mode of production. In her words,

Two aspects of his historical work in particular stand out: a profound sense of process, expressed in an unequalled capacity for tracing the intricate interplay between continuity and change; and an ability to reveal the logic of production relations not as an abstraction but as an operative historical principle visible in the daily transactions of social life, in concrete institutions and practices outside the sphere of production itself. (Wood 1995: 67)

Three aspects of Thompson's work strike me as invaluable tools for a materialist anthropology of memory: his insistence on the simultaneity of the economic and cultural expressions, his stress on the *lived experience* of productive relations and his continuous insistence on the need to recognize working-class self-activity. His understanding of process, as revealed in his original work, has been, for many years now, an invaluable tool in thinking about how the material is constituted by social practices and relations, and how the products of social activity become material forces. In this respect his work has been indispensable to supporting the argument that the way we imagine the past must be treated not merely as a symptom of the successful concealing of certain relations, but as a force involved in the reproduction of social reality.

I am most sympathetic to readings of E.P. Thompson that emphasize the impossibility to divorce his empirical work from his theoretical work, or, in Wood's formulation,

The burden of the theoretical message contained in the concept of 'experience' is, among other things, that the operation of determining pressures is a historical question, and therefore an immediately empirical one. There can be no rupture between the theoretical and the empirical, and Thompson the historian immediately takes up the task presented by Thompson the theorist. (Wood 1995:97)

If one agrees with such a reading, this, I believe, has immediate political implications about the way we use his work. The immediate consequences appear to me to be poignantly captured by Cooper's statement that "Our best tribute to Thompson is not to keep quoting his title, but to engage the basic tensions of his work." (Cooper 1995: 241). This should not of course result in an empiricist fragmentation or subordination of our theoretical debates to data collection practices. Quite the contrary, such a reading is averse to both the extreme localism favored by many anthropologists as well as to the belief that theory should guide our discovery of the empirical. It is a reading that assumes that the only type of theoretical

practice worth defending is one that does not place itself above the dialectic of the abstract and the concrete. The safest way to bury the relevance of any theoretical lineage is to disconnect it from its use and confirmation in the analysis of contemporary social organization and the production and reproduction of material existence. There is no meaning of theory that stands above its use, and no theoretical practice worth defending can declare itself betrayed by reality.

To the extent this thesis is indebted to the work of E.P. Thompson this is mostly reflected in the way I engage and formulate some core arguments, rather than in an explicit dialogue with his work, which in any case would appear to me to be a rather farcical conversation resulting from the most uneven exchange. In between the mere act of subordinated quotation and the immodesty of placing this thesis in a direct conversation with E.P. Thompson's seminal work, I have tried to address the question of how historical knowledge becomes part of the lived history of productive relations and the way in which the sense of the past becomes part of discriminations in the present. This in itself is the consequence of trying to go beyond the preoccupation with understanding the social relations that underwrite the constitution of historical knowledge (Samuel 2012[1994]), towards understanding the conditions under which the latter becomes a material force in the present. And this reflects at most times the centrality of the notions of experience and process as I have encountered them in the work of Thompson.

### **iii. The railway journey**

I started working on this thesis at the end of 2010 and moved to Spain at the end of 2011. What followed were approximately two years and a half of ethnographic investigation in the Spanish railways, the end of which is hard to pinpoint, since I still follow daily developments as reflected in the media and try to keep in touch with many who have been kind enough to share their time and their inside knowledge with me. Between 2012 and the summer of 2014 I conducted interviews, attended demonstrations and protests at various scales, carried out participant observation and extensive archival research, systematically followed media coverage of issues I had come to believe were central to my research, and formally and informally benefited from the help and guidance of people working in the railways. The already given shallowness of the notions of 'exit' and 'return from the field' is

strengthened by my intention to extend the research covered in this thesis by further looking into the development of high speed rail, through the lens of the financialization of infrastructure development.

As is almost always the case, the method of presentation differs quite substantially from that of investigation. Having abandoned the initial comparative project with a clearer focus on the institutional dimension of historical memory and labour protest in Spain and Romania, I kept the focus on Spain and began a long process of familiarizing myself with everything that the Spanish railways meant. Apart from the time I spent understanding the landscape of Spanish railway historiography, I was already trying, from the beginning, to construct a map of labour protest in the Spanish railways in the Transition years. One of the problems I encountered was the constant negotiation with the temporal limits that marked the research. While my thesis was explicitly concerned with the post-Francoist history of the railways, not only did I have to get familiar with the longer history of the railways, I was often times confronted with the ambiguities inherent in treating the transition or democratic years as a clearly delineated era. In the end, rather than trying to annul that ambiguity, I tried to integrate it into the thesis and discuss its meaning for contemporary railway history.

Similarly, I was for a long time confronted with the question of how much this thesis is about the railways. It is no coincidence that most often when briefly introducing my research I was assumed to be another incomprehensible railway aficionado. My typical impulse in this situation, which I still frequently encounter, is to align myself with the discipline of anthropology or sociology, depending on the context, so as to immediately signal that my concerns are quite removed from the spirit of industrial archeology. But to write about the railways treating them as a sociotechnical system the organization of which has profound implications and reflects fundamental debates about the organization of contemporary society is not straightforward. The extreme empiricism and niche specialization of railway studies has strengthened the common belief that railways are a world of their own, comprehensible and relevant only to a rather odd group of initiates. Far from being another curiosity, I believe this to be a symptom of the struggle between the defense of the technocratic governance of the railways and the belief that the organization of the national railways is a fundamental political question about the way we organize and

imagine life in common. I came to believe that there is little need to defend the border between where that which belongs to the railway proper ends and their relevance to other sectors begins.

Initially I was drawn to the railways because of the historical importance of the railway company in the Spanish context. This was for many decades the largest state company, and the collective agreements reached here were the ones that would set the tone for negotiation on a national scale. At its maximum, Renfe employed close to 150.000 people. This alone is sufficient to signal its reach. The railways were also a sector where, for reasons unknown to me at the time, the majority sector of anarcho-syndicalism enjoyed some of its strongest support. The tight political control of the workforce under Franco, following the widespread radicalism of workers during the Civil War, was another historical development that drew my initial attention. This context was the one in which my intuition about the railways being a fertile sector for exploring questions about the relationship between historical memory and labour organizing was initially anchored. Years later, the list of reasons for which I believe the railways to be a privileged terrain for understanding key transformations in post-Francoist Spain has grown much longer. The thesis itself is in a way the unfolding of that list. But having learned more about the historical organization of the railways, their evolution as a technological system as well as their social history, I am now convinced that salient political questions about the meaning of public ownership, democratic control of production and self-management are at work in the confrontation between different models for organizing the railways. The clash between these models needs to recover its political scope and formulate its meaning beyond the railway sector, as much as the struggle for a just world must be informed by credible alternatives for the future of the railways.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The arguments in the thesis unfold over three sections, devoted to dominant historical narratives, organized labour politics and finally an exploratory analysis of high speed rail as an instance of confrontation between different historical visions. They are all dimensions that I find essential to understanding the question of liberalization and its embeddedness into regimes of historical representation. The primacy of my interest in the

liberalization process is also partly responsible for the narrower treatment of memory. Memory, I have been reminded<sup>4</sup>, cannot be understood as merely a question of workers' identity and workplace histories. While I fully share this observation, the immediate question of memory and railway workers' broader identity is not the main focus in this thesis. The focus is on understanding the kind of historical vision that informs organized labour politics and the way the latter is situated in relationship to the question of liberalization. This would have been no doubt a different thesis had I started out with a more grounded focus on memory and workers' identity, and such an approach could clarify important questions about the liberalization process, such as the relative absence of autonomous workers' organizing. This remains, for the time being, outside the scope of the research, and undoubtedly a meaningful limitation. The last section in the thesis looks at the development of high speed rail and the type of historical visions that ground the most important infrastructure project of 21<sup>st</sup> century Spain. It is here that I introduce, for further exploration, the concept of technologies of memory. I employ the concept cautiously and consider it a potential useful tool rather than an analytic resolution. Its usefulness is to be determined mostly by future investigation into the problems of debt management and organizational transformation. I believe these problems to be essential to understanding the degree to which the making of histories of progress and decline can effectively shut off different organizational models and contribute to silencing conflicting alternatives.

The omissions in the thesis are essential to understanding the current selection of concerns. By omissions I do not mean that which falls outside the scope of the research, but aspects of the research that I excluded in the writing process. These exclusions represent in a way a provisional resolution of the tension between writing for a potential reader that is unfamiliar with both Spain and railway history and the need to maintain a meaningful conversation with those involved in the everyday defense of the railways. It is all too easy to write about Spain for an anonymous non-Spanish audience, and it would be all too easy to instrumentalize the knowledge that has been shared with me and present it in fetishized ethnographic form. In my writing I try, even if in the clumsiest of manners, to constantly

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<sup>4</sup>I am grateful to Prem Kumar Rajaram, whose comments on a draft version of chapter three have been very useful for thinking through this and other related questions.

signal my indebtedness to those involved in the defense of the railways as well as my indebtedness to Spanish scholarship that is typically insufficiently acknowledged by those writing for an English speaking audience about Spain. Most of the times this is a question of structural constraints rather than individual imposture. Nonetheless, the practice itself remains exploitative.

I believe the nowadays widespread idea that academics, and in particular anthropologists, can act as translators between different environments, perhaps between those involved in concrete struggles and either the academic environment or some caricature of the world at large thickens the imposture rather than solving it. The metaphor of translation appears to me to be a most unfortunate academic malaise. The many shortcomings of the balance between the too general and the too specific in this thesis should be judged by the degree to which this balance serves the purpose of opening as well as advancing a meaningful conversation about the defense of the social railway. The safest way to assume a full failure would not seem to me to be a degree to which it falls short of achieving it, but the failure to establish the criterion as fundamental. The many asymmetries that permeate writing with the resources of the anthropologists about a struggle that should regain its social centrality, but which for the moment is carried out mostly by people deeply knowledgeable and closely linked to the railways, cannot be done away with through declarations of intentions. But I believe that abandoning the arrogance of imagining anthropological research as an act of translation and rather thinking of it, contextually, as a responsible act of listening is indispensable. In a world in which critical academic production so often decries that reality falls short of its radicalism, it appears to me evident that critical ambitions have become irremediably aligned with the dominant culture. Equally, where the defense of theory is joined by a defense of the specialization of struggles in theoretical producers and grassroots practitioners, theoretical activity appears to me to be hopelessly disconnected from meaningful processes of abstraction. Not all those who do some kind of ethnographic research find themselves aided by the friendship and comradeship of those who they meet through the research itself, as it has often been my luck. But no anthropologist to date has improved upon reality by observing it.

This more often than not ungainly attempt to do justice to what I have learned from those involved in fighting for a social railway starts with a discussion of the dominant representations of the history of the railways. In the first chapter I introduce what are considered the main turning points in the recent history of the national railways and discuss the institutionalization of academic railway history. The second chapter extends the discussion by looking at official company representations as reflected mostly in managers' memoirs, railway magazines and advertising.

The second section takes the discussion to the terrain of organized labour. I look closely at two syndical models, the corporatist engine drivers' union and the anarchosyndicalist option. The discussion about anarcho-syndicalism focuses on the railway section of CGT (*Confederación General del Trabajo*), but also extends to CNT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*) and SF (*Sindicato Ferroviario*), two unions the history of which I find important for understanding the contemporary articulation of anarchosyndicalist unionism. The section is introduced by a brief overview of some background issues that are important for understanding the position of these unions, but does not include an extended discussion of the majority unions CCOO (*Comisiones Obreras*) and UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*). This is a decision that I have taken in the writing process, but my research has extended and devoted ample attention to the majority unions, and my writing is at all points informed by that research. This section advances the argument about historical memory and labour's response to the liberalization process by showing how different organizational options are intimately linked to different historical visions.

Finally, the third section introduces the development of high speed rail (HSR) as a concrete struggle that reflects the clash between different historical visions. The history of Spanish HSR, I argue, reveals that historical arguments about progress and decline have been essential to securing its legitimacy. It is the early making of the HSR revolution and the historical arguments that have been essential to it that I look at in chapter five. Chapter six concludes the discussion about conflicting historical visions and their centrality to the liberalization process by introducing a discussion about technologies of memory and the possibilities for analyzing the historical articulation of the commercial railway through the lens of technologies of memory. The backbone of the argument that traverses these three

sections is that the way we remember the past is relevant to the way we defend future alternatives, not merely as a symptom of power relations, but as a material force capable of structuring political action in the present.

## PART I: The Represented Past

“They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;  
They pursued it with forks and hope;  
They threatened its life with a railway-share;  
They charmed it with smiles and soap.”

Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*

The history of liberalization for most mainstream commentators is a story about the decades of the 1990s and 2000s, barely connected to the preceding period and essentially the culmination of a process of modernization that places today’s railways in opposition to the Francoist railway. This type of narrative, as I discuss in this first section, is well established in the official historiography and is built upon a particular bundle of silences. What results from the interplay between the mentions and silences of the official historical narratives is a dominant representation of the present as the only possible one. This is a history from which those contested moments at which different visions of the future were clashing are missing. These political and politicized silences and erasures are the foundation of a history the fundamental tropes of which are those of rupture and revolution.

The constructed revolution is one which is written against a past that is haunted by the teleology of decline. This, in turn, is a faceless decline, one that is always recuperated as status quo and which can never be traced back to political clashes between different plans for the present and the future of the railways. It is a necessary, inevitable, and agentless process. The corollary of decline is the only other force that animates the official history of the railways: modernization (and its variant, progress). The contemporary railway is, from this perspective, an institution born out of the conflict between these two forces. If the process of decline is inevitable and agentless, and the dramatic state of the railways in the early 1980s is most of the time presented as the outcome of macroeconomic forces beyond political control, the entry into the pantheon of modernizers is bitterly disputed. The revolution that brings forth the rebirth of the railways at the end of the twentieth century, a vision powerfully associated with the *arrival* of high-speed rail, has been part of important struggles of legitimation and a strategic battleground for segments of the managerial elite of the 1980s.

The formal opening up of the railway sector to competition in the first decade of the 2000s is indissolubly linked to the transformations of the Spanish national rail company in the 1980s. The institutional transformations, without which today's liberalization process would be unimaginable, were mostly carried out during the long period of socialist rule that extended from 1982 to 1996. Whether we place the end of the transition period in 1982 or in 1986<sup>5</sup>, what remains essential for understanding the history of the Spanish railways is that the most turbulent years of the Transition did not result in major transformations within the organization of the railways. The only plan that belonged to the narrowly defined era of the Transition and which concerned the railways specifically was the 1980 *Plan General de Ferrocarriles* (PGF). Drawn up under the UCD government, this was a document that reflected the era's concern for the deficit of public companies. It was, however, a planning document that envisioned a strategy of massive investment into the railways, with the objective of bringing RENFE to the top of the European hierarchy of railway companies within a timeframe of twelve years (see Ferner 1990). Hailed as the railways' chance to recover their historic centrality, this was a plan that aimed, among others, to create 50.000 new jobs in order to meet the production demands of the envisioned modern railway company.

The *PGF* could be regarded as "the promise of the Transition" for the railways. And, not unlike other promises of the Transition, it was never implemented. Instead, the arrival to power of PSOE resulted in a radical change of policy towards the railways. The foundational episode in this turn of policy was the establishment of the Commission for the Study of the Railways in 1983, headed by Carlos Roa Rico, a prominent railway manager and transport economist already in the 1950s. The report issued by the Commission became a highly influential document which both anticipated and advanced what would become the socialist government's transport policy in relation to the railways. It essentially articulated a new commercial vision for the public company. From this point onwards, the organization of the railway company became subordinated to the pursuit of commercial objectives modeled on the basis of the presumed efficiency of private sector companies. The presidency

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<sup>5</sup> Spanish historiography has been marked by differential views about whether the end of the Transition should be placed in 1982, year of the election of the first socialist government, or 1986, year of Spain's accession to the EC and the referendum on NATO membership.

of Mercè Sala, the ideological foundations of which are amply documented in her memoir (Sala 2000), is a testament to the pervasiveness of the obsession with reorganizing the railway company on the basis of the recipes provided by private sector management. Despite what she would have us believe, this was not an attribute of her presidency. In fact it had become the ruling managerial philosophy already in the 1980s.

The problem of the railway deficit and the losses incurred by the company was not new, and the Francoist administrations had a long history of dealing with it. What changed in the 1980s was the articulation of this problem with the new commercial orientation. Essentially, the first socialist government definitively wrote into being previously contested history. As such, it declared that the railway had finally found its demise as a hegemonic mode of transport. The only thing that was left for it was to find its market niche and specialize in those types of transport where it could prove competitive. While this was a battle fought in the name of free market competition, it essentially represented the subordination of the railways to the hegemony of highway and air transportation. For the 1980s reformers, much like for mainstream analysts today, there was nothing *made* about this situation. This was a situation to be diagnosed, not to be explained. It was a prescriptive diagnosis on the basis of which the company of the future was to be built.

The company of the future was, by necessity, a profit oriented commercial one. If the railways were a public company, there was no reason for this company not to act as a private one, with the citizens of Spain as shareholders. This implied a tremendous ambition to separate commercial and public services, the history of which is still unfolding today. Isolating those services that were deemed necessary for the well-functioning of certain segments of society, but which would not be delivered by the free market, became a driving question of railway policy in the 1980s. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s some of the high rank managers of Renfe still spoke a language fundamentally different from the newspeak of new management philosophies that came to dominate the railway company in the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s. As such, in 1980 the president of Renfe was explaining the origin of the railway deficit by arguing that “it crosses no one’s mind to talk about the deficit of the army or about the fact that our public learning institutions are loss-making” (quoted in Ferner 1990:114).

It could be said that the 1980s and 1990s were devoted to writing this argument out of history. And that writing out of history has happened with the complicity or the direct participation of the various mediums in and through which historical narratives are produced. Imposing the commercial model was a process grounded in the language of anti-Francoism. And while it did involve an immediate confrontation between a segment of the technocratic elite of the late Francoist regime and the new socialist managers, it also relied on important continuities between Francoist reformers and the new socialist managers.

The consensus over the new commercial orientation was consolidated through all the major planning documents that framed railway policy in the following three decades. The *Plan Director de Infraestructuras* (PDI), the most important infrastructure planning document of the 1990s, followed, in 2003, by the *Plan Estratégico de Infraestructuras y Transportes* (PEIT), definitively consolidated the commercial vision of the railway. The application of these documents to the railways and their extension into specific policy documents has not been free of contradictions. Nor has it given birth to a unitary railway policy. But the two most important planning documents of infrastructure policy in post-Francoist Spain both uphold the commercial vision of the railways. Whatever differences can be identified, they stem not from a conflict over this shift of paradigm, but from questions that operate within this consensus. The troubling recent history of the railways, from the perspective of governmental planning, has been about capturing that elusive creature that the commercial railway is. From this broader perspective, liberalization appears as a specific episode in this particular history of the hunting of the snark. It represents not a radical rupture with the public company, but a distinct articulation of the problem of the commercial railway. Its evil twin, as I will discuss in the third section, is high-speed rail (HSR). Born out of the same dream of the commercial railway of the 21st century, HSR today returns to undermine the very objectives of liberalization.

The story of the railways and the breaking up of the public railway company is, of course, not exceptional, but a specific history within the broader history of the economic development model of post-Francoist Spain. The burying of the PGF and the adoption of the *Plan de Transporte Ferroviario* (PTF) under socialist rule are consistent with the policies for relaunching economic development in the 1980s, after the long period of crisis that began in 1973. The 1980s were marked by the carrying out of the policy of de-industrialization—the

agreed price for the first wave of European subsidies. These subsidies would later become essential to the property development model that became the foundation of Spain's economic boom in the 1990s and the 2000s. Importantly, the influence of these subsidies was largely felt through their channeling into infrastructure development. The development of transportation infrastructure was a key element in raising the market value of urbanizable land (see López and Rodríguez 2011).

But it would be wrong to assume that the demise of conventional rail and the rise of high-speed rail are nothing but the unilateral transmission of governmental political objectives to the company level. First, because as I will show, there were alternatives which envisioned a different future for the railways, alternatives that are mostly silenced today. Secondly, because even where we find a correspondence between the economic development model at the national scale and the faith of the railways, the actual building up of the institutional solutions that made possible pursuing this model is riddled with contradictions. And, finally, because just like the current economic crisis has revealed the inherent instability of a model of economic development that was until recently hailed as the Spanish miracle, the Spanish railway of the future finds itself in crisis. The solutions that will emerge or be cast aside in this process will require specific solutions informed by structural awareness. This is a history that is about the railways as much as it is about the contemporary dynamics of capitalist accumulation and its contentious relation with the national scale.

In the following two chapters I look at historical representations that tell a story quite different from the one outlined here. These historical representations, whether they belong to academic analysis proper, unofficial railway history or the historical imagination of corporate branding, articulate a vision of a revolution disconnected from fields of power and clashing interests. It is a vision of the inevitable rupture that doubles as a narrative about an inexorable course of action. These are the building blocks and the conditions of possibility of a political consensus which assumes that that which is had to be and can therefore be no different.

# 1. Shadows on the Walls

## 1.1. Introduction

For most of their 20th century history, European railways have constituted integrated national monopolies. A single, state owned company delivered what was considered an essential service. Overwhelmingly, national railway companies came to be identified with the railway itself. The case of Spain is no exception. “To travel with Renfe” and to “travel by train” became interchangeable, as the everyday functioning of the national railway and its organization as a single, state-owned company fused into one. National companies, of course, did not represent the early forms of the organization of the railways, most of which began as private enterprises. The first wave of railway nationalizations goes back to the late 19th century and the early 20th, when massively indebted private companies proved unable to deliver a reliable public service and were reorganized as integrated public monopolies.

For the greatest part of the 20th century national railways across Europe remained organized as state owned public monopolies. The integrated public monopoly as the dominant form of the organization of the railway came under assault in the 1980s. Following more than two decades of loss of market share and increasing indebtedness, the railways were prime targets of the 1980s aggressive pro-market policies spearheaded by the Thatcher and Reagan governments. Railways, at the time, were in many respects just another case of a public monopoly and networked industry coming under the assault of unassailed belief in the merits of market competition. Not unlike air travel or electric companies, the railways came to stand in as a symbol for the failures of state management and the absence of competition.

Unlike many of the analysts of European liberalization would have us believe, liberalization is not a neutral policy formula emanating from the upper realms of transnational politics and differentially implemented on the national levels. Major ideological shifts and political reorganizations preceded the EU’s liberalization policy, which in turn reflects shifting priorities and interests on the national and regional level. By the time

the first EU railway package laid the conditions for the liberalization of freight, radical privatization processes had been carried out in Sweden, the UK, and the Netherlands. The horizon of transformation of EU policy is the establishment of a single railway area on the European level, within which operators can freely compete for the provision of services. This, today, is far from an established reality. If significant advances have been made with regard to freight transportation, the liberalization of passenger services looks very different across countries.

Railways, as commentators sympathetic to the liberalization agenda are often quick to notice, have been more resilient than other monopolistic industries when it comes to their opening up to competition. However distant or close we judge the project of a single European railway area to be, it remains beyond doubt that significant advances have been made in what concerns the liberalization of railway services on the national level. It also remains indisputable that whatever the objectives articulated and designated in the technocratic languages of EU railway policy, the process of liberalization varies greatly across countries, and that meaningful differences mark the contemporary national railways across Europe. Nonetheless, it is clear that for the last three decades we have witnessed an increasing pressure towards the dismantling of the national railway monopoly and the reorganization of this service on a competitive basis. While this could be reasonably argued to be a European wide phenomenon, it does not occur at or across neatly differentiated geographical scales, nor does it have a straightforward meaning, although much of the analysis would have us believe otherwise.

In a sense, “this is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling” (Nabokov 2006[1932]:7). The story this thesis sets out to tell is about what this very briefly described process looks like for the Spanish national railways. As part of the broader attempt to make sense of the liberalization of the Spanish railways, I develop an account of the different forms of understanding the past that inform it. Liberalization, understood as the introduction of competition in the railways, expresses itself as a conflict between different forms of understanding the past. This is not merely epiphenomenal or superstructural. The success of liberalization relies on the successful imposition of certain historical readings and the exclusion of others; just like resisting it is tied to particular historical interpretations. The relationship between

liberalization and these historical readings is of course not a mechanical one, nor a narrowly ideological one, there is no one to one correspondence to be found. Rather, the case for competition as expressed in the process of liberalization draws on and advances ideas about the past that are embedded in broader regimes of historical representation. To reveal the interplay of silences and mentions that are the building blocks of these historical readings is a primary goal of this account. To understand the way in which different ideas about the past play into contemporary conflicts about the future of the railways is another one.

There is no single story of deterministic necessity to be told here. It is easy to imagine alternative scenarios in which the same outcomes would be imposed under quite different circumstances and with more overtly violent means. Those alternative scenarios are as important for analytic purposes as they are for planning political strategies. But the circumstances under which the liberalization of the Spanish railways is carried out are so that what is believed to be possible, desirable or necessary is intimately tied to what is believed to have been. Those involved in this process have been more often than not aware of it, and as such have been actively involved in advancing certain readings of the past over others. This is a battle fought with uneven means. The power to produce and advance some histories rather than others is connected to the differential control of the means of historical production. The ability to represent the past is not the same for a company with the resources to set up a museum as for a small union fighting to preserve the history of its own battles. The capacity to establish what was and what was not is not the same for those who can declare an institution to be debt-free as for those trying to find a way to warn about the constant degradation of working conditions, today buried under an ever accelerating process of organizational fragmentation. What passes as acceptable history is always a function of what can be reasonably argued to be a historical fact. The conditions under which any phenomenon becomes a fact relevant to state bureaucracies are themselves historically variable. The more facts approximate numbers and the less history passes the test of truth unless expressed as numbers, the more those who do the counting are likely to have the power to write others out of history.

All of the above are processes that I look at under the three headings of the represented past, the remembered past and the proven past. As part of the analysis of the represented past, this chapter deals with those domains that have an explicit aim of

delivering historical explanations about the railways: academic history and museum displays. Before I take up a more detailed discussion of Spanish railway history, I establish the minimal chronological coordinates required by the subsequent discussion.

## 1.2. Renfe in context

### 1.2.1. History, as usually told<sup>6</sup>

The formal beginnings of Renfe (*Red Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Españoles* – Spanish National Railway Network) are to be found in the years following the end of the Spanish Civil War. Officially coming into existence in 1941, Renfe is the institutional articulation of the 1939 *de facto* nationalization of the railways by the Francoist government. The 1941 nationalization of broad gauge rail, although taking place in the post-Civil War context is not unique to Spain, it happens in a European wide context of the conversion of the private railway assets into publicly owned ones, as heavily indebted private companies find themselves in the impossibility of providing a reliable public service. The controversial 1943 bailout is one of the main windows we have into understanding the specificity of the Spanish process and its importance in the context of the Francoist national economy. The public service considerations were, in the Spanish context, secondary to the control demands of the project of an autarkic economy. This, in turn, must be understood in the context of the policies of economic nationalism and industrialization that go back to the second decade of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> The reference history works on the post-1939 history of the Spanish railways typically file the years up to 1959 (to as late as 1964) under a period generally described as the autarkic years, characterized by underinvestment and inadequate service provision. Railway policy throughout these years does not manage to transform the severely degraded network, the latter a consequence of not only the war but also of the heavy disinvestment

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<sup>6</sup>In this very brief introduction to the history of the Spanish railways following the creation of the integrated national company, RENFE, I follow the standard chronology and overarching historical narrative of what I consider to be the fundamental works of synthesis on the history of the Spanish railways (Comín et al. 1998; Muñoz Rubio, Sanz Fernández y Vidal 1999). As I will discuss in the following chapters, this standard historical and chronological sequence is in itself a form of naturalizing a set of ideas about the past which can be challenged. Although in setting up this chronology I aim to familiarize the reader with the main chronological markers of the twentieth century history of Renfe as reflected in the authoritative works of historical synthesis, it is important to note that the historical analysis of the past of the railways relies, overwhelmingly, on this standard sequence of historical progression. Most academic analyses work with it, rather than challenging it in any significant way.

<sup>7</sup>For an insightful discussion about the nationalization of the railways and the 1943 bailout of the private companies see Miguel Muñoz Rubio, *Renfe (1941-1991): Medio Siglo de Ferrocarril Público* (1995).

under the previous private ownership.

These, importantly, are also the years during which the share of railway traffic within total traffic declines dramatically. If in 1952 the market quota of the rail was 52%, by 1960 this reaches 25% (Comín et al. 1998: 93), and while the number of passengers or transported units does not decline in absolute terms, the railways were failing to capture any of the new demand for transport. This also stands out in railway history as a period in which tariffs represent an obstacle to its development: regulated by the government, they do not reflect the steep increase in production costs. The question of labour usually features as a question of costs; seen as partly responsible for the lack of sustainability of the system, the workforce appears mostly as expressed in the figures that account for the cost of its reproduction. The fact that the workforce reaches its historical peak during this period is usually made into evidence of the overall inefficiency of the system. The formal end of the autarkic period is most often situated in 1964, and marked by the new Railway Statute, although the precursor to this can already be found in the 1957-1959 period, when the changes deemed necessary for a greater opening up to the market of the railways are put in place. The outline of this policy at the national level is to be found in the 1959 Stabilization Plan (*Plan de Estabilización*). The configuration of the institutional transformations that would correspond to the railway sector are laid out in the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) report in 1962, in the footsteps of which follows the Ten-Year Modernization Plan (*Plan Decenal de Modernización* – PDM), a revision of which will occur for the years 1972-1975.

The decade following the 1964 Railway Statute is usually described, in contrast to the previous years, as a decade of modernization. The significant investments made into traction systems are seen as the delayed benefits of Spain's exit from economic isolation. This is essentially the history of the railways during the period of *desarrollismo*, although the canonical works of railway history make little if any recourse to this broader economic context and its political and ideological articulation. The question of modernization is treated almost exclusively on the terrain of the railways and its broader dynamics barely touched upon. The standard narratives establish the efforts of modernization and the results following them as important to overcoming the poor state of the network, the latter being the fundamental characteristic of the railways during the autarkic years. However, when seen

together, the years between 1950 and 1975 remain years characterized by the dramatic decline in market quota of railway transportation: from 60% to 10%. The immediate other to the “decade of modernization” are the autarkic years. But the full meaning of the modernization process and the true other of the Francoist railways, the dominant historical narratives would have us believe, is to emerge in the 1980s, and this is set up against the continuous and agentless process of decline that marks the postwar history of the railways.

1984, the year in which the first management contract (*contrato-programa*) becomes effective, is commonly described as the moment which marks a definitive break with the previous managerial model, representing the final dismissal of the paternalist model which had characterized the companies from their inception. According to the commanding description of the authors of *150 años de historia de los ferrocarriles españoles*,

We can consider this moment, despite the fact that many of its proposals were not put into functioning until much later, as the year in which the railway company lost that paternalist character which had characterized railway companies from their emergence in the middle of the 20th century. (Comín et al. 1998:167)

Many of the announced changes, as the previous paragraph alerts us, were carried through during the following decade. The 1987 Law on the Organization of Terrestrial Transport (*Ley de Ordenación del Transporte Terrestre* – LOTT 1987), the 1987 Railway Transportation Plan (*Plan de Transporte Ferroviario* – PTF), together with the long awaited 1994 Railway Statute are consistent with the managerial policy and the commercial orientation of the first management contract. The decade of the 1990s is a continuation of changes set in motion in the 1980s. The decisive commercial orientation, as manifested in organizational restructuring and a new focus on the client, together with the technological revolution manifest in the modernization of suburban rail and the arrival of HSR, are the defining features of the 1980s and the 1990s. These of course are marked as achievements in relation to the railways’ defining struggles: the battles against constantly rising deficits and an ossified company structure. Importantly, the 1980s and 1990s are also defined by the intensification of the efforts to secure the managerial autonomy of the company against excessive state intervention.

The successful reorganization of RENFE into business areas, a process that begins under RENFE’s aggressively modernizing president Julián García Valverde, will be perfected

under Mercè Sala, the first female president of the company. Taken together, these two presidencies add up to a period in which the rupture with the pre-1980s paternalist corporate model is firmly established. The decade of the 2000s is the decade of the historic division of the national company into two: Renfe Operadora and Adif, a service provider and an infrastructure manager. This is most often presented as an adaptation to EU requirements. The 2000s are also the decade of high-speed rail (HSR) expansion. The thrill of HSR is indissolubly related to the late 1980s and 1990s. But the decade that has seen so far the most significant expansion of the Spanish HSR network is the first decade of the 2000s. Throughout the early 2000s the bulk of what is today's Europe's longest HSR network was built.

Authoritative histories of the Spanish railways do not cover the period that formally corresponds to the liberalization years. The most recent comprehensive histories reach the year 1998. The reflection of the problem of liberalization in Spanish railway history after this year must be reconstructed from more minor works. However, questions related to the liberalization process are extensively covered by the main comprehensive histories of the Spanish railways. The problem of introducing competition into an industry facing collapse is an implicit or explicit preoccupation across these works. The vision of change that they put forward is one built around the image of the "railway with a future." Today's railway, the railway of HSR and modern suburban rail, one trying to establish its own niche and establish its competitive advantages in an intermodal transportation paradigm, is a railway radically different from the pre-1980s railway.

Although infrequently named, the other of this railway is most of the time implicit. This is the underfunded, non-competitive and anachronistic company targeted by generations of reforms initiated in the 1980s. In the image of the "railway with a future" what survives is also the memory of the "railway without a future", a railway that was struggling to stay afloat following decades of dropping market shares, underinvestment and ever-increasing deficits. The organizing terms and the main framing devices of railway history are clearly revealed as decline and modernization. The chronology borrows the established taxonomies of Spanish history. These are fully naturalized and remain the organizing categories even when they do not seem to correspond to the transformations corresponding to the railways. A depoliticized reliance on the standard points of rupture in postwar Spanish

history produces a railway history that is told in terms of the autarkic years, the Francoist modernization years, Transition and democracy. But losing their political meaning, these temporal markers are often times reduced to nothing but a rigid chronology that captures poorly the transformations specific to the railways. This produces a particular tension, in as much as such a chronology can be invested with meaning only through a political reading that recovers the structural transformations of Spanish society throughout this period, a task for which dominant railway history seems insufficiently equipped. It is through this particular contradiction that railway history produces stock images that speak of the Transition, but assign virtually no content to it, more or less glossing over it as a rather uneventful era.

### **1.2.2. Liberalization**

The main comprehensive histories of the Spanish railways saw their publication before or around the 150th anniversary of the country's railways, in 1998 (Comín et al. 1998; Muñoz Rubio, Sanz Fernández y Vidal 1999). Consequently, they do not cover the years during which the formal liberalization is put into place. Although there is currently no comprehensive history of the Spanish railways that extends through the decade of the 2000s, less ambitious, more focused academic sources (most of which represent a similar type of transport history) allow us to identify the dominant portrayals of the problem of liberalization (see, for example, Ramos Melero 2000; García Álvarez 2006). The convergence between academic sources and policy oriented commentators is significant, and both types of accounts offer a rather straightforward, unproblematic view of the liberalization of the Spanish railways.

The liberalization, for most commentators, is part of the process of establishing a single European railway area. Spain's actions in this regard can be understood as an extension of EU railway policy, and tracing Spanish developments is essentially a matter of following the government's compliance to the supranational legal framework. The division of the national railway company into Renfe Operadora and Adif in 2005 represented the national response to the European policy of vertical unbundling. The institutional separation of the service provider and infrastructure manager was a response out of several possible types of institutional responses to the demand of vertical unbundling. Like the UK, Sweden or Portugal, Spain chose a two company solution. Unlike Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands

or Italy, it did not choose the company holding as the new organizational form. Nor did it follow the Hungarian model of the separation of accounting balances for infrastructure and service provision within the same company.

Spain's national solution is the outcome of a set of EU level legislative acts that have as an objective the liberalization of the railways. Known as the "railway packages", these bundles of legislative acts (currently at 4), were passed in the years 2001, 2004, 2007 and 2015 and they represent gradual steps in the process of introducing competition in the railways. All of them can be traced back to the 2001 white paper, "European transport policy for 2010". Domestically, the 2003 Railway Sector Law (*Ley del Sector Ferroviario*) is one of the first and most important pieces of legislation aimed at the implementation of EU directives. In its footsteps the first division of the national company occurred. In 2014 Renfe Operadora was further divided into four companies: Renfe Viajeros (Passenger), Renfe Mercancías (Freight), Renfe Fabricación y Mantenimiento (Production and Maintenance), and Alquiler de Material Rodante (Rolling Stock Lease). It is also the year during which the narrow gauge company FEVE was integrated into Renfe and Adif, and when the latter was divided into Adif and Adif-Alta Velocidad (High Speed). Today, Spain has effectively liberalized freight services, international passenger transportation and tourist rides and is in the process of liberalizing domestic passenger services. The latter is an ongoing process, and many commentators are quick to decry its slow pace. The first passenger line opened for competition in 2015, the Madrid–Levante line, is still awaiting effective competition, and it is expected a private service provider will run an alternative service on this line in 2016. Some commentators also discuss the distance between the virtual and actual state of competition. As such, it is frequently noticed that although freight transportation has been liberalized, the majority of the freight operations are still carried out by Renfe, with private operators making up only a small percentage of the total share of traffic in freight.

The level of detail may vary, but the majority of the academic or policy oriented commentators of the Spanish liberalization process essentially keep to this narrative as the backbone of their analysis. Liberalization is portrayed as an inevitable process, a top-down unfolding of European policy applied to a national context. While differences from other countries, reduced to legislative and organizational aspects, are often diligently catalogued, there is little to no effort at explanation. The cataloguing of these differences sits comfortably

with the overall view of the process as the national application of dehistoricized, neutral supranational policies. As for the tone, it mostly comes in two versions: explicitly supportive of the liberalization process and critical of Spain's failure to fully follow through, or a pretense of neutrality which in practice amounts to tacit support through a teleology of the inevitable. Hopelessly synchronic and obsessively formalistic, most accounts of the Spanish liberalization process have abandoned both social process and interest in explanation.

In what follows I take a closer look at Spanish railway history and its constitutive silences and mentions. The importance of this discussion will become fully apparent next to other forms of historical representation. While they represent different mediums for the circulation of ideas about the past, it will later become obvious that what academic history, museum displays and corporate identity share is as important as that which sets them apart. The ideas about the past that they reflect and reproduce add up to a shared understanding of social process. This teleological and often agentless view of history is the broader regime of historical representation into which most discussions about liberalization are anchored.

### **1.3. Explaining the past**

#### **1.3.1. Railway history**

The majority of the works of Spanish railway history oscillate between extensions of economic history and rather narrowly understood transport history. Spanish railway history is a field that consists of works overwhelmingly produced after the 1970s. The history of the works it consists of is indissolubly related to the academic and institutional dynamics of the Transition years. The first major works addressing the history of the Spanish railways were produced in the 1970s. The works of Tortella (1995 [1973]), Nadal (2009 [1975]) and Artola (1978), proposed or responded to a major preoccupation within the economic history of the era, namely the failure of the Spanish industrialization process in the 19th century. Tortella and Nadal carried out their study of the railways as part of broader investigations of the industrialization process. For Tortella, the railways, together with the banking and industrial sector, represented an area of activity that held key answers about the weaknesses of the 19th century Spanish industrialization. Unique at their time, Artola's edited volumes critically engaged the thesis of the railways' role in industrial underdevelopment, providing across two volumes a detailed empirical response meant to qualify Tortella and Nadal's

contributions. The 1980s saw a deeper engagement with railway history, by providing mostly macroeconomic analysis meant to firmly establish the railways' contribution to economic modernization. The work of Gomez Mendoza (1982;1984;1985) is the foremost contribution to the topic.

As Muñoz and Vidal Olivares (2001) notice, by the end of the 1980s a significant number of regional and sectorial studies significantly broadened the range of available empirical investigations, a trend that continued throughout the 1990s (see Bel 1993; Cayon Garcia y Muñoz Rubio 1998; Pascual 1988; 1990; Vidal Olivares 1991). The late 1990s saw the publication of what is to date the most important synthesis of Spanish railway history (Comín et al. 1998). 1998 was a turning point in other respects as well, since it was also the year in which the first Spanish Railway History Conference was organized. This event, together with its subsequent editions, was fundamental to bringing together scholars researching the railways, and it has been essential to formulating programmatic directions in the study of the railways. A testament to it is that many topics in the history of Spanish railways remain covered exclusively in the contributions to this series of conferences.

The late 1980s and the 1990s was also the period in which the first works addressing the problem of liberalization of the transport sector were published (Bel 1996; De Rus 1989; Dodgson y Rodriguez Álvarez 1996; Izquiero de Bartolome 1997; Nash y Preston 1996). These works overwhelmingly favoured the liberalization and privatization process, and unanimously opted for a commercial model of the railways that must see the national company firmly established on the foundation of market criteria. If there is one virtue of these works is that they reveal a broader meaning of liberalization as the process of adjusting the railways to competition, within the horizon of privatization, rather than the much narrower works that treat liberalization mostly as synonymous to the EU policies of separating infrastructure and management, and pushing for distinctly narrow, empiricist and ahistorical analysis (an illustration of the latter can be found in Ramos Melero 2000; García Álvarez 2006). This treatment corresponds quite precisely to the limit between works published before and after the first round of opening up the railways to direct competition from private sector providers. The actual distance from the liberalization process seems to have produced for the first group of works a space in which alternatives, however feebly present, were part of this history. As such, the works that address liberalization before the

process began to be formally implemented maintain the type of possibilism that is required by the legitimation of a future process. In the well-established explicit or implicit assumption that liberalization is the only course forward, the political character and the historical option for this model of railway development is more readily available than in the retrospective projection of liberalization as an agentless and inevitable transformation.

In the 2000s the few works that up until then touched on the social history of the railways (Ferner 1990; Ferner y Fina 1988) were joined by some others that made an explicit concern of going beyond the narrow confines of economic history (Cuéllar Villar et al. 2005; Juez Gonzalo 2000; Muñoz Rubio 2011). Overall, a few characteristics of Spanish railway history clearly stand out. First of all, up until the early 1990s almost no works addressed the history of the railways under their organization as RENFE, the bulk of railway history focused on the 19th and early 20th century history of the railways. Although significant advances have been made in the 1990s and 2000s, railway history is still dominated by works that do not cover the recent history of the railways, and for social history or the study of labour this situation is even more striking. Secondly, to a large extent Spanish railway history is mostly an extension of economic history, as for most of the analysis that extends into the public monopoly years of the railways, they look at RENFE from a rather narrow institutional or company history focus.

The subordination of Spanish railway history to economic history is not a situation unique to Spain. Railway history, as a branch of transport history, has been internationally subordinated to the preoccupations of economic history, prominently so between the 1960s and the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Slow to respond to the critical advances achieved by the study of mobility, the social-constructionist analysis of technology and essential developments in critical science and technology studies, transport history remains, in many respects, a fairly conservative area of research. However, a partially shared predicament does not necessarily mean shared circumstances or origins, which is why in what follows I look at the specific circumstances in which Spanish railway history has developed.

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<sup>8</sup>For an introduction and overview of the relationship between railway history and the history of technology, as well as the institutional developments that have marked their institutionalization, see Armstrong (1998), Divall (2010), Gourvish (1993), Mom (2003), Pirie (2014), Simmons and Robbins (1998).

Understanding the silences and mentions of Spanish railway history requires paying attention to the institutional context in which it evolved. The development of Spanish railway studies is today fundamentally linked to Spanish Railways Foundation (*Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles*—FFE). Established in 1985 as a public institution, its board includes representatives of the main public companies in the Spanish railway sector. Its mission includes “the conservation of the historic and cultural heritage of the railways, the encouragement and promotion of knowledge about and usage of the railways by society; the diffusion of railway news through periodic publications and other media; and the diffusion of cultural aspects connected to the railways.” (FFE n.d.). With this end, it maintains and coordinates the activity of two railway museums, in Madrid and Vilanova y la Geltrú (Cataluña), as well as the Railway Historical Archive, the Documentation Center, the Railway Library and the Railway Training Program (*Aula de Formación Ferroviaria*). The programs run within its aegis include the Railway History Program (which has resulted in a broad range of academic publications), its own railway research and studies program, a postgraduate program on terrestrial transport, the publishing of *Vía Libre* and cultural programs such as the annual photography contest “Camino de Hierro” and the poetry and short story railway awards “Antonio Machado”.

The contemporary state of Spanish railway history is indivisibly linked to FFE’s railway history program, which, during the last two decades has been the main catalyst of new academic work. The history of this program and the institutional setting in which it developed speaks saliently to the complicated interplay between railway history, the institutionalization of economics as a discipline in the 1980s and the internal dynamics of academic networks. Miguel Muñoz Rubio, director of the railway archive and library between 1998 and 2010, and of the railway museum between 2010 and 2012, accepted his nomination as part of a broader plan of reorganizing the archive and the library in line with the objective of facilitating public access<sup>9</sup>. A railway historian who started his career with a

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<sup>9</sup>As far as this objective is concerned, his work, together with that of the other employees of the archive and the library, have no doubt brought about a radical change in the ease of access to available documents. The cooperative, accommodating and cordial atmosphere created by the staff of the railway archive, together with their continuous work of classification and organization of archival material, is an instantiation of the democratic ethos that pervades the work and intentions of the researchers and staff of the archives. This is no doubt a very important contribution to facilitating the expansion of research about the railways, the consequences of which are unfolding. As I will discuss, the limits of this public character are structural and

doctoral thesis on the company history of Renfe, which resulted in an important published monography of Renfe (1995), he assumed this position in a year of seminal importance for contemporary railway history.

1998 marked the 150th anniversary of the Barcelona –Mataro line, a date which came to symbolically mark the beginning of the railways in Spain. It was with this occasion that the two volume comprehensive history of the Spanish railways was published (Comín et al. 1998). As previously observed, 1998 was also the year in which the First Railway History Conference took place. Initially planned as a one-time event, its success led the organizers to converting it into a periodic event that was aimed at bringing together the majority of academics engaging with the study of the Spanish railways. Organized between 1998 and 2012, the six editions of the Railway History Conference served as an agenda setting event. The meetings did not only provide an opportunity for national and international exchanges, but served as an opportunity for diagnosing the state of railway history and railway studies. It was within the context of the conferences that the topic of the social history of the railways gained some prominence, initially by way of a radiography which concluded its virtual absence in the landscape of Spanish railway historiography.

The study of the railways was from its early years subordinated to the discipline of economics. The institutionalization of economics in university departments and investigation areas in the 1980s included a preoccupation for the history of the railways, to a large degree attributable to the influence of the seminal 1970s debate between economists regarding the role of the national railways in the Spanish industrialization process. Most of the work devoted to the railways in the 1980s and the early 1990s was a continuation of, or a response to the thesis that the development of the railways had stalled the advance of Spanish industrialization. The effective result of this was that Spanish railway historiography came to be dominated by economic and company history, to the detriment of other topics. “The star topic” of Spanish railway studies, in the words of Miguel Muñoz remains, to this day, the contribution of the railways to national economic development throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. The social history of the railways remained in the

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institutional rather than contextual. Not a totally unexpected development, since as Miguel Muñoz himself reminded me, the archive “ultimately remains a company archive”.

shadow of these dominant concerns, and one of the early concerns of the researchers that came together in the First Railway Conference was to encourage and strengthen research in previously neglected areas.

“We (i.e. economic railway historians) used to do company history, but for us workers did not exist”, the director of the railway archives and library tells me. He goes on to add that this was, and keeps being, an unacceptable lack. One of the responses to this was precisely the attention devoted to the topic within the Railway Conferences. An immediate result of this was the publishing of the volume *Represion obrera y lucha sindical* (2011), characterized by its editor as a unique book. The book is one of the few attempts to bring together, through the collaboration of international scholars, a broad perspective on the repression of workers and labour struggle across various national railway companies. The broad scope of the book results in a rather artificial unity, but that which immediately stands out is that its broad historical view essentially stops in the 1970s. None of the articles in the book deals with labour questions after the 1970s, in Spain or elsewhere. The other titles that belong to the narrow area of social history of the Spanish railways mostly share this feature. With very few exceptions, contemporaneous labour issues in the railways remain unstudied, to the point they are almost unmentioned.

The commendable, if incipient and fragile attention that the topic has received starting with the late 1990s finds itself threatened again. The impulse behind the recent attention is to a great extent the contextual result of an unanticipated development within the FFE. According to the now former director of the archive, conducting original research was never one of the priorities of the Foundation, as reflected in the fact that the financial resources it has depended on have always been secured as extra-budgetary funds. Conversations with historians collaborating through the Historical Research program of the Foundation make it clear that much of what has been done reflects the efforts of a handful of researchers and their temporary success in working with the institutional resources of FFE as much as the margins of it. At the time of its establishment, in the mid-1980s, FFE, I was told, was a deeply innovative institution, and the type of solution it represented for the conservation of railway patrimony and heritage was in many ways unique. Born under the auspices of a few historians' interest in the railways, it was also a product of broader structural conditions. The 1980s interest in railway heritage and conservation was

happening at a time of massive closure of lines and profound reorganization of the railways. The immediate threat to the existence of the railways reverberated, quite rapidly, in an interest in conservation and heritage work. For more than two decades, these transformations gave way to an institutional setting in which railway history could become conversant with its own blind spots and structural silences.

Today, however, in a corresponding era of radical reorganization, this type of history finds itself threatened by the vulnerability of the same institutional setting that has made its development possible to begin with. If the division of the state railway company into Renfe and Adif did not have major repercussions in the research activity, albeit it generated practical problems in terms of everyday functioning, the subsequent divisions and the budgetary cuts are expected to end the independent research agenda that has operated through the mediation of FFE. And with it stand threatened the incipient attempts at uncovering the “black history of repression”. A history which characterizes railway companies as institutions devoted to specific models of exploiting labour, and which, according to one of the foremost practitioners of Spanish railway history, has been silenced by a historiographical tradition that has, for a long while, reproduced an idealized image of the company.

### **1.3.2. FFE – the archive, different from the museum?**

“The museum is another line of work, it is completely distinct”, the director of the archive tells me as we move on in our conversation about his academic work. Yet, a walk through the museum does not feel so fundamentally different from one through the landscape of Spanish railway history. The Madrid Railway Museum perhaps best captures the objectives of FFE. Opened to the public in 1984, it was the response to an anxiety born in the midst of a period of reorganization. An era dominated by the images of a futureless railway, when the imminent line closures found a correspondent in memorializing fervor.

The museum is located in the old railway station of Delicias, dating back to 1880, and closed down in 1971. The potential visitor can approach the museum through its website, where the English speaking visitor is briefly introduced to the exhibits and their history:

The Madrid Railway Museum opened its doors to the public in 1984. It is located in the former station of ‘Delicias’, one of the finest and most representative examples of Spanish industrial architecture, inaugurated in 1880. The museum contains a selection of vehicles and other railway-related exhibits which aims to show the historical evolution of this mode of transport. Its

fundamental purposes are to convey the reality of the railway, both past and present, promote an appreciation and understanding of rail transport, encourage railway-related research and enhance the railway heritage, all in the spirit of public service. The recent opening of the Railway History Archive and the Railway Library Consultation Room, as well as the conservation and constant expansion of the Photographic Library, have greatly contributed to the achievement of these objectives.[1]

The Spanish speaking visitor is told a bit more about what to expect in terms of the structure of the exhibition:

The visit to the Madrid Railway Museum allows for familiarization with an impressively complete collection of historical railway equipment. The central nave of the station hosts a highly diverse exhibition of locomotives and passenger coaches, through which the evolution of rail traction throughout more than a century and a half of the existence of the Spanish railways can be known (steam, electric and diesel), as well as the conditions in which the passengers of these trains traveled. On both sides of the central nave thematic rooms are located, among which one devoted to antique railway station clocks, another one devoted to railway modeling, with moving scale models, and a third one where the main elements of railway infrastructure, that is, the tracks, are explained. On the outside tracks the Algodor signal box and its signal bridge can be found, a unique element of our industrial heritage that started to function in 1932, and which, when in operation, allowed for the remote control of the switch junctions and signals.

If moved to take the step from potential to actual visitor, the person curious to learn more about the past of the railways can step through the gates of the old railway station and purchase a six euro ticket that will give them unlimited access to the collection for the rest of the day. The visitor will have here fairly unencumbered access to the extensive collection of objects that the museums takes pride in. Not unlike in most other transport and railway museums, the visitor will experience her visit from a position that loosely replicates the experience of the passenger. The limits of the freedom of movement of the visitor are well approximated by those of a featureless railway traveler. She can freely move between the passenger coaches restored to original condition and will perhaps enjoy the luxury of a the fully restored dining car that doubles as an occasional venue for events organized by the museum, such as the TST discussion series<sup>10</sup> which I would occasionally attend. Daily visits to the archives that the same building hosts will frequently ensure crossing paths with groups of children as young as five or six or small filming crews trying to capture the authentic feel of turn of the century travel as a young woman hidden in a suspicious number of layers of white lace is waving from the steps of a luxury coach.

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<sup>10</sup> *Transportes, Servicios y Telecomunicaciones*, transport history journal published by the Iberian Railway History Association.

There is little explicit directing of the visitor, but the actual structure of the collection provides a sequence of historical progression from steam to electric trains that is intuitively decoded. Having enjoyed both peeking inside the cabin of a steam locomotive and resting for some minutes in a Talgo coach, an instantiation of patriotic pride on display, the visitor can direct herself to one of the thematic rooms found to the left and the right of the four tracks on which the most prominent items of the collection rest. Here, in addition to the collection of rolling stock exhibited in the main hall, the visitor is provided the opportunity to learn more across four thematic rooms. One of them is dedicated to infrastructure and another one aims to provide the visitor with more knowledge about the *Talgo*. A room devoted exclusively to station clocks introduces the visitor to one of the more modest technologies of the railways, and another one is meant to familiarize her with the miniature world of railway modeling. While many of the objects on display, most of them carefully restored to their initial condition, are joined by little more than identifying labels, the infrastructure room is more heavy on description and accompanying audiovisual material. As one enters the infrastructure room, she can read:

You are invited to a journey in which to get familiar with a fundamental aspect of the railways, the railway infrastructure. The tracks on which the trains move, the communication and safety systems that organize circulation, electric installations, bridging systems, the construction of tunnels, route projects and the evolution of all of them throughout history. And, of course, its protagonists, the workers who build, maintain and guard the railway routes.

The visitor excited at the prospect of entering the world of the infrastructure railway workers is up for a rather brief encounter. There appears to be little to learn about railway workers beyond the fact that around 5000 of them are distributed along the 15.000 km of railway lines that ADIF is in charge of. A diorama allows the visitor to familiarize herself with different elements of the track. Here, the visitor can get familiar with eight different elements of the line. Individual elements are illuminated at the push of a button, as the visitor learns to differentiate between X and Y. Next to them, workers both anonymous and generic become appendices to the railway technology. Having perhaps hoped to learn something about railway maintenance workers, the visitors comes across a very basic description of “maintenance work”. The true protagonist of the infrastructure room remains railway technology. In the thematic rooms of the museum one of the most internally complex occupational schemes seems to be mostly remembered in the depictions of shadows on the

walls. The black contours of protection helmets of shadows on the walls stand out as the most striking depiction of the absent *ferroviarios*.

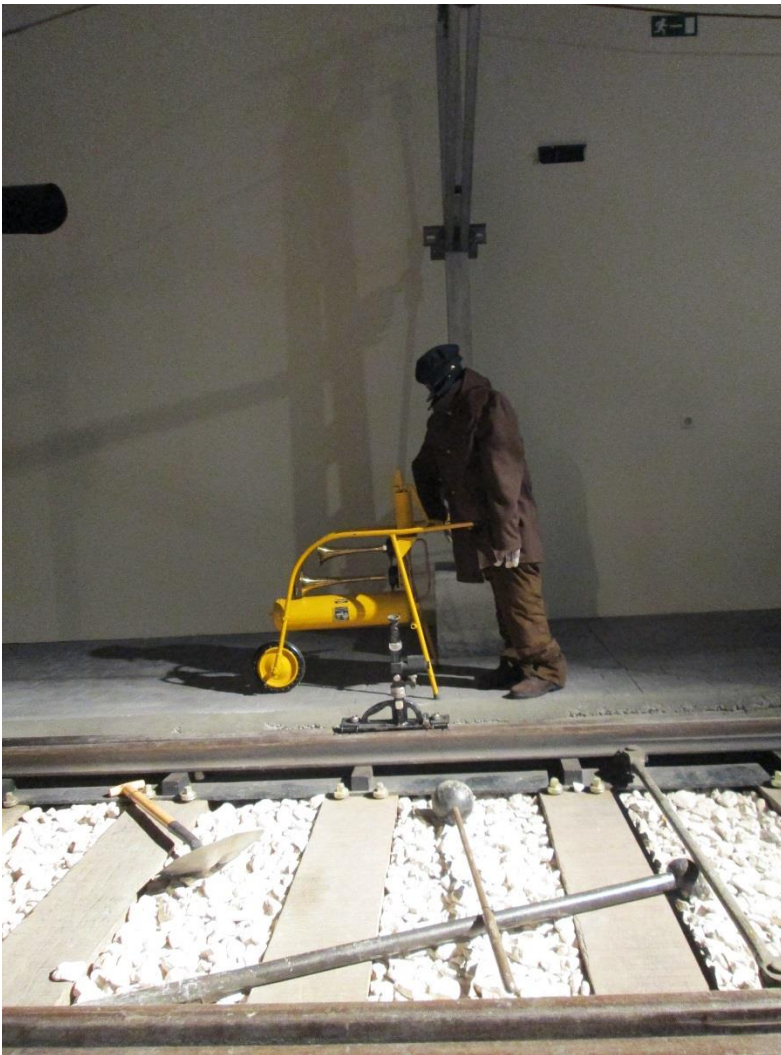


**Depictions of workers on the walls of the infrastructure room of the Madrid Railway Museum (photo by author)**

The present of the railways also gains prominence in a promotional video that glorifies the contemporary achievements of HSR. Upon departure, the visitor exists the museum the same way she walked in, not before passing by the glass cases which display the publications of the Railway Foundation which can be purchased at the same place where the ticket was earlier handed out through the window of a reconstructed wooden cabin. More likely to be picked up by those heading the same way towards the library or the archive, the visitor might still spend a bit of time checking out the books on sale, which might include a 50% discount

on the 60 euro worth two volume history of the railways. Perhaps she will pick up the catalogue of the 1998 photo exhibition “Express to the future” (FFE 1998) or the bargain *The railways and Madrid: the history of a progress* (Matilla Quiza et al. 2002), an edited volume on 80% discount. The visitor less interested in picking up the history of the railways where the museum leaves it at might exit after having purchased a tote bag or a cute painted tin engine, not unlike those to be found in a Budapest Christmas market. And it is more than likely that most visitors will also stop to admire the fine details of the miniature models that will be quickly classified as “toys for grownups”. At prices that rarely drop under a 100 euro, these toys are likely to never make it to the homes of most children awe struck by the perfection of their design. They will however feature prominently, together with many other items, at the

monthly railway modeling fair hosted on the premises of the museum.



**Diorama in the Madrid Railway Museum (photo by author)**

The Madrid Railway museum is, in its choice of depicting the past, typical rather than outstanding among transport and railway museums. As Divall and Scott convincingly show, transport museums had fallen behind the renovations that became reflected in museum practices and curatorial choices following the 1980s wave of critical museology (Divall and Scott 2001). This can be attributed partly to the specificities of the field of expertise that these museums are embedded in, but one should not forget about the financial constraints that

railway museums most often face. In addition to this any tentative discussion of the circumstances that explain the predicament of many transport museums must take into account the specific difficulties that arise from dealing with industrial artifacts.

However, the situation that the visitor encounters is still that of a hegemony of formalist exhibitions. In this sense, the Madrid Railway museum is an instantiation of what Divall and Scott (2001) refer to as “whiggish histories”. The ideas about the past that dominate this type of exhibition are essentially a take on a narrative of progress. If in the Madrid Railway museum natural harmony between the railways and the countryside does not feature prominently, unlike in its British variants, the past depicted here is a quintessentially harmonious industrial past. The railway heritage has been cleansed of all

traces of conflict and antagonism. With social context almost entirely absent, the Madrid railway museum contributes to and reproduces a vision of the past, present and the future of the railways in which technological and social progress are unquestionably related. The over 4800 artifacts that are meant to tell the history of the railways do so by explicitly promoting or implicitly suggesting an apolitical narrative of technological progress. The seeming apoliticism of the exhibition is interrupted only for the occasional display of national achievements of railway engineering. The exhibition is also a straightforward illustration of what the authors of *Making histories in transport museums* refer to as the “black-boxing of technological things” (Divall and Scott 2001:119). Although technology is the protagonist of the museum, its inner historical workings remain completely impenetrable. While social change appears as little more than a reflection of technological progress, the history of technological change and the social coordinates of the technologies on display remain fully opaque. Presented in isolation, technology on display tells the story of achievements through a history devoid of choice, the story of work without workers and the history of industrialism without conflict.

### 1.3.3. Altogether different?

From sufficient distance, Spanish railway history and the Madrid Railway Museum appear as more than neighbours in the representation of the past. Taken together, written and displayed railway history are revealed as reproducing similar silences. For Spanish railway history, with its origins in economic history, the recent past has only very recently become an object of research. Between the macroeconomic focus on 19th century industrialization and the functional adaptations of the 20th century national company, academic history has barely begun to take interest in the “protagonists” of the railways, the workers. The pioneering works of social history that today exist still primarily address labour questions in the pre-Renfe history of the railways. The foraging into social history has overall happened without a fundamental renovation of the methodological instruments that mark the older studies. The dominant positivism and almost obsessive empiricism of railway studies survives in much of the existing social history of the railways, the advances of which have mostly followed through taking up previously uncovered topics within a largely unquestioned and broadly shared theoretical and methodological orientation. The extension

in this sense has been continuous with the dominant interpretive paradigms and has been cumulative and quantitative in the strictest sense. Broader questions about social process and social change, about the type of historical tropes that academic history reproduces have been almost absent.

Recent works in Spanish railway history incessantly repeat words such as *intermodality*, and constantly emphasize the paradigmatic change in the transition from the railway monopoly as the hegemonic mode of transport to its competitive integration alongside other forms of transport. The dominant representations construct the 1980s as the moment of rebirth of a railway previously threatened by extinction, as it lost its competitive advantage in relation to highway and air transport. Yet, the story railway history mostly tells is one of inevitability. *Intermodality* appears, just like in the visions of its policy advocates, as a necessary outcome to a given situation. The predicament of the railways in the 1970s and 1980s is, for academic history, given, neither constructed, nor produced. The hegemony of the car is something railway history faces with the dispassion of facing an eternal fact of nature. Social process appears trapped into two variants and possibilities. The ascendant slope, or the progressive trend that overlaps with the efforts of commercialization, and its dark underbelly, the pre-1980s increasingly marginal railway, with its history of decline and its imminent descent towards extinction. This, overall, is a history absent of choices and alternatives. The foundational turn in the history of Renfe is encapsulated by the embracing of unyielding modernization somewhere in the 1980s, but this, in turn, appears as the only possible course. A choice that is rooted in the seeming absence of alternatives.

Similarly, the dominant historical logic that integrates the artifacts on display in the railway museum is that of progress and inevitability. Devoid of choices, failed plans, cast out alternatives, the history on display here is a history that tells the story of seamless technological development. Except for the workers standing at the top of the internal company hierarchy (such as the head of the railway station), seen as *representatives* of the company in relation to the public, workers are absent to the point of being reduced to contours and nameless figures recognizable not by their craft or attributions, but by the objects they have become appendages to. History here has become independent of workers, and it appears to be steadily conquering emancipation from work as well.

Taking up the concept of the “usable past”, Colin Divall has insisted in much of his work on the importance of analyzing and understanding the ways in which “nonacademic audiences perceive and understand the technological past” (Divall 2010:940). Captured under the heading of “techno-tales”, these narratives about the past become, in his reading, essential to historians’ work in demystifying historical process. These stories, stories that people employ in the defense or explanation of mobility choices, must become, in his reading, central to critical histories of technology and the efforts at producing a public history of technology. Divall also makes the important claim that the public history of technology should not be treated as applied scholarship, but rather it should be treated as another form of historiography. Interestingly enough, however, he does not appear to let these two related, but distinct arguments, form a unitary conversation. In his use of the concept of the “usable past” as well as his embracing of the concept of “techno-tales”, historiography and the public’s ideas seem to remain two qualitatively distinct realms. The relationship between historiography and these techno-tales appears to be that of the interaction between producers and consumers of history. Divall’s arguments are powerful and illuminating, and they represent an important step further in producing a critical historiography of technology. Equally, his stress on the importance of understanding the ways in which ideas about the past circulate in certain determined contexts or are engaged by certain audiences opens important avenues for researching the constituting effect of narratives about the past.

Yet, in this employment of the notion of the “usable past” there is also a limitation that arises from the implicit privileging of academic history as the legitimate domain of authoritative representations of the past. Implicit even in the wording of “techno-tales”, this is a view that seems to suggest that the ideas about the past of the public are by nature secondary to critical historiography, that the claims to truth they hold are by definition subordinated to the true site of the production of history, namely scholarly work. Distinctly from this, the focus on the production of history is one that argues not simply for heightened awareness to narratives about the past, but argues for broadening our understanding of the contexts in which history is produced. My argument is that privileging academic history over other forms of history restricts our possibilities for understanding the struggles over imposing dominant readings of the past. It does not take seriously enough the power of nonacademic actors to formulate readings of the technological past, and it obscures as much

as it illuminates in the question of how ideas about the past get produced in the first place. Of course, critical historiography, as distinct from other contexts for the production and circulation of ideas about the past, might be often better equipped to challenge certain historical readings. Even when this is the case, this tells us little about its influence or the pervasiveness of certain understandings of social process. But more generally it also amounts to a certain overconfidence in historical scholarship's autonomy. It is only when viewed alongside other forms of historical practice that the silences and mentions of railway history can regain their own historical character.

When placed in the same field of historical production, academic history and the historical logic of industrial heritage are revealed to be supported by similar explanatory devices. Their central tropes are modernization and its corollary, decline, technological progress and company reorganization. This is a history which borrows the established chronology of mainstream historiography (first Francoism, second Francoism, Transition and democracy) but cleanses it of political connotations. To the extent there is room for structural issues, this is only on the terrain of the distant past. It is only when the focus is extended to the 19<sup>th</sup> century that capitalism becomes a relevant analytical category. The recent history of the railways features only marginally in the preoccupations of railway history. To the extent that it is there, its tropes are well established: the 1980s railway revolution marks the passage from the antiquated conventional rail to the commercial railway of the future, the latter spearheaded by the development of HSR. From this agentless history workers have fully disappeared. Their traces are to be found mostly in references to the costs of the reproduction of the labour force and in the occasional reference to the modernization of the human resources programs of the company. If social history is marginal in the overall landscape of railway history, its marginality becomes absolute in relation to the recent past. Just like in the railway museum, within the bulk of the history addressing the recent past of the railways workers feature as mere shadows on the walls.



**Workers depicted in the Madrid Railway Museum (photo by author)**

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## **2. AVE María, or the second coming of rail**

Following the implications of the idea that we should not overstate the division between academic history and other forms of representing the past (Cooper 2000;2013), this chapter seeks to engage dominant historical representation at the company level. Historical arguments, I will try to show, pertain as much to evocations of the past as to representations of the future, and ways of performing the past outside the strict field of academic history are intimately linked to defining and limiting what appear as possible futures. The type of logic that representations of the past at the company level try to impose on the past itself is more than a symptom of a certain balance of powers at a certain moment. The end point of controlling the past is limiting the field of possibilities in the present, and the active search for imposing the logic of the present on past events can lead us towards understanding how alternatives are silenced. This chapter seeks to deepen the argument for extending the analysis of forms of historical consciousness. Consequently, academic history is not treated as a singular type of practice, but as one form of control and access to “the material means to do history” within the broader field of distribution of these resources.

The two dominant –but disputed and resisted –ways of linking the past to the present at the level of the railway company are progress and decline. The stakes in this, the argument is, go beyond legitimizing ways of action in the present. They extend to the active pursuit of excluding alternative models of organizing the railways. But in order to build up this argument the first step is overviewing the main historical arguments that are present at the company level. The options for doing this are of course subject to debate themselves. The pursuit in this chapter is in no ways definitive, nor does it offer conclusive answers about the ways in which different representational strategies speak to each other. Rather, what this chapter aims to establish are the main forms of linking the past to the present that are articulated at what could be schematically called the official company level, primarily in the self-representation of the company.

In order to do this I take a close look at advertising campaigns, official railway magazines and, finally, a selected group of managers' autobiographies. These three different mediums are united by the fact that they put forward representations of the railways from a position that seeks to project a unitary and/or comprehensive image of the railway company. They are also mediums that are either explicitly aimed at representing the railways or ones

through which company members articulate their arguments for being seen as privileged company representatives. They all, it could be said, share a claim to being the voice of the company. And as I will show, these mediums, although they are not typically brought together in this form, do converge in their representation of the past. The weaving together of silences and mentions reveals some specificities in each case. Nonetheless, they all converge towards a broader shared historical logic. Similarly to what I describe in the previous chapter, the dominant organizing principle of the historical discourses that belong to these mediums is revealed to be the logic of progress and modernization. The implicit or explicit other to the railway of the future is also revealed to be twentieth century conventional rail.

### **2.1. The second coming of rail**

A man in the dark is heading towards a train distinguishable in the dimly lit background. We move with him to a cabin where the camera closes in on a speed meter. The train exits the station. The image fades and smoothly transitions to the dreamy appearance of a girl that we are guessing is admiring the landscape. Shots of a boy running through a passenger carriage, a business reunion, and a smartly dressed woman being served a coffee. The train traverses the landscape, as young people sipping on their drinks casually look out the window of the clean, modern looking dining car. We see the image of a new born, a woman absorbed by a delightful phone conversation and the euphoric reunion of young couples on the railway platform. Letters align to form the symbol AVE, as underneath the description “Alta Velocidad Española” needs no qualifiers. The video closes with a simple message spelled out in capital letters “SUBE” (GET ON).<sup>11</sup> 45 seconds of images announcing the arrival of high speed rail to the music of Ave María. The prayer addressed to the Virgin Mary for help is deemed the adequate medium to announce the arrival of the first high-speed rail train. A second coming of rail that appears undisturbed by possible catholic distress in associating AVE (*Alta Velocidad Española* – Spanish High-Speed Rail) and Ave María.

If easily the most messianic among the commercial campaigns of Renfe, the 1992 promotional video for the high-speed rail service is in no way unique in conjuring images of long awaited arrivals and salvation. If one's only instrument for reconstructing the history

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<sup>11</sup>Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czCl3eJ3VqQ>. Last accessed February 29, 2016.

of Renfe would be its traces in advertising campaigns, the first thing one would notice is a radical change of tone in the early 1990s. In contrast to that decade, 1980s advertising was dominated by an easily discernible nostalgic touch. The train was family friendly, it was the medium for traveling for those who collect stories, and those who made it possible were, in turn, a dedicated and polite family. Versions of this were played out in most advertising campaigns of the 1980s, many of them born anachronistic, as Renfe was trying to half hopelessly respond to the widely diffused negative images of the company.

The twenty years following the arrival of high speed rail portray a radically different train and a fundamentally transformed railway company. Dominated by suggestions of rebirth, miracle and a boundless horizon of technological improvement, the last two decades of Spanish railway advertising are devoted, almost exclusively, to high-speed rail. Most railway advertising is dominated by the development star, with the occasional exception of the campaigns devoted to the modernized Cercanías. In the type of selection one can see at work in advertising strategy, PR budgets seem to neatly match investment dynamics. The rebirth of rail through the arrival of high-speed rail effaces any relevant, non-accidental suggestion to conventional rail.

Populated by irremediably upper middle class looking customers, the last two decades of railway advertising are dominated by a fascination with speed, explicit references to the annihilation or conquest of space and the time freed up by the conquest of distance. With images of travel as substitutes for images of the passing of time<sup>12</sup>, the present and future of the railways is essentially depicted as one of constant acceleration. The obsessively repeated image of travel to the future is the most common trope that heralds the arrival of a new era. “Renfe. We are going to the future. Are you coming?” (“*Renfe. Vamos al futuro¿Subes?*”) was one of the main slogans of the 2000s. Even the promotional video announcing the segregation of the company into Renfe and Adif instructed us that “now is the time to dream of tomorrow”<sup>13</sup>. The new railway is one that is respectful of the environment, with constant acceleration easily slipping into a metaphor of constant betterment. The railway of the

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<sup>12</sup>See, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bD-YqdPgHcU>, a promotional depiction of the segregation of the railway company into a service provider and an infrastructure manager.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bD-YqdPgHcU>

present is fundamentally about its recovered future:

We are here, we are here to conquer distance and bring closer the distance of conquest, we are in your memories as well as in your future, these are new times and we are where you are in order to take you where you want to arrive. Renfe: we are going to the future. Are you coming?<sup>14</sup>

The corporate branding of the 1990s and 2000s railway company is dominated by the tropes of modernization and rebirth. In the advertising campaigns that accompanied the rise of high-speed rail we can follow not only the imagination of the future and the present railway company, but also sense that which separates the new railway from the old one. A transition captured in one advertising spot as the transformation of sleeping into dreaming, of looking into discovering, of rush into punctuality, of traveling into living; a transformation that makes the future become the present, a present where the new Renfe is “your train”, as opposed to “the train”.<sup>15</sup> In the commercial rendering of the contemporary railway company(ies), modernization, high-speed and competition have become indissolubly linked. The customer has become the true master of the train, and the echoes of the past are nothing but proof she is living in a new era.



**Snapshot from 1992 AVE advertisement**

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZdRTe9s-ds>. Last accessed February 29, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kk73c1XCDIo&list=PLF6F68F70FA2B44C8&index=26>. Last accessed February 29, 2016.

## 2.2. Vía Libre - “We only talk about the railways and we talk well” (“Solo hablamos de ferrocarril y hablamos bien”)

The main railway magazine in Spain, *Vía Libre* is a publication that goes back to 1964. If today it is described as a technical magazine directed at railway professionals, specialists and railway enthusiasts, its origins are to be found in a company publication primarily aimed at railway workers, a family publication which replaced the previously published *Ferrovianos*. In 1986 its publication was transferred from Renfe to the then recently formed *Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles* (FFE – Spanish Railways Foundation), which also resulted in a stricter technical orientation of the magazine, as the family orientation subsided and the content became more narrowly focused on the railways. Ranked among the top 10 railway magazines worldwide, the current editorial statute describes it as “a magazine committed to the defense of the railway as an advanced medium of transportation”, as well as “the vehicle for the circulation of the principles that drive the activity of its publisher, the Spanish Railways Foundation which, through its statute, adheres to the objective of disseminating the technical, social and cultural importance of this medium of transportation.” We are further informed that, “in this respect, the activity of *Vía Libre* is engaged with the ensemble of professional railway companies, whether of public or private nature. *Vía Libre* is the only medium of communication of its environment that directs itself towards this.”<sup>16</sup>

The publication of the magazine is part of a broader array of activities of the Scientific and Technical Diffusion area of FFE, which include not only the maintenance of a daily updated web page, but also the editing of special issues, a yearbook (*Anuario del Ferrocarril*, a publication offering an overview of the railway sector primarily aimed at researchers), the maintenance of online forums devoted to railway issues, an online railway news portal and the organization of conferences and railway specialists’ meetings. With 23,600 readers in 2013 and a weekly average of 162,364 page visits in the corollary website, *Vía Libre* deserves the title it attributes to itself, that of the leading Spanish railway publication. Essentially

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.vialibre-ffe.com/>.

though, its importance is increased by the role it plays as a source of historical data. Treated as an important primary source by railway historians, *Vía Libre* does much more than voice a certain company view of current developments. For half a century, it has been instrumental in reproducing established historical narratives.

Priding itself on its apolitical stance, the railway magazine has for decades now been described by its editors as a publication that keeps away from political debates. According to the editorial statute, “*Vía Libre* will separate the defense of the railway from the concrete management by responsible politicians” (p.21), which is why “the magazine provides objective information – without support or criticism – about projects, developments, realities, etc. from a professional point of view”, and does not publish “closed-question interviews, managers’ photos and political statements, since the magazine directs its content exclusively to the railways.” (p.21). That the same document that claims, above all, the objectivity of the publication, highlights its efforts at establishing ties with various railway companies and diffusing as well as promoting company specific research interests appears as no contradiction. *Vía Libre*, not unlike other international railway publications, substitutes an increasingly narrowly defined view of the railway sector for proof of coverage that elevates itself above political declarations.

In what follows I build a schematic outline of *Vía Libre*’s engagement with the topic of the railways’ recent past and the primary tensions that mark railway history as reflected in its pages. *Vía Libre* opens two different routes for doing so. First, one could look at the ways in which the publication has explicitly engaged the problem of railway history throughout its existence. Second, as a landmark company publication, *Vía Libre* opens the route for comparing the contemporaneous depictions of events to established historical narratives that cover the same events. In the silences and mentions of the magazine, but also in the distance between the contemporaneous description and contemporary history what we find are important tensions that suggest the stakes in certain forms of linking the past to the present. Such a comparison could be questioned by those who see academic history as fundamentally different from non-academic forms of engaging the history of the railways. Several types of defenses can be easily formulated. First it should be said that *Vía Libre*, which for a long period has been at the center of the activity of FFE, has also been an important resource for railway historians. Another important observation is that while I don’t

extensively discuss here the claims to objectivity and the presumed political neutrality that the editorial collective emphasizes as a distinguishing feature of the magazine, I do not take it for face value. I treat these claims about the apolitical character of the magazine as aligned with an official ideal of technocratic neutrality. Far from placing itself above the politics of the time, *Vía Libre*, and the many faces of its apolitical ambition prove a useful instrument for approximating the official company line.

A reader that spends the time to chronologically go through the monthly issues of the magazine will immediately sense the main direction of the transformation it has suffered throughout the years. The first decade of the magazine was infused with the corporatist spirit of the company. Designed as a magazine aimed at railway employees, its contents included, beyond railway news and history, rubrics devoted to fashion, the raising of children, and recipes for the housewife. Its structure spoke to the railway family, not simply to the railway employee. If we are to credit the many years throughout which women's letters got published in the letters to the editor section, housewives indeed made for an important segment of the readership. Their feedback to the magazine was claimed to inspire changes in its content to reflect their interests. Although in the 1970s this type of content got reduced, traces of it can be found until well into the 1980s. Another clear feature of these early decades is the attention devoted to railway workers. Portrayals of the "railway family" sat side by side with extensive attention devoted to the various railway trades, the leisure interests and passions of the railway worker, or the company organized social and religious activities.

The popular rubric "*Por toda la red*" ("Across the entire network") was a detailed account of retirements, promotions, and employee awards within the company. Loyal to the corporatist spirit, the rubric seamlessly brought together news about blue collar workers, technical personnel and middle management. Today the magazine is a pale reminder of its first decade, with "*Por toda la red*" now closer to a nostalgic curiosity rather than formerly one of the most popular rubrics of the magazine. Altogether, in the contemporary magazine, description of work and workers have been almost entirely replaced by descriptions of companies operating in the railway sector, interviews with upper middle and higher management and supposedly impartial coverage of railway news. Here too, just like in the Madrid Railway Museum, workers' voices figure as little more than echoes, in this case

echoes of the past. In what the official editorial line describes as a “positive approach”, today's magazine often reads as the railway equivalent of a car catalog, where news is dominated by the minute description of the technical details of newly produced or purchased trains. But in the many years of publication that extend between these two endpoints, the shifts in dominant historical representation can be traced.

One of the ways in which the magazine stands out is through its own explicit engagement with railway history. Between special anniversary issues and extensive coverage of both the technical and corporate past of the railways, the magazine has throughout its entire existence devoted time to the pre-Renfe railway. For longer articles a clear preference has always been given to what could contextually be thought of as the distant past, namely a past that can be made to appear disconnected from politics in the present. A distinguishing feature of the magazine is its constant commentary about its own evolution. Every important anniversary, be it the 100th issue or 500th, 30 or 40 years of existence, is usually met with a special issue that reviews the history of the magazine and the transformations it has suffered. In the 1990s the constant commentary on the past of the railway magazine and its portrayal of the contemporaneous situation of the railway became even more explicit, as the rubric “25 years ago/50 years ago...” was born. Under this heading the editors of the magazine select news featured in the pages of the magazine or previous railway publications.

The selection is often presented as a neutral recollection of an objective historical record, but every now and then it will be met by commentary on either the eccentricity of past times and events, or, more often, the magazine's peculiarities in the past. As such, quite frequently, good humored commentary about the “magazine where almost anything could get published” singles out what appear to the editor in the present irrelevant or amusing details previously featured in the magazine. Articles devoted to railway workers and their hobbies, or the featuring of the educational achievements of railway employees' are some examples of the type of content that can get singled out. In the humorous and exoticizing portrayal of the past content of the magazine what we can see at work is a process of presenting as eccentricity what used to be ordinary. That which for decades had been typical content of the magazine, namely a paternalist detailed coverage of company employees' existence and what was deemed as notable events in their lives, now appears as the

humorous attribute of a distant past removed from a professional present of elevated journalistic standards. But in the magazine's othering of its own past, the contemporary reader can be alerted to the changing status of the portrayal of work and workers in the magazine. To the contemporary magazine, from which most depictions of the everyday life of company workers have disappeared, this past portrayal is not only humorous, it is most of the times implicitly laughable. Overall, the selections in the rubric are a good indicator for the dominant tone of historical recollection in the magazine. History of technology, mostly with a strong deterministic overtone, changes in the official company structure and the random curiosity appear as the clear favorites in the topical selection.

Similarly to railway advertising starting with the 1990s, *Vía Libre* is haunted by the tropes of the “railway with a future”. However, in turning attention to the magazine the narrative of the railway of the future reveals its complications. From the early days of the announcement of HSR the magazine was a fundamental instrument for reproducing this trope. However, in the early 1980s, a different history was told with recourse to the same images. The first major plan for the reorganization of the railways elaborated in the post-Francoist years, the *Plan Decenal de Modernización* (PDM), was covered in the pages of the magazine with a sense of unprecedented optimism. It was widely believed that the investment plan elaborated under the UCD government appeared as a vote of confidence for a mode of transport that was given a real chance to recover its historic centrality. In other words, this was the promise of the Transition extended to the railways.

The tone radically changed as the first socialist government of the Transition years withdrew support for the plan. In what can easily be described as an unprecedented episode in the existence of the magazine, direct editorial intervention was made in defense of the railways, in the years during which the most virulent public attack against the company was carried out. This is an episode that I discuss more at length in chapter five and which speaks saliently to the contemporary silences in the dominant historical representations of the recent past of the railways. It did not take long, though, before the magazine resettled into the repetition of the conventional formula for recalling the evolution of the post-Francoist

railways. Already in issue 274 one could read:

The evolution of Spanish railways throughout the last decades has been marked by loss of traffic and a constant degradation of its financial situation that hit rock bottom in 1983, 1984 representing the beginning of a recovery of its general situation. By and large, this negative evolution can be attributed to the old conception of the railways, as the main mode of transport, and the spectacular development of transport by highway, especially during the decade of the 60s. (*Vía Libre* 274:6; my translation)

The article further summons details from the typical factual repertoire of the narrative of decline:

In order to highlight the importance of the process it will be enough to remember that between 1950 and 1980 highways multiplied 30 times the number of passengers they transported and 20 times the volume of goods, at the same time at which railways did not even double their share of passengers and grew an approximate 40% in freight. During the same period transportation by air and coastal shipping grew much more than the railways. (*Vía Libre* 274:6; my translation)

And finally it opposes the trend of decline, successfully tamed through a policy of deficit control, to the railway of the future:

Once the galloping tendency of the operating deficit was brought under control, the long term approach to the modern Spanish railway became necessary. A railway specialized in the type of traffic in which it proves competitive and operating within the economic margins that society disposes of for guaranteeing the public service that the railway performs. [...] The railway of the future must be a competitive mode of transport which carries out its service in a competitive regime alongside the remaining modes operating in the transport system. (*Vía Libre* 274:6; my translation)

From this point onwards the fundamental elements of the narrative of the rebirth of the railways and the conquest of the future start repeating themselves ceaselessly: “historic break”, “qualitative jump”, “change of paradigm” are but a few of the variations in which the beginnings of the “golden age” of the modernized Spanish railways are marked. All, however, state clearly the same temporal sequence: the mid-1980s represent a moment of rupture, preceded by years of the decline of the conventional rail, followed by the rebirth of the modern Spanish railways as the commercial railway of the 21st century. Here we have then, ceaselessly repeated, the fundamental tropes of railway history: the agentless decline of conventional rail and the rebirth of the modern commercial rail, the main incarnation of

which HSR will later become.

### **2.3. The metaphysics of new management**

José Luis Villa, Gonzalo Martín Baranda and Mercè Sala are all historians of the railways. They are historians of the railways as well as former high rank managers in Renfe. They turned to writing railway history at the end of their official careers in the railways, and their rationales for doing so are distinct, if overlapping. José Luis Villa decided to write his memoir as a contribution to the unofficial history of the railways, and anticipates the contribution of his work in its opening pages: “The first conclusion that the reader will reach is that, generally, official history is far from being the real one, because reality tends to be not confessable and facts a combination of chance and necessity” (Villa 2013:26)<sup>17</sup>.

Gonzalo Martín Baranda might have more confidence in the possibilities of official history, but he is no doubt convinced of the necessity of history in the first person:

It is other people who can and must do an objective history of this change in the Spanish railways. I do not see myself as having the capacity to do it, and, moreover, having been so much part of it, I am completely subjective. But these stories and memories, told for the first time here are worth something for making available information and data, and it will be up to others to verify them. (Martín Baranda 2011: 19).

And like a good contemporary historian, he is well aware of the “memory boom”:

Nowadays histories of facts are written on the basis of collective memories, and these are mine, and they include the names of people, which can help to recover those belonging to a generation of railway specialists (técnico) that took part in this feat. Because it was a feat. (Martín Baranda 2011:19)

Finally, for Mercè Sala, writing history is a resource for introducing and formalizing a theoretical apparatus, and relating theoretical concepts to a history of managerial practice. Writing meets the double purpose of illuminating the past and clarifying the use of ideas for

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<sup>17</sup> All following translations from Spanish are my translations, unless otherwise specified.

future practice:

Upon leaving the presidency of Renfe, in June 1996, I set out to write the lived experience of the previous five years. In order to meet this purpose, I had to choose between writing the typical book of memoirs or carrying out a more meticulous study, grounded in a work of rationalizing all the measures applied in the management of the company. In this spirit, I decided to focus on the description and analysis of the ensemble of management and administration system that was applied throughout the period, for which I relied on the collaboration of an ample group of people. [...] (Sala 2000: 13)

Commenting on the relationship between her own writing, theoretical practice more generally and experience, she briefly introduces her own view of the discipline the representative of which she fashions herself as:

As I progressed in my writing, my ideas about how to better communicate my contributions to the field of company management have matured. This is an environment that stands out, among other things, because of its complexity, and in which it is necessary to obtain the best possible combination between the use of theories, practical necessities and the real possibilities for applying these theories within the company. (Sala 2004:13-14)

Reading these memoirs against each other shows how hegemonic representations of the history of the railways are not monolithic, and that authoritative accounts are born from the interplay of officially sanctioned narratives and historical production outside the clear boundaries of official history. The memoir of Mercè Sala allows us to also point to the way in which this type of history can become a resource for academic history. The same cannot be yet said about the other memoirs, given their recent publication. Nonetheless, the close reading of these texts shows how various type of discourses, usually presumed to be autonomous from historical production as such, are important porters of historical representations.

The confrontation of different accounts makes it possible to observe silences and exclusions produced by the dynamic relation between the authors' positions as both actors and subjects, or "voices aware of their vocality" (Trouillot 1995). Confronting these different histories reveals the ways in which systemic silences emerge from the lived history of clashing interests. Together, the importance of these memoirs also resides in the challenge they represent to overdrawn versions of the "pact of silence". The hegemonic signifier of the politics of memory of the Spanish Transition must be reconstructed as a historical object itself. As these accounts reveal, as shorthand for official attitudes towards the past, the "pact

of silence” cannot be assumed to be grounded in a coherent, non-fractured ideological consensus.

Long before the Movement for the Recovery of Historical Memory made its first defining contributions to retrieving lived history, the railway company was the site of a clash of interests expressed as one between Francoists and anti-Francoists. The latter were trying to ground changes in the configuration of scientific and political authority through recourse to the cultural tropes of anti-Francoism. This conflict cannot be understood by projecting backwards an overdetermined vision of the pact of silence. The pact of silence itself, as the political solution to the questioning of official history, must regain its own temporality. As some of the conflicts expressed at the level of the railway company reveal, this was not a consensus that smoothly followed from the Transition years, but an imposition upon the lived history of those. The final part of this chapter substantiates this argument.

### **2.3.1. Introducing the historians**

José Luis Villa and Gonzalo Martín Baranda both worked for over 30 years in the railways. Trained as engineers, they both spent their working lives in the same company, and moved between a variety of positions in the higher echelons of management. Villa tells us, in summary, that in the thirty two years he spent in the company, between 1967 and 1999, he covered “17 positions implying different duties, changed residence five times, got to know thirteen presidents of very different natures, and finally, as one can imagine”, he “had his share of everything” (Villa 2013:25). Mercè Sala had a much shorter stay in Renfe; she arrived and left as the first and only female president of the company, a position which she occupied from 1991 to 1996. Unlike the other two manager-historians, she was, however, occupying the highest position in the company, to which her fellow colleagues could only aspire. Also unlike her male colleagues she was not an engineer, she was an economist with ties to the Catalan socialist party and PSOE, and before being appointed as the president of Renfe she had occupied political positions in the Barcelona city council and had been at the head of the same city’s public transport consortium. She passed away in 2008 at the age of only 65, so she never got to read the memoirs of her colleagues nor comment on the types of

history they were writing. But Villa and Martín Baranda appear to have read her memoir closely, and refer back to her as friend, colleague, and chronicler of the railways. In their own writing she features as both actor and historian.

Villa is the last among them to publish, and as such has had the benefit of being able to also comment on Martín Baranda's own writing. In his work, again, the latter features as both colleague and chronicler. We cannot know from their writing how Martín Baranda feels about his colleague as a chronicler of the railways, but he does comment on his relationship with José Luis at several moments throughout the many years they were both part of the same management structure. Like in a corporate team building exercise, we can allow them to reciprocally introduce themselves. This is how Villa is introduced as a character in his colleague's writing:

José Luis was a man who had always been part of the management of the company. He had been director of personnel and this gave him very important knowledge of the house. He knew all the tricks and dodges that could be done in operations. But since he had always been a boss, he had never done them. He had an army of faithful that supported him since they owed him their position, and they were those who gave him the information, he never had to come up with it himself. (Martín Baranda 2011:90)

Gonzalo Martín Baranda rarely earns himself a more personal form of address in José Luis's writing, perhaps a modest price to pay for having had the opportunity to write first. Absent the suggestion of intimacy that is achieved by repeated address by first name, here is Martín Baranda, featured as both colleague and historian in José Luis's writing:

The already mentioned autobiographical book by Martín Baranda, with a prologue by García Valverde and presented by him and Barrionuevo at the Spanish Railway Foundation, is a document of inestimable worth for knowing the manner in which work and decisions were carried out after the arrival of Julián García Valverde to the presidency. The adventures of court councils, the use of sophistry and devious methods in order to meet their aims, and the adoption of important decisions then and there - usually while drinking some whisky, according to his own observation - classify this book as an updated contribution to the Spanish picaresque, which has such a glorious tradition in our literature.

But the book, far from representing an anomaly, is considered by the reviewer to be an exemplary account of a dynamic that inserted itself not only in the life of the railway company, but in the life of contemporary Spain:

The worst is that this behaviour was not anecdotic, but that, unfortunately, it became habitual with the landing of these characters into decision making positions in the public sphere, where they self-confidently subverted the values of rigor, respect and effort that have been degrading in

time. With the alibi of modernity - Gonzalo always branded everything that he did as “modern” - the “anything goes” (*todo vale*) has slipped into society, and, moreover, I am afraid, it has, without complexes, permanently settled among ourselves. This adjective of such high prestige, *modern*, has been an excuse for carrying out many aberrations in our country. (Villa 2013:202)

As for Mercè Sala, we can learn by reading *Renfe en el diván* that at the time of the author’s stay in Barcelona she was supposedly referred to as “the Catalan Iron Lady” (Villa 2013:278), although José Luis is of the opinion that her and Margaret Thatcher had nothing in common apart from a certain physical resemblance and perhaps a certain decisive and frank personality. My own reading of her memoir and analysis of her presidency is one that brings her, as a socialist appointee, close enough to Thatcher to justify the comparison. In *Renfe en el diván* she emerges as part of a close relationship that at some point reached an obstacle. The ensuing conflicts between José Luis and Mercè do not seem to have prevented him from a balanced review of her own memoir. In his reading, her work as a modernizer and her theoretical analysis is regarded as valuable, but her own estimation of her path breaking role as a modernizer gets challenged. As José Luis Villa convincingly argues, the work of modernization that was carried out under her presidency was being erected on an earlier established foundation.

With the stage set, and José Luis, Gonzalo and Mercè established as characters and unofficial historians, I can confront their different readings and tease out the heuristic implications of this confrontation for the problem of liberalization. In itself, this confrontation is an illustration of the way in which the differences between “that which is said to have happened” and that which happened are itself historical (Trouillot 1995:4). One way to read these memoirs against each other is to identify the points at which the authors converge or differ in the interpretation of the 1980s railway revolution. Since they all seem to agree that such a revolution did take place.

In *El AVE Madrid-Sevilla: Crónica de una aventura*, Gonzalo Martín Baranda’s framing historical narrative is that of progress. The arrival of HSR, the courageous decision to implement a project of such dimensions in Spain, and the leadership of a generation of engineers in this project are at the center of his historical recollection. His is a first-hand account that is aimed at firmly establishing him in the pantheon of innovators who

contributed to making the historical feat possible. The narrative and chronological framing of *Renfe en el diván* is slightly different, since the author tells the history of the railways through the history of his own professional trajectory. The 16 chapters of the book are structured around the major shifts in the author's career. However, just like in *El AVE Madrid-Sevilla* the overarching reading of the past and the historical dynamic that José Luis Villa describes is one of progress. Today's railway is certainly very different from the one he encountered when he entered Renfe in 1967, and between these points lies a trajectory of modernization. The modernization he speaks of, however, is, according to his own observation, different from the type of modernization Gonzalo Martín Baranda and those close to him talked about. Finally, Mercè Sala's *De la jerarquía a la responsabilidad: El caso de Renfe* is both a theoretical treatise and a chronicle of her presidency. Her own reading sets her center stage as more than subject and participant. She portrays herself as a resolute modernizer, and her own historical account would have the reader believe that when she entered the company what she found was a decidedly anachronistic company culture. Her own legacy, made possible by team work which she enabled as all good leadership should, was the decisive transformation of the company culture of the railways. In her own words,

When I arrived to the presidency of Renfe, I found a company that did not know what its business was; in fact, there was a historic belief –that still survives in the minds of enough of its workers – about a possible business in the activity of building tracks and moving trains. (Sala 2000:67)

If chroniclers José Luis Villa and Gonzalo Martín Baranda are constantly busying themselves with reminding the reader that they do not aim to overstate their own contribution to the transformation of Renfe, Mercè Sala is trying to establish herself as a force of transformation. But, moreover, she also tries to work out the kind of ideas that allowed her to become this force of transformation, and it is mostly those that are interesting for the purposes of this thesis. However, as protagonists of the process of transformation of the Spanish railways in the last 40 years, the three authors are brought together and set apart by a more complicated set of relationships. A series of conflicts that have marked the aggressive commercialization process of the railways in the 1980s and the 1990s is beautifully captured in reading these histories against each other. Featuring prominently are

the conflict between specialists and politicians (*técnicos*<sup>18</sup> y *políticos*), conservatives and modernizers, and engineers and economists. The last can be said to be more subdued than the other two, but it remains clearly identifiable, and as I will argue the difference between economists and engineers was important for determining which of the other conflicts would gain prominence.

### 2.3.2. *Técnicos versus políticos*

José Luis Villa rises from his own memoir as the quintessential apolitical engineer, preoccupied with getting things done and always concerned with reality on the ground. The primary ways in which he self-identifies are those of professional and *ferroviario*. And it is in extension and against his identity as professional and *ferroviario* that the world of the railways between the late 1960s and the end of the 1990s gets reconstructed. This world, despite his belief in the necessity of everyone to stand united in defense of the railway company, is a world traversed by many conflicts. Reading through José Luis Villa's memoir is an instrument for recovering an enmity that as I will try to show also expresses itself in other conflicts at the level of the company. The collision between professionals and politicians sometimes takes the form of those from within the company, or "belonging to the house" (*de la casa*) and those from outside, sometimes referred to as those "from the street" (*de la calle*). The professional is frequently designated as an engineer, and so the conflict becomes that between engineers and politicians.

This is a conflict that is clearly illustrated in the pages of *Renfe en el diván*, and which corresponds to differently organized temporal horizons. "The professionals of Renfe, we had a saying, 'they come and go, we remain', so it was the time to wait" (Villa 2013:374), José Luis reminds us following his conflict with Mercè Sala, whom he ends up having a fall out after what initially appeared as a promising start in their relationship. It is the same unity of the professionals of the house that he celebrates when Mercè Sala gets replaced by Miguel

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<sup>18</sup> The translation that I most frequently use for *técnico* is that of specialist. *Técnico* can be translated as technician, specialist or expert. I find that translating it as "specialist" better captures the shifting emphasis on skill, specialization and higher level qualification which is frequently encountered in the usage of the term *técnico* in the railway sector.

Corsini, a professional with a long trajectory in the railway company. This, supposedly, leads them to exclaim, in the first meeting of the upper echelons of railway management after Corsini's appointment as president, "Finally, alone!" (p.395), a feeling described by the author as similar to that of the newly wed. The conflict between professionals and politicians becomes most acute, in the same author's reading, during the long presidency of Julián García Valverde, who, we are to believe, opens war on the *ferroviarios*. One of the numerous proofs of it is, according to Villa, his own overhearing of the president's confession, during a 1987 Christmas celebration, when supposedly the president says, observing the crowd: "Damian, we achieved it, there are barely any *ferroviarios* left" (p.208). For this author the entire history of Renfe is marked by this conflict, and the times during which he is most affected by it are those that coincide with García Valverde's presidency. This is the era during which he confesses to feeling lonely, at barely 45 becoming 'one of the old ones', whereas just shortly before he had been of the young generation; this is also the time when people around him, the new ones (*los nuevos*) start speaking a different, incomprehensible language and when the unity of the professional idiom breaks down (p.203).

Martín Baranda is also an engineer, primarily identifies as one, and speaks as and on behalf of a generation of engineers. His book ends with the following sentence in capital letters: "THIS WAS THE WORK OF A GENERATION OF ENGINEERS." (Martín Baranda 2011:270). From the first pages of the memoir he announces his intention of contributing to recovering and restoring the contribution made by a generation of specialists to the development of the most important railway project of the 20th century, high-speed rail. However, as opposed to Villa's memoir, the identity of the engineer appears as more autonomous from that of the politician. If the former ceaselessly opposes and confronts the professional and the engineer to the politician, Martín Baranda makes the former less dependent on his nemesis, the politician. The following section explains what primarily accounts for this difference.

### **2.3.3. Conservatives versus modernizers**

The appointment of Julián García Valverde as president of Renfe by PSOE is a history

intertwined with some of the most turbulent years of the company. García Valverde assumed the presidency of Renfe after the radical shift in railway policy announced by the first socialist government, expressed in severe cutbacks, the biggest closure of lines in the history of the railways and massive layoffs. The new president would, from the beginning of his mandate, identify his presidency with a need for a change of paradigm in the management of the railways. Testament to this are not only the memories of some of those I have interviewed, but also the media coverage of the era. The announcement of HSR as the railway revolution was joined, at the time, by the constant talk about the need for a paradigm change and the definitive push towards a commercial orientation. Interviews of the era with García Valverde confirm his obsessive preoccupation with “culture change” and the need to firmly situate the railway company on a competitive basis. As will become obvious by the end of the chapter, the question of “company culture” is one that haunted not only the 1980s but also the first half of 1990s, as Mercè Sala’s program of reform became primarily oriented towards transforming company culture.

Villa’s memoir is an insightful testimony of the ways in which the arrival of a new generation of managers with ties to the socialist party translated into a conflict inside the railway company. García Valverde was, importantly, the first president of the company who was not an engineer, but an economist. In his wake followed another one, Mercè Sala. Their two consecutive presidencies add up to 11 years during which the highest positions in the railway company were occupied by economists rather than engineers. The symbolic “Finally, alone!” speaks precisely to the years in which, under socialist government rule, economists without previous ties to the railways and without professional training as engineers were at the head of the railways. But, before being economists, these presidents were, importantly, socialist party delegates.

Transformations in the company structure and internal recomposition of the upper echelons of management following government change was a perennial attribute of Renfe. But following the arrival to power of the first socialist government, this meant the arrival of the first generation of modernizing managers who saw themselves as anti-Francoist

modernizers. Meeting a generational gap and a professional divide, the difference between the newly arrived reformers and the old guard took the form of a conflict between modernizers and conservatives, or progressives and Francoists and/or reactionaries. Villa's account of the period that coincides with García Valverde's presidency is infused with a sense of him feeling targeted as a representative of an anachronistic and reactionary generation. In his words,

Throughout this long cohabitation I became aware of what was his ideology (i.e. Julián García Valverde's), which was rooted in a series of prejudices about our company and its managers, namely: Renfe was a francoist bunker; the *ferroviarios* were old-fashioned and inefficient; the managers and professionals unfit, suspicious and *fachas*; the suppliers were leeches; and the unions those which were in command. (p.204)

Images of being under assault and feeling targeted as an outmoded representative of a defunct regime permeate Villa's account of these years. The contradictions of the era are beautifully captured in an anecdote he remembers, which in his reading encapsulates the shallowness and stridency of the new generation of modernizers:

During a summer day's managers' reunion in a Madrid restaurant, the narrator tells us, a discussion began about a shield with an eagle on one of the walls of an old Madrid train station, Príncipe Pío. This, the narrator goes on, appeared to very much bother some of his fellow diners, who were of the opinion that the Francoist symbol had to be removed. The narrator's belief, of the contrary, was that "Spain had to overcome these retrospective glances and confront the future which held many things that had to be done" (Villa 2013:218). The night ends with one of the louder and drunker members of the company declaring he will take the matter into his own hands. A few days later, the narrator opens the paper to a story about the destruction of the Habsburg imperial eagle shield in the Príncipe Pío Station. This turns out to be the work of three of his fellow managers who showed up in the middle of the night to remove what they mistakenly assumed to be a Francoist symbol. Upon presentation of their bigwig id cards to the head of the station, who they asked to supply a hammer and a ladder, they personally removed what they mistakenly assumed to be a symbol of the Francoist dictatorship. The three of them managed to avoid prosecution

for the destruction of public property.

Martín Baranda's biography reveals not only the salience of the conflict between the "old guard" and the "young modernizers", but the way in which the significance or the willingness to identify as the latter is dependent on the shifting meaning of the professional identification. As such, Martín Baranda sometimes identifies as an engineer in opposition to the young reformers seen as economists. The professional solidarity eclipses at certain times the shared ties to the socialist party, as economic knowledge became increasingly perceived as a broader threat to the authority of engineers. But mostly he writes in a way that allows him to easily shift between the voice of the socialist reformer and that of the modernizing engineer. Through his writing he emerges as both committed party militant and an engineer fully devoted to the cause of modernization through the development of the AVE. As a matter of fact, he believes the embracing of the AVE project as a government priority is also due to his own militancy (p.47). He also appears as someone fully identified with an ethos of rupture, both through his ideological affiliation and his unrelenting support for the AVE. However, as a good historian, he is fully aware of the contradictions and dangers of projecting backwards contemporary criteria. The transformations affecting the internal organization of the railways can only be judged by restoring them to their context:

I believe it is not possible to judge with contemporary criteria that era, the people were neither more, nor less worthy than today. At that time the cycle of 40 years of Francoism was closing, and a new group, a group of people with other habits, friendships and relations were going to take power. The old acquaintances were not of use anymore, the old customs either, and there was fear and uncertainty. Being 40 or 60 years old meant having lived in a different world throughout your entire professional life and what would happen was unknown. It stands to reason that people would be worried and that this would transfer to the relationship with those who were going to be in command. (Martín Baranda p. 59)

#### **2.3.4. Engineers versus economists**

Reading against each other the memoirs of the three railway managers reveals the traces of a conflict that strongly marked the railway company beginning with the 1980s. Sala, on the one hand, and Martín Baranda and Villa on the other, stand separated by their professional affiliation. Villa's memoir is a record of the enmity between those arriving to the higher echelons of the railway company from outside of it, but importantly the outsider/insider distinction was one that overlapped with the professional divide between

economists and engineers. In the aggressive reforms carried out during García Valverde's presidency, Villa, the professional engineer with a lifelong trajectory in the railways, reads a full blown attack on the *ferroviario*, aimed at eliminating him.

Sala's autobiographic treatise reveals the same conflict, but couched in the language of new management and the attempts to convert the railway company into one of service provision. To the transition from an administration dominated by engineers and their technical knowledge, she opposes the project of firmly grounding the railway of the twenty first century in the science of new economic management. This would mean not only a willingness to realign the company in line with commercial criteria modeled on the image of the private enterprise, but also embracing a new philosophy of human resources that would eliminate the corporatist spirit of the Francoist administration. Her memoir saliently captures the affinity between the cultural tropes of anti-Francoism and the language of new management, both aimed at waging war on the cultural terrain and erasing the traces of the past. The "Francoist company culture" and the reorganization of the company through the dictums of the science of management are, in this respect, two sides of the same coin. They both represent the displacement of conflict from the economic realm to the cultural one. But, importantly, they were not simply a means of concealing conflict, the shared culturalist explanations of anti-Francoism and new management were both prescriptive and performative. The mushrooming of human resources programs, employee trainings and new management seminars in the first half of the 1990s were all instruments of firmly putting into place the neoliberal corporatism that would come to dominate the company in the 1990s and 2000s and that directly constructed itself in opposition to Francoist corporatism.

The contradictions of the relationship between the authority of engineers and that of economists are further revealed when Martín Baranda's account is brought into the discussion. As seen, his memoir is evocative of the interplay between his vocation as engineer and socialist militant<sup>19</sup>, but the contradictions are not exhausted in following the interplay between these two affiliations. A passing reference in his memoir alerts to a

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<sup>19</sup> I use the term 'socialist militant' in its emic understanding, that of an active party member of PSOE.

dynamic that is barely covered in his book, but remains essential to understanding the alliances between governmental actors and the economic and engineering professions:

The arrival of Roa as an ideologue to the railways of the socialist government meant the rise of those who could be called the “INECO boys”, the people who had worked with him in this public consultancy firm. They occupied almost all positions of responsibility in the transport councils of the regional governments, and this brought with it a change of mentality. Transport economics criteria were applied; Roa was a head of department of this subject, at the time that a new air was entering the railways. (Baranda 2011:69)

The passing reference to the “INECO boys” also appears in José Luis Villa’s memoir, according to whom, with the arrival to power of PSOE, a group of engineers, with ties to the transport economics department headed by Carlos Roa, as well as socialist party militants, saw their fortunes rise. A few clarifications are necessary for placing the importance of this affiliation. Carlos Roa was a prominent railway manager whose ties to the railways go back to the 1950s. Director of the company between 1962 and 1968, he later put the basis of the transport economics department of the *Escuela de Ingenieros de Caminos* of Madrid, as well as the public consultancy firm INECO. Various referred to as a “Christian humanist” (Villa 2013:214), “ordoliberal” (Roa Marco 1998) and militant of *Acción Católica Nacional de Propagandistas* – ACNP (Fernández Fernández and Vila Álvarez 2011), he came to be an extremely influential figure through his position at both INECO and the *Escuela de Ingenieros*.

Responsible for the training of generations of engineers in the subject of transport economics, his lasting influence was sealed through his heading of the 1983 Commission for the Study of the Railways, commonly designated as the “Roa Commission”. The report issued by the Commission in 1984 became the basis of subsequent planning documents and definitively marked the subjecting of the railway company to market competition criteria, a topic that I will return to in the third section. But important for the argument here is the association of a Francoist era Catholic militant, active participant in the Civil War on the nationalist side, with socialist engineers. The reputation of Roa as a tolerant professor was strengthened in the 1970s by his refusal to sanction anti-Francoist students.

In the official history of the railways he remains a marginal figure, but the unofficial histories of the recent past of the railways capture his lasting influence. This is symbolically captured by the modifications suffered by one of the memoirs discussed here. Villa’s

published memoir devotes only a few paragraphs to the figure of Carlos Roa, but a draft of his book, available online<sup>20</sup>, captures Roa as a powerful symbol of the railways of the Transition era. As opposed to the final published version, the draft opens with a short chapter about Carlos Roa. What prompted the author to eliminate this chapter from the final version (otherwise identical to the draft), remains unresolved at the time of writing this chapter. But a heuristic provocation would be to suggest that it is the very contradiction between the close affiliation of a powerful exponent of the “old regime” with the vocal anti-Francoist socialist militants to the group of which Gonzalo Martín Baranda belongs that prompted the change. This, in the author’s own confession, later silenced in the final version, remains for him an unresolved puzzle.<sup>21</sup> The published memoir sidelines the hesitation, as the mystery of a bewildering association is replaced by an explanation focused on proximate causes. In the final reading, Roa’s popularity and lasting influence with socialist militants was made possible by the ties forged at the university and INECO, as the explanandum becomes the explanation.

Between the silenced incomprehension and the partial explanation focused on proximate causes stands the real and marginalized history of the meeting of a fraction of the Francoist management elite with the socialist transport planners: a meeting consumed on the shared terrain of economic thought and policy. A meeting protected not by a pact of silence, but by a vocal rupture with the past expressed as cultural conflict.

### 2.3.5. Two cultures, one project

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<sup>20</sup> I came across the draft online at <https://www.scribd.com/doc/240875641/Experiencias-de-Un-Ferroviano#scribd> (last accessed February 29, 2016). I hold no information about the origin of the draft, but the document appears to be a credible manuscript of the published book. Other than the changes undergone by the parts on Carlos Roa Rico the document appears to be identical to the published volume.

<sup>21</sup> This is how Villa describes Carlos Roa in the manuscript: “I always found striking Carlos Roa’s multifaceted character, who, having fought in the Civil War on the side of Franco and having contributed afterwards to the establishment of the National Catholic regime, as an active part of the second attribute of this compound word, would end up helping anti-Francoist socialists. Or who, having thought of the private suppliers of RENFE as parasites, would then head a perfectly dispensable one; one that could have been integrated into the activity of RENFE at a lesser cost, under the idea of the *nasciturus*. It also surprised me that his socialist students from the 70s would be so admiring of the teachings of a person whose ideology was that of the outdated paternalist social dirigisme.” (Villa n.d.:19)

The three manager-historians discussed here can all be said to belong to what has been referred to as the “generation of the Transition” (Rodríguez López 2015). The oldest among them, Villa, was born in 1940; Sala in 1943, and Martín Baranda in 1946. Their trajectories recommend them as belonging to the young fraction of the generation of the Transition. This, Rodríguez López argues, is defined by four characteristics, all of which are met by the authors: being the son or daughter of a well-off family; being born in the 1930s or in the first years after the war; entering the university after the mid-1950s and beginning a professional career in the 1960s (Rodríguez López 2015:351). This, for Rodríguez López is the generation that provided the bulk of the cadre of the Spanish Transition and his analysis is confirmed for the railways. If from the standpoint of the “generation of the Transition” the manager-historians appear to share a structural position, internally they are divided by a set of conflicts which define a dynamic field of power. The internal struggles at the managerial level, clearly revealed when reading against each other the autobiographies, speak to the broader disjunctures and continuities that marked the relationship of the late Francoist reformers and the new socialist cadre. Internally, the differences between them were consumed on the terrain of anti-Francoism. For the socialist engineers, politicized in the anti-Francoism of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, their politically unaffiliated colleagues appeared as the expression of the old order. From the standpoint of the socialist militants external to the railway company, both the socialist engineers, and the so-called Francoist engineers were the exponents of an old order captured both by the technical vocation of the engineer and their belonging to the professional caste of the *ferroviario*. In opposition to the engineers, the socialist economists spoke not only the cultural language of anti-Francoism, but also the gospel of the science of new management. From this standpoint the era of the technocratic expertise of the engineer<sup>22</sup> was fading as much as for the socialist engineer the hierarchies of the Francoist railway administration appeared as obsolete.

In spite of these internal differentiations, these different type of actors belonging to the generation of the Transition were united in their ambition and formulas for building the railway of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When José Luis Villa observes that there were effectively two types of modernization, and that the modernity of the railway professional is not the same

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<sup>22</sup> For a recent discussion on the role of engineers in the building of the Francoist state see Camprubi (2014).

as that of the socialist reformer, he is in fact expressing the differences between the reform language of the late Francoism and that of the socialist managerial elite which became the principal actor in charge of ensuring the institutional continuity between the late Francoism and the democratic period. But when he appears puzzled by the association between Carlos Roa, a prominent Francoist manager, and the young socialist engineers, what he is in fact silencing is the degree to which the projects for the railway of the 21<sup>st</sup> century of these two fractions of the managerial elite of the railways coincided. With anti-Francoism reduced to a struggle expressed in cultural terms, the Francoist reformers and the socialist modernizers could easily meet on the terrain of economic planning.

Roa, himself a militant Jesuit educated in the spirit of economic reform and the new economic thought of the *desarrollismo*, was apparently notorious for threatening to call the police on his subordinates and protected students at INECO because of their political activities<sup>23</sup>. His true reputation was gained by never having done so. Instead, what he achieved was to become the architect of one of the most influential planning documents of the 1980s, which effectively set the basis and the philosophy upon which the socialist reformers carried out the “commercial revolution” of the railways, a history which I look at more closely in section three.

When zoomed in, the conflicts that express themselves in the railway company in the 1980s reveal a terrain upon which the language of anti-Francoism was still instrumental in the power struggles internal to the managerial elite of the railways. When we zoom out, however, the same process reveals the extent to which these different fractions of the managerial establishment of the Transition and the first years of the democratic period relied and continue to rely on a similar type of historical vision. The question that traverses the works analyzed here is not what happened in the 1980s, but who was the true architect of the railway revolution of the 1980s. In the battle over writing themselves into history, the

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<sup>23</sup>Here is how a former employee at INECO recalls this: “There was a moment, in the 70s, when INECO was a nest of commies (*nido de rojos*)- Maria Antonia Hernandez adds- but don Carlos was very tolerant and he used to say that you must have friends even in hell. But then all those commies (*todo aquel rojerio*) were his favorite boys. When they had assemblies he used to threaten them that he would call the police, but he never did, of course.” (INECO 1996:33)

manager-historians reveal the internal struggles at the managerial level, to which most of official railway history remains blind. In their concession that the 1980s were a time of revolution, they build, reproduce and contribute to a history from which the workers have disappeared as a subject. Their occasional guest appearance is always a reason for concern. For the architects of the modern commercial railway, regardless of political affiliation, the model to be emulated is that of the private enterprise. In this the workers can at best feature under the heading of “human resources”. This is a history fully consistent with the vision of what I refer to in section three as the “revolution without alternatives.”

#### **2.4. Back to the future**

“We are going to the future. Are you coming?”, the advertising slogan that looms large over a decade of railway publicity, could as well be the title of a collective biography of the managerial elite of RENFE in the last decades of the 20th century. Between the sense of the past that comes across in the commercial self-fashioning of the railway company and the historical repertoire of its managers, the ramifications of the discourses of progress and modernization can be traced. In the pages of *Vía Libre* the reader can follow the decades’ long progression from the spirit of Francoist corporatism to the contemporary claims of professionalism clad in the language of apolitical reporting and the metaphors of technological prowess. With the last traces of the corporate spirit of the magazine seem to have disappeared most of the images of workers and work. The railway of the future, embraced and heralded by the leading publication of the sector, is a railway of managers, entrepreneurialism and innovation. This is also the railway of the manager-historians introduced in this chapter. In continuity with the images of rebirth and revolution, the dispute between the manager-historians does not occur over questions of what has changed, but rather over who is responsible for the change. The unofficial history of the contemporary railway converges with official history in as much as its actors and agents are always engineers, professionals, specialists, experts, managers. The shadows on the walls of official history are muffled voices in the unofficial history of the railways. But between the dissonant voices of unofficial history the freshness of the railway of the future begins to fade. The railway of the future, the project ardently embraced by the socialist managers and bitterly

defended with the language of cultural anti-Francoism, appears as firmly rooted in the economic modernity of a fraction of the Francoist managerial elite.

## PART II: The Remembered Past

The efforts to liberalize the railway sector, corresponding to a particular articulation of the vision of the commercial railways, have been, ever since the 1980s, joined by the attempts to reduce labour costs. This is, broadly speaking, an unexceptional situation for both the Spanish context and the broader transformations affecting public sector companies in Western Europe starting with the second half of the 1970s. The heightened concern for labour costs in the 1980s Spanish railway company is inseparable from the increasing preoccupation with the control of public deficits and the maximization of the efficiency of the public sector. Otherwise put, the liberalization process and the transformations in labour relations are two sides of the same coin, the increasing commercial orientation of the railways starting with the early 1980s. It is not surprising that the pressure for the rationalization of expenses and greater fiscal responsibility made itself felt primarily in relation to the control of the workforce. In the early 1980s, approximately 60% of the operating costs of the railway company were so-called labour expenses (Ferner 1990:98).

For decades the largest company in Spain, Renfe, at its height, employed almost 140,000 workers<sup>24</sup>. The first massive reduction of the workforce occurred in relation to the *Plan Decenal de Modernización* (PDM), between 1964-1973. Throughout the next decade the workforce remained stable. It is after 1982 that the second massive wave of workforce reduction began. 1982 actually marks the last year in which the total number of workers increased.<sup>25</sup> The following two decades saw the reduction of the total number of employees by close to 60%, as in the year 2000 the workforce of Renfe reached approximately 34,000. This last figure is comparable to the total number of people employed by today's divided public railway companies.

The favored explanation for the reduction of the workforce, at the company level, is always a vision of increased productivity through technological progress. And while no doubt technological transformations are an important part of this story<sup>26</sup>, this is an explanation that only scratches the surface of things. The reduction of the workforce cannot

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<sup>24</sup> For details on the evolution of the workforce see Muñoz Rubio 1995; Comín et al. 1998; Ferner 1990.

<sup>25</sup> See Ferner and Fina 1988; Ferner 1990.

<sup>26</sup> For a broader discussion about the role of technological transformation in the reduction of the workforce see Folguera et al. 2005.

be explained absent the story of subcontracting. Although official figures are missing, the unions estimates of the size of the sector brings it in the range of 100,000 workers. An increasing share of this work is becoming invisible. Or, as the striking workers from Nertus put it, “We are the AVE and nobody knows it!” (*¡Somos el AVE y nadie lo sabe!*). The human resource management policies of the last decades have been characterized by the so-called “flexible exit” and “functional flexibility” (Araque Catena 2008), or otherwise put a dramatic decrease in the number of workers employed by the public company(ies) and increased flexibility of those remaining.

In the company’s human resource management language, this reduction of the workforce has been achieved through “non-traumatic” measures, namely labour force adjustment plans (ERE’s) that have primarily taken the form of collective lay-offs, be those in the form of early retirement or voluntary exits incentivized by compensatory pays. The constant search for the reduction of the workforce has been discursively softened by the occasional commitment to new hirings, mostly aimed at reducing the average age of the workforce. Most of the time the commitment has remained at the level of the promise, as the company has systematically failed to meet even the agreed upon objectives of workforce renewal plans. The distance from the days of the railway company being a central instrument of industrial labour policy and the main employer in the country is perhaps best captured by a 2015 public job offer: 12,567 people applied for 75 openings<sup>27</sup>.

The commitment to the reduction of the workforce was not always what it is made to be today, namely the inevitable outcome of a process of modernization. The 1980 PGF was a modernization plan that was expected to create 50,000 new jobs. In contrast to this, the PSOE era PTF, approved in 1987 and hailed also as a major investment plan, was advancing a vision of modernization that was focused on reducing the labour force rather than increasing it. Between these two points the most important lay-offs in the history of the company took place. In 1984 alone, the early retirement scheme led to more than 10,000 workers leaving the company within one year. Similarly, the 1984 management contract included the elimination of 5000 jobs throughout three years (Ferner 1990:170). At the time that the

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.eleconomista.es/empresas-finanzas/noticias/7013451/09/15/Renfe-recibe-12567-solicitudes-para-los-75-puestos-de-su-primera-oferta-de-empleo-tras-la-crisis.html>

workforce was shrinking significantly, the size of the network was too. Following a 1984 Council of Ministers' agreement almost 2000 km of railways were closed down.

The evaluation of labour's response to these transformations is typically one that argues the railway unions and workers have been responsible actors throughout the Transition. While relatively speaking within the history of the company the 1980s were a period of heightened unrest, as compared to other sectors at the time the levels of it were significantly lower. Between 1976 and 1983 many of the unions' demands were met following a moderate level of pressure. Essentially, as Ferner (1990) observes, it can be quite clearly established that these concessions were a way of avoiding the escalation of conflict in what was considered at the time a "model company" that set the tone for the negotiation of collective agreements across the country. Between this, the threat of militarization (last carried out in 1976) and the 1980 imposition of obligatory minimal services, a situation of relatively low confrontation was ensured. Effectively, the attack on the public company and its workforce had to wait for the arrival to power of PSOE and the implementation of its deindustrialization program.

The majority unions in the railway company are today the same that monopolized the rights to representing the workers throughout the Transition years: CCOO and UGT. And the model of labour relations today in place is tributary to the same period. As it has been shown (Rodríguez López 2015), in 1977 the defining features of the social pact that would come to dominate the post-Francoist era were already in place. Deficit management and a policy of wage control had been established as the cornerstone of the social and political project that would define the first decades of the democratic period. However, the actual institutionalization of labour relations would take another few years. 1978 was the year of the first union elections in the democratic period. And while voter turnout was low, with only approximately half of the workers voting in the first union elections (Rodríguez López 2015:187), the approval of the unions was still higher than it was by 1980. The institutionalization of the new model of labour relations, with which the union bureaucracy definitively displaced the workers' assemblies as the main political body at the level of the factory, coincided also with the beginning of a loss of support that has throughout the last decades become only more acute.

In this respect, the story of the two main union confederations that have come to dominate collective negotiations throughout more than three decades runs parallel to that of the institutionalization of the two party model that came to define Spanish political life for several decades. Already in 1980 affiliation rates at the national level had dropped to 38% (Rodríguez López 2015:188). The affiliation rates that the unions today maintain are better explained by their ability to address individual grievances and offer “personalized” services, rather than by their ability or willingness to defend collective grievances. This is a situation that I often heard described while talking to both union affiliates and union representatives. A condition cogently captured by the systematic lack of endorsement of the majority unions in the elections by their own affiliates.

The situation of the railways and the relationship between organized labour and union representation is both typical and divergent in relation to this broader image. It is typical in as much the majority unions UGT and CCOO have been instrumental in securing a quiescent reorganization of the railway company. It is divergent to the extent that in the railways the conflict between the workers’ assemblies and the union bureaucracies never achieved the intensity that it had in other industrial sectors in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. This is best explained both by divergent chronologies and the form taken by the actual reorganization process.

The rhetoric of inevitability of the liberalization process that the majority unions embrace nowadays without much hesitation has been in practice backed by their willful collaboration in the implementation of this process. As many of those I have talked to repeatedly pointed out, this has mostly been a trade-off between union benefits in exchange for compliance with the transformations affecting the railways; always at the cost of the workers. Expectedly, when we take a close look at the history of railway unionism in the recent past things begin to complicate and concrete moments occasionally unseat the broader historical arch. Perhaps what mostly immediately complicates the narrative are the differences between CCOO and UGT. If UGT and CCOO today show a comparable willingness in eventually always lending their support to the reforms affecting the railways, this has not

always been so. In the words of Héctor<sup>28</sup>, CGT representative, referring to the fully compromised current generation of CCOO unionists and the difference between them and that of the first militants: “If your grandparents raised their heads..!”. It is certainly the case that in the early 1980s, as the railway sector was being reorganized in line with austerity measures, CCOO maintained a critical position towards the envisioned and ultimately implemented transformations. The same, however, cannot be said about UGT. In 1983 UGT backed the government’s measures for the railway sector and lent its support to the austerity measures in the midst of which the formulation of the new commercial orientation took place.

If this points to the role played by the unions in the transformation of the Spanish railways throughout the democratic years, this role cannot be understood as the unions’ legitimate representation of the workers. The majority unions’ history throughout the post-Francoist era confirms the fact that they have been consistently aligned with company and/or governmental interests. To the extent they have been an important actor they have been acting either in defense of the organizations’ own interests or in alignment with governmental objectives. The details might complicate the broad narrative of betrayal of the workers’ interests, but they do not manage to disprove it.

In what follows I look at the history of two unions in the railway sector that do not fit within the political matrix that UGT and CCOO belong to. These are two unions that began their activity in the mid-1980s, at a time at which a wave of protests was sweeping through the public sector. Their origins are concomitant with those of the liberalization process and the early days of the AVE, and they make for even more interesting cases as they allow to observe the evolution of different models of labour organizing in parallel to these two other processes. These unions stand out primarily on account of their leverage at the company level (SEMAF) and their uncompromised opposition to the liberalization of the railways (CGT). The next two chapters explore the articulation of divergent labour organizing models and the role historical memory plays in this.

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<sup>28</sup> I have changed the names of all those directly quoted or identifiable to ensure anonymity, with the exception of those who I talked to in an official capacity and who have expressed a preference for being identified with their real names.

### **3. From coal to silk, from pilots to Easyjet pilots: The Spanish engine drivers' union and the memory of progress and decline**

“Our way of doing unionism had nothing to do with what the class unions were doing; we were much more bellicose in this regard”, recalls Juan Oliver Barranco, the first secretary of Sindicato Español de Maquinistas y Ayudantes Ferroviarios (SEMAF - Spanish Train Drivers’ and Railway Assistants’ Union) the early years of the union (*Bias* 2007: 14). The history of the combative attitude, often reclaimed as an identity marker by union representatives, is a history of belligerence that set SEMAF not only apart from the class unions but also against them. Formed in 1986, SEMAF is the most powerful grade union in the railways and, throughout its existence, the only grade union represented in the works council of the Spanish railway company. The recent history of the engine drivers’ position in the contemporary Spanish railways cannot be divorced from the history of their most powerful organizational expression; neither can the history of SEMAF be told without understanding the transformation of train driving as a profession.

I set out to understand the position of SEMAF in the landscape of railway unionism moved not by their combative reputation but by what I believed to be a counterintuitive reality: the engine drivers’ union unrepenting support for the high speed rail project. What, beyond the immediacy of facile answers about the contextual alignment of individual or power groups’ interests, explained SEMAF’s wide open optimism about the high speed rail, or at least that which appeared to be so judging by its public presence in the last decade, given that the long term development of the high speed rail seemed to be eroding the basis of the very profession the union claimed to defend? The combination of a significant dose of naiveté and lack of knowledge about the historical evolution of the profession were probably the conditions under which my curiosity was born, but contextual short sightedness opened what turned out to be a meaningful point of engagement with the role played by SEMAF in the recent history of the railways. It allowed me to listen carefully enough in order to be able to tell a story that would not be deadened by the readily available labels of “reactionary”, “self-seeking”, or “treacherous”, voiced by those who felt SEMAF’s history of belligerence was

a story of reaction more than one of insurgence. This, as I learned, is fundamentally a story about the sense of the past and the way it informs a specific group of railway workers' vision of the future.

Formed in 1986, SEMAF was born amidst a wave of mobilizations that had been spearheaded by the engine drivers, whose collective power and strategic position in the railway system were central to the negotiating power of the main union confederations. The only relevant precedent of a craft union in the railways had been that of the short lived *Sindicato Independiente de Cuadros Renfe* (SICRE), trying to organize technical and management staff that felt marginalized by the class unions (see Cayon y Cuellar 2009). By the 1982 union elections SICRE had disappeared from the panorama of post-Francoist railway organizing, which opened a period of several years of uncontested hegemony of the main union confederations. SEMAF took part in the union elections for the first time in 1986, but it was not before another four years passed that it managed to secure a representative in the works council, following the 1990 elections.

The immediate precedent for the formation of the union was the dissatisfaction of a sector of the grade with their representation in the majority unions. The founders of the union believed their interests to be inadequately represented by these, at the same time that they saw their negotiating power thwarted. This is of course insufficient for explaining why was it that such a union had not been formed before or what is it that explains its emergence at this very specific moment in time. The broader explanation has to do with both the more ample dynamic of unionism during those years as well as with dynamics internal to the company. As mentioned in the introduction to the section, the cutbacks in the railway sector were somehow delayed in comparison to the rest of the public industrial sector, and the first years of the Transition were marked by a cautious series of concessions for the railway workers, as overt confrontation was avoided by the government. By the mid-1980s, however, this had changed, as the railways too became a target for the austerity measures led by the socialist government. This led the railway workers to join in the wave of mobilizations that was sweeping through the public sector at the time. The mid-1980s was also the period in which at the national level the two main union confederations increasingly started to converge (a key moment in this being the replacement of Antonio Gutiérrez by Marcelino Camacho at the top of CCOO). While previous research does not provide an

answer to what is it about the organization of the railways themselves that might have favored the formation of SEMAF at this specific moment in time, throughout my own research I have found traces or suggestions of an internal managerial conflict. The managerial elite of RENFE seems to have held diverging opinions about the potential to control a grade union and the degree to which this could have helped undermine the negotiating power of the majority unions, often referred to as “class unions”. Julián García Valverde’s arrival to the presidency of RENFE seems to have favoured the strategy of undermining the power of the unions by isolating a sector of the workforce that could be then treated as a privileged interlocutor.<sup>29</sup> This chapter is also an exploration of some of the contradictions entailed by this managerial strategy. Ultimately the shifts and realignments of the union’s and company’s interests are at the core of a history from which SEMAF emerges as both triumphant and defeated.

Today SEMAF represents the majority of the engine drivers and following the division of the national railway company into an infrastructure manager and a service provider, it has become the majority union in Renfe Operadora. If the memory of its early years seems to be indissolubly related to its conflictive orientation, it is certain that its more recent history and the significant advances it has managed to secure for the group of workers it represents are also part of a history of tightening relationships with the company and increasing isolation in the union landscape, manifested not only in the public conflicts with the other unions but also in its history of negotiating separate agreements.

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<sup>29</sup> This is how José Luis Villa describes the change in the relation with the unions following García Valverde’s arrival to the presidency: “Julián gave the order of destroying the unions’ power in Renfe to the seasoned Damian Navascues, who had no better idea than to decidedly encourage the engine drivers to create a union in order to undermine the majority held by CCOO and UGT, in such a way that he was even present at the SEMAF’s constituent assembly. That which all of us personnel directors before him had avoided, in order not to create a craft monster that would be able to stop the company at its own will, was something he encouraged as soon as he arrived. I expressed my complete disagreement, I told him that he was playing sorcerer’s apprentice, that he should watch the movie *Fantasia* by Walt Disney to learn what happens to Mickey Mouse when he uses power without being able to measure its consequences; but he completely disregarded me, I was obsolete [...] The result is known, the professional union Semaf has been and keeps being a continuous headache for the management of Renfe because of its capacity to intimidate and to halt the service independently of the other groups in the company. Navascues changed the power of the class unions, and therefore transversal ones, for the same plus the added power of a professional and much more dangerous one.” (Villa 2013:204-5)

### 3.1. The reported sightings of optimism

The main reason the case of SEMAF stands out in the context of a preoccupation with the role of historical memory in contemporary transformations is that it reflects a trajectory that would be hard to predict based on the existing analyses of the relationship between grade development and the contemporary transformations affecting the railways. My initial surprise at being faced with the support high speed rail enjoys among engine drivers and from the main union representing them was in that sense not that displaced. Academic as well as autobiographical accounts of work on the railways and craft identity signal the erosion of the prestige once enjoyed by train drivers and the erosion of their work as a source of professional pride, with technological transformation playing a central role in the process (Gamst 1980; Edelman 2004; Strangleman 2004; 1999).

Tim Strangleman's work on the role of nostalgia and nostophobia in the contemporary British railway industry is the closest available analysis on the matter (Strangleman 2007; 2004; 1999). My work builds critically on his own insights, reaffirming the need for continued engagement with ethnographic explorations of the contemporary organization of work as well as a need for refining analytical instruments in order to be able to account for the social articulation of historical memory. His work reveals the multiple uses of the past and the plurality of forms in which railway history and heritage have featured in the process of the privatization of British Rail. On the one hand his analysis makes manifest the need to destabilize the simple narratives of workers' attachment to an idealized past. Understanding the way in which the past is a resource in the contemporary articulation of workers' identity and the way in which the sense of decline is intertwined with the lived experience of work is not straightforward. To this end, Strangleman argues, "we need a more subtle account of nostalgia, one that distinguishes between an uncritical idealisation of the past and more complex and reflective accounts." (Strangleman 2007: 94). However, his empirical findings support the thesis of a pervasiveness of "the repeated claim of a contemporary loss or decline in work and employment" (2007: 93). But, against a simplistic overstatement of the historical exceptionality of the sense of loss and change arising from processes of deindustrialization, as well as the trap of reducing it to an ubiquitous attachment to that against which the present is always measured, he urges us to look into

the way this structure of feeling is produced across different social and historical formations. This should allow us to see the continued, if transformed, relevance of work in providing meaning and structure but also to restore attention to workers' agency in our analysis of the contemporary organization of work.

Empirically, Strangleman's attention turns towards two broad phenomena: a complex account of worker nostalgia and the conditions under which it is produced and the role of nostalgia as well as nostophobia in company and management organizational strategies. Strangleman's discussion of the construction of a negative image of the past as a background from which to distance the modern company as well as the recasting of workers' attachment to the past as a regressive force is a powerful illustration of the way in which a mode of historical representation is entangled with the efforts to push through privatization plans. Strangleman's analysis of the role of conservative administrations' reliance on notions of nostalgia in the mobilization of the past has been very useful for thinking through the problems addressed in this thesis. But the type of processes of historical reflexivity that he studies remain in many ways rather different from the type of sense of the past that informs SEMAF's politics. If indeed history acts "as a knowledge bank or resource which railway workers in general were, and still are, able to draw on for meaning and understanding" (Strangleman 2004:35), this is a knowledge bank with an internal power structure. Or otherwise put, within a production of history focus, the problem is that no medium of historical knowledge is treated as a neutral repository of experience. Experience and representation inform and condition each other, or otherwise put history as process and representation are indissolubly linked.

While many of the differences between the explorations of the role of representations of the past might well be explained by sheer differences in context and local histories, the differences in analysis might go beyond this. In reading Strangleman's analysis of the mobilization of the past in the privatization of British Rail, there appears to be an underlying tendency to treat managements' notions of the past as coherent ideological tools employed with a high degree of instrumental precision, while workers' historical reflexivity with its roots in the memory bank of certain cultures of work appears to be somehow more organic. Both these problems might be attributed to the unresolved and undertheorized tensions of the relation between history as representation and history as process. But apart from

challenging the pervasiveness of a sense of loss and decline among railway workers, what the case of SEMAF points towards is how the representation of the past cuts across contradictory positions in the company structure, and the way in which experience can be rearticulated at the level of workers' representation in alignment with company interests.

By looking at the case of the Spanish train drivers' union I provide a case that unsettles the empirical account of the pervasiveness of the sense of loss among skilled workers in the railways and shows the conditions under which craft pride can become aligned with company interests. This, I argue, is more than the temporary resolution of inter-grade competition. It reveals how profoundly historical memory and alternative ways of recovering the experience of the past are intertwined with support for contemporary development plans. The dominant sense of the past that available ethnographic accounts usually recover is paradigmatically captured in the following description by Peter Parker, Chairman of the British Rail Board (quoted in Strangleman 1999: 731):

The driver grieved over past glories. Once an engine-driver was what most boys wanted to be; now nobody bothered to stop and have a word with him about the journey, good or bad. Once the King of the Road, rising from cleaner, through fireman, to the throne on the footplate; now he was in an unglamorous exile. Once he was inseparable from his locomotive, his castle and his home, cherishing it and its reputation for meeting the timetable, frying breakfast on the shovel; now he and it were computer-programmed through the depot. Once sure of his place, superior, knowing the headmaster; now he was adrift in the impersonal professional world of area managers and operating managers...Gradually the driver's grip on things was in truth slipping. It was as if esteem was lost with the loss of steam, self-esteem and other people's. And as I was bringing the chips down for change at the beginning of the Eighties, just when the union most required a prophetic, restoring vision, the executive was in the hands of class warriors battling in the trenches of 1919 agreements which had enshrined the sanctity of the eight-hour day.

Strangleman's account is precisely an instrument for recovering the engine drivers' sense of the past from the condescension of present day reformers, showing how nostalgia is not merely a "passive emotion of an older workforce", but an "active tool in the hands of the management" (1999:742). However, the sociological account it gives of the transformation of the work process together with its testifying to the ubiquity of the sense of loss across different moments in the history of the railways does not truly prepare us for making sense of the following statement by a SEMAF official commenting on the differences between the engine drivers' union and the rest of the unions, in an article from the anniversary edition of *Bias*:

The unquestionable fact that SEMAF, apart from being the strongest and most representative of the activity of railway transportation from its inception, holds today the title of majority union of the up until now only railway operations company, has united them (i.e. the rest of the unions), in their attempt to recover old privileges, in the search of mechanisms that would allow them a *"return to the past"* that would guarantee them the continuity of, their, so to speak, union activity, union activity that, as we have always seen, and especially during the last years, consists of not doing anything and waiting to see what SEMAF obtains for our grade in order to say that they also want it, effortlessly, for the rest. (*Bias* 2007: 21)

But the portrayal of the rest of the unions as nostalgic rarely appears in isolation, most of the times it is met by a powerful restating of the recovery of the social prestige of a profession that has risen from its own ashes:

We have evolved in a spectacular way, since nowadays the driving grade does not have to worry about extra hours' work in order to obtain a decent salary. The engine drivers' profession has dignified a lot and I believe it is a privilege to belong to an officially approved and socially recognized profession. (*Bias* 2007: 22)

In what follows I track the contemporary story of the making of the social prestige of the engine drivers' union as a specific mode of relating to the past and try to unravel the relationship it establishes with some of the highly controversial positions the union has taken throughout its existence. In this my intention is to go beyond the way in which certain constructions of the past are involved in bringing about, over time, a change in that which is possible (*Strangleman* 1999: 742). By this I mean there is more to historical representation than a matter of tipping the scales in favor of this or that option. Rather, the process of choosing a course of struggle and that which the struggle aims to rescue or establish are indivisibly related and they both reveal the way in which change is conditioned by historical memory. But in this the objects which populate our horizon of transformation are as much a matter of historical memory as our desire (or lack of) to choose between them. If we manage to convincingly argue that privatization is aided by the successful portraying of an entire era of state management as obsolete and workers' nostalgia as a barrier to modernization, this still leaves historical representation as an annex to the historical process, a mechanically acting, instrumentally employed force that is but a possibility among a range of weapons to be selectively employed. Take historical memory away, privatization remains untouched, the only question is how else could it be carried out. But in order to see the development of the privatization process, a category such as privatization must in turn be revealed as the

expression of modes of representing the past. To paraphrase a railway official, “we do not talk about education or health as deficient, when did we get to talk about the railways as such?”. The most tentative answer to that question, I argue, must include a serious engagement with historical memory. And the case of the train drivers’ union, albeit tentative and partial, appears to support the argument.

### 3.2. Origins

The memory of the early days of the union, as reconstructed through interviews and written records, rests on two fundamental dimensions: one is the story of the engine drivers in relation to the other unions in the 1980s. The other is the memory of the experience of work itself. Inscribed in the history of 1980s mobilizations, the retelling of the story of the birth of the union reinforces the memory of the fighting attitude of the engine drivers as a distinct body within the workforce represented by the class unions. The train drivers recall themselves at the front of mobilizations but unable to better their situation. Early attempts to organize grade specific representation included the *‘pleno de conducción’* within CCOO, but this, as most of their militancy, is remembered as lost to the objectives or the inefficiency of the class unions. In the words of Miguel, engine driver and today a SEMAF representative:

[...] then came a moment when the driving grade said “We are in the streets, we are on the tracks all day, mobilizing. And we can’t see anything improving in our social conditions, our working conditions. Starting from there, the main unions, primarily CCOO, created something internal...something they referred to as the *‘pleno de conducción’* where there were primarily representatives of the driving grade. But it had no decision making power. The proposals that originated from it were blocked by the leadership of the unions, CCOO and UGT. I think Comisiones was stronger in driving...But they would block any proposal that could generate an internal conflict because it would have implied a greater improvement for the engine drivers against other groups. This is where it originates (i.e. SEMAF) and...We started walking...The beginnings were very tough because the big unions were putting pressure on the company to not even receive us. The possibility to reach agreements was remote and we had to gain a mobilization basis.

Another recollection of the same years highlights the strategic importance of the drivers’ strength for the union’s mobilization capacities, a doubtless reality given the strategic positioning of the drivers in the railway system:

And, if we exercise our memory, we will remember how the unions were using us time and again in order to carry out mobilizations/ actions the burden of which fell upon the drivers’ group/collective, but the results of which had repercussions for other groups of workers with the

excuse that our payments were higher, without taking into account that we would obtain those payments by way of carrying out inhuman working days in dreadful conditions and spending most of the time outside of our homes, where we were provided for our 'rest' the filthiest dens spread across our territory. And they would also forget the preparation required to become an engine driver and the responsibility entailed by our professional practice. (*Bias* 2007:21)

In response to this state of affairs the drivers decided to form a separate union, which managed to obtain its first meaningful victory after the 1988 conflicts, marking the end of SEMAF's struggle for being recognized as an official body within the company.

But recollections of the early years of the union are also indissolubly linked to the experience of being an engine driver in the 1980s. The long working hours and the poor working conditions, as in the above description, are remembered as the notorious hardships suffered by a group of workers with an important degree of responsibility. The memory of those years as challenging years for the profession cuts across union affiliation, and resurfaces in the recollections of drivers not affiliated with SEMAF, and is also found in the contemporaneous press or workers' publications. This, of course, is often times described as a condition stemming from the general condition of the railways in an era of cutbacks and underinvestment. However, in the history of SEMAF the driver emerges as the outstanding victim of a condition against which they were actively fighting, as opposed to the compromised class unions.

### **3.3. Consolidation**

The more recent history of the union and its achievements are described as set either against or upon the firm foundation constituted by its early years; marked by hardships, the beginnings of the union, as previously seen, were characterized and are remembered as defined by the drivers' willingness to confront the company. Recollections about the most important achievements of the union repeatedly render two events as landmark victories in the history of the union: the establishment of the single agent and the official recognition of the train driver's profession. The first was concluded in 2000, and represented the suppression of the driver's assistant position. The second refers to one of the more conflictual moments regarding the professional formation of the engine drivers, and the memory of the governmental attempts to reduce the prerequisites for obtaining the officially recognized title of train driver (2006). They are both recalled as moments when drivers,

using their collective power, managed to push through a course of action favorable to their grade. They also appear as moments at which the strength of the drivers was publicly projected and their leverage was indisputably affirmed. The transition to the single driver was preceded by a series of strikes that managed to paralyze the railways nationwide. This is how Santiago remembers the 2000 strikes:

They wanted to institute the single agent and the company wanted to impose it through negotiations it had carried out with one of the unions...UGT. This led us to mobilize and there came a day when not that a train would leave the station and another wouldn't, but there came a day when none would exit. A very tense situation. We were opening the news bulletins. I remember the pope was in Spain and instead of the TV news bulletin opening with the pope they would start by saying that they are going to fire us, the members of the strike committee. And well...we reached an agreement after a 40 hour meeting, or 30, I'm not sure. Yes, the last meeting must have reached 30 hours. And there we reached an agreement important to us, we accepted the single agent but with the establishment of reasonable driving limits.

To the mythological character of the strikes speaks perhaps more than anything else the fact that the strike did not coincide with the visit of the pope. Perhaps the juxtaposition of the coverage of the highly mediatized pope's visit to Jerusalem with headlines about the drivers' strike is what later resurfaced as the memory of the pope's visit to Spain being eclipsed. What remains certain is that varied contemporaneous testimonies confirm the exceptionality of the strike, in which a large number of drivers decided not to respect the imposed minimum services, typically resorting to calling in sick. The strikes have entered not only the memory of the confrontational tradition of the union, but even at the time stood out as an affirmation of the workers' collective power in an age in which minimum services make most strikes virtually pass unnoticed ("not that a train would leave the station and another wouldn't"). The massive following of the strike was publicly attributed to the downwards pressure from union officials, but even the narrative of the officials' coercion seems to leave behind the impression of the punishment of the scabs as testimony to the exceptional strength of the organization:

Fernández disclosed that the agreement removed the disciplinary proceedings against the engine drivers that have not showed up for work during the last four days. It was agreed, according to Fernández, that the SEMAF strike committee will be held « directly responsible » (some 15 people) for the coercion suffered by the employees so that they would not come to work. According to Renfe, they received garlands of flowers, threatening notes in their lockers and phone calls. The general secretary of the union, Juan Jesús García Fraile, denied knowledge of these pressures and in any case condemned them, were they to be proven true. He admitted that

the strike «went a bit out of control », for which he apologized to the users, but argued that the situation was a response to the « repressive attitude of Renfe's bosses » (source: *El País* 26th of March 2000)



Frontpage of *El País* during the March 2000 strikes, featuring a headline about the railway strike and an image from the Pope's visit to Israel.

That the memory of the transition to the single agent is reclaimed as a story of success is not straightforward. The prolonged conflict between the company and the engine drivers which is retrospectively recovered as “the single agent” issue was actually a broader conflict that included grade specific demands that ranged from bettering driving conditions to upgrading the assistant drivers to the position of driver, and which had actually started off as a conflict around the 12<sup>th</sup> Collective Agreement that involved all the unions except for UGT. The focus on the drivers’ grade issues marked one of the last phases in the conflict and the decision of SEMAF to pursue grade demands rather than remain a part of the struggle for a company-

wide agreement. As far as the driving grade is concerned, the conflict ended with the incorporation of the drivers’ assistants as train drivers, but with the suppression of the presence of a second driver on the train, an event remembered by some of those critical of the process as the “selling off of the driver’s assistant”, marking the end of the iconic team of the engine driver and the fireman, an image going back to the era of steam. But in the recollections of members and representatives of SEMAF the event is assimilated to a continuous process of betterment of a job once carried out under distinctly worse conditions, a recollection made possible by the fact that the company traded the suppression of the position for an increase in wages and other financial incentives.

The 2006 confrontation between the company and the union regarding the official certification of the drivers involved the attempt to reorganize the requirements for becoming a licensed driver, essentially consisting of a lowering of the mandatory standardized training period. The measures proposed would have left it up to the individual employers to offer the second part of the training, which, was argued, would have significantly lowered the reliability of the process of selection. Publicly assumed as a struggle for maintaining a standard of safety on the railways, it remains doubtless that the opposition also coincided with the interest of extending SEMAF's control over access to the profession, currently regulated through The Engine Drivers' School (*La Escuela de Maquinistas*). The proposed measures constituted not only an attack on safety standards but also the threat of increased competition within the grade itself, and the drivers managed to block the reorganization of the official certification process, one in which a decisive role was played by the renewed safety concerns following the Angrois accident. If these two events are remembered as histories testifying the collective power of a grade the main representative of which is SEMAF, the same events appear as episodes in what is the dominant narrative of a history of progressive betterment marking the work of the train driver. As a matter of fact, in the recollections of union representatives the two are often times indissolubly related, and they are also linked in the historical explanation of the union's evolution from a more combative to a conciliatory attitude, the latter marked by increased willingness to negotiate as well as an overall different relationship to the company.

The history of high speed rail intersects curiously with this image of constant evolution, and features prominently in the contemporaneous accounts of the recognition of the merits of the profession and its gains in terms of social prestige. Unlike the rest of the unions, even the majority ones, SEMAF's recent history is marked by an overtly sympathetic position towards the high speed rail project. What for the other unions has become a common slogan, "velocidad alta, no alta velocidad"<sup>30</sup>, is a position even rhetorically removed from that of SEMAF, overtly supportive of the high speed rail project. The testimonies of

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30 Word play that can be loosely translated as "higher speed rail, not high speed rail", a common slogan expressing criticism of the high speed rail project, most commonly referred to as AVE (Alta Velocidad Española). Even the majority unions, although in practice liable to having supported measures that have favored the development of high speed rail at the cost of conventional rail, have a history of public distancing from the high speed rail project.

engine drivers affiliated to SEMAF reveal how the high speed rail project, presented nationwide as bearing the renewed, expansive energy of a once again globally leading Spain, was integrated into the drivers' lives as the experience of affirmation of professional prestige. This is how Pablo, a driver on the first high speed rail line, the Madrid - Sevilla line, remembers the early years of high speed rail:

That which shocked me a lot, the change that took place here in Renfe, was the step to high speed rail, which yes, I did experience first-hand. This was something else. We were in Renfe for many years already. I think I was 33 when this happened...it was 22 years ago, in 1992. Back then we worked as engine drivers : a bit of freight, a bit of passenger rail, a lot of suburban rail. I had just spent two years in long-distance [...] And we moved to doing the high speed rail line and this was a terrific shock : of how to work, how to think, how to act, the safety it involved, all the involvement of the mass media at the time. This for me was an important shock. I experienced it from the beginning, from 1992. Yes, the Madrid – Sevilla line [...] That yes, that was important in the life of the railway worker. As a matter of fact it has marked me until this day. Here I am the « AVE boy »

What surfaces in the individual testimonies as the gain of a sense of professional worth and the radical improvement in working conditions also features as an integral part of the contemporaneous corporate image of the railway company, albeit with a different emphasis. A 2010 TV ad for RENFE<sup>31</sup> (year of the division of the company into a service provider and an infrastructure manager) tells us, in less than a minute, the story of the rebirth of the engine driver's profession. The video opens with black and white footage of a steam engine piercing the landscape at an abnormal velocity, and as the camera shifts to the iconic driving team the following conversation is carried out between Antonio, the troubled engine driver, and Ricardo, the disillusioned fireman:

**Ricardo:** "What is wrong with you, Antonio?"

**Antonio:** "Ricardo, you are a fireman, I am an engine driver. Your father was a fireman and mine was an engine driver..."

**Ricardo:** "And your grandfather and mine..."

**Antonio:** "And now the son says he wants to become a pilot..."

**Ricardo:** "Maybe he's right and this thing of ours does not have a future..."

The image fades out and the scene shifts to a bucolic colour scenery, with the now old fireman running in the fields towards the former fireman, Ricardo, as he shouts: "Ricardo, Ricardo, Ricardo! The grandson is going to be an engine driver!" The video closes with a

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31 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbTTYap9h2o>

scene of the two old men, dressed in suits and trench coats, admiring the passing by of a high speed train, as the message “The train returns to being at the center of our lives” is read out.

Despite the fact that we never learn whether the son has succeeded as a pilot, nor do we understand why is it that the fireman does not cry out “I was right!” with the assistant driver’s position, the last trace of the fireman’s position in the actual work process, having disappeared from the occupational scheme of the railways at the time of the airing of this video, we are led to believe that a once existing professional prestige has now been restored to the point where becoming an engine driver can outdo the appeal of a career as a pilot. As a matter of fact the power of the restitution is such that it even seems to be retrospectively projected on the careers of the former steam engine driver and fireman, who are wearing ties and suits, the memory of their painstaking work lives as blue collar workers lost in an attire intimating careers as union leaders spearheading company buyouts rather than working lives spent shoveling coal.

This form of depicting the past coincides with as much as it contradicts engine drivers’ actual recollections of the past. The recovery of the lost prestige, while smoothly integrated into the narratives of decline that I trace in the first section, seems to belong almost exclusively to a realm of representation that is not anchored by the actual experience of work on the railways. Engine drivers’ memories of their work lives are marked by the memory of high responsibility and the recollection of lifetime employment within the same company, but they are quite removed from the idealized, nostalgic portrayal instrumental to corporate branding. Rather, they are histories marked by the tension between a lifetime devoted to one job and the hardships and distinctly ungratifying nature of that job, applied to both work conditions and the issue of social recognition. In that sense, the typical recollection of a Spanish engine driver’s early years in the company is much better approximated by a story of the discrepancy between the high level of responsibility and commitment entailed by the job and the contrasting lack of social recognition it enjoyed. What, however, does feature prominently in the union’s official description as well as in the personal recollections of the drivers I have interviewed is the contemporary change in status of the engine driver. A sense of the past dominated by a sense of evolution and change, unsettlingly captured in an image from the official union publication, *Bias*:



**Bias, February 2011: “Evolucionamos”**

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The image accompanies a feature article titled “We are evolving”, listing the accomplishments of the union on its 25th anniversary. The article reads: “[...] Because in the decade of union freedom prior to the birth of SEMAF there were practically no advances for our grade. But since the creation of our union the transformation has been spectacular and it has entailed the recognition of the profession of engine driver as such and the profession acquiring undoubtable prestige and acknowledgment.” (*Bias* 2011:4)

The union press of course conflates the history of the union and the history of the improvements in the work of the engine drivers, and they are, to a large extent, indissolubly related. The advances secured by the driving grade have been significantly more important than those pertaining to the overall workforce, and the union’s willingness to negotiate separate agreements has been the most important point of contention in relation to the other unions, which see these advances as obtained at the cost of the increasingly vulnerable remaining workforce. Accused of capitalizing on their position in the railway system, the union, and most of the time this extends to the engine drivers as a group, is seen as lacking solidarity and being blinded by partial interests. But what the identity between the history

of the union and the evolution of the profession obscures is the way in which the profession has benefited from the overall transformations affecting the railways. If the improvements in wages are inextricably linked with the drivers' organization and their negotiating power, the betterment of work conditions is to a large extent the consequence of investments in the railways which have resulted in technological transformations which have significantly changed the nature of the work carried out by engine drivers. The transition to high speed rail is the culmination of this, and its radical transformative power is described as follows by Pablo:

We had a different way of working before arriving to the AVE and from there almost a mentality change. It was a different type of work with respect to the involvement in the work. Something which I believe is now already getting lost. [...] You would get involved in the work, you would come to work feeling at ease ; you came very happy, you helped, you cared. In all companies what happens is more or less the same: your work day arrives, you are checking the time, you look at your watch and you get out running...and in those times we didn't look at the watch. You didn't care if you finished half an hour later, even 5 hours later, you would remain working, you were doing things that you liked. This was a change that I only got to understand after a bit of time passed. Or well...I understood it in time. We had more training than anyone else in Renfe, we had more resources, everyone focused on us, all that help...So it was a change towards working differently. Entirely different from that which Renfe had been until then.

### 3.4. Double-edged combativeness

SEMAF's uncanny story of betterment in an age in which the sense of the workers' past as loss is almost ubiquitous has not passed unnoticed in the syndical landscape nor is it missed by workers commenting on the relationship between different grades. Some accounts share the diagnosis of radical betterment and attribute it to the 'egoism' or 'selfishness' of drivers, a collective always narrowly following its own interest, not prone to acknowledging the importance of different types of work carried out in the railways. Others warn against the dangers of pursuing exclusively the interests of the grade, in view of a potential future need for broader workers' solidarity. Most interestingly, though, a range of accounts fundamentally unsettles the history of progressive betterment by anchoring it in a fundamentally different historical explanation. I repeatedly came across this reading of the recent history of the railways in my conversations with CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo) representatives and affiliates, an anarchosyndicalist organization that is the third major union confederation in the railways.<sup>32</sup> These accounts made cautionary tales in at least

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<sup>32</sup> CGT's railway section is also one of the strongest among the national level union branches. It has gained its

two important regards: on the one hand, they qualified 'betterment' and rendered the idea of 'improvement' contentious. On the other, they were stories that unsettled the identity between SEMAF and the driving grade, speaking of divisions where otherwise unity was assumed. The caution, however, was seen, rather than as fulfilled prediction, as foresight informed by the cyclical nature of the railways' history. For most of those I talked to the developments were perfectly expected in a scenario of the liberalized railways, a historical reality that had been previously experimented both in the distant past of the national railways as well as in their more recent international history.

Here is how Álvaro recounts the 2000 struggles and the issue of the "single agent" in relation to SEMAF, a year during which the railways section of CGT managed to increase their representation among the driving grade:

In the beginning they were together with everyone else because they had understood at a given moment that the struggle is either of all or there are no possibilities for support, that is to say that if you follow alone that which is yours alone no one will support you. But in that moment they signed an agreement which was the single driving agent, which is to say that there was a change from having two engine drivers to having just one. With which they were abandoning some of the engine drivers. There were drivers, for example in freight, for whom the working conditions diminished significantly, although they would have been paid more. [...] They created a double wage scale in which the old ones, the old engine drivers have some conditions which the newcomers don't [...] In the end what they create, and I think here the company completely defeats them, is that they are obliged to accept that not all drivers are equal. Not all railway workers are equal, that was something they were already proposing, and now it's a bit part of their union paradigm, but here that which they accept is that not even all drivers are equal. You have engine drivers of the first, second, and third category, and those who have entered recently are almost not considered engine drivers.

That this defeat seems to have been easily integrated in the triumphant account of SEMAF's achievements is not merely the spinoff of deceitful union propaganda. Interviews with SEMAF representatives and affiliates confirm the pervasiveness of the sense of progress. In contrast to this already sketched dominant sense of the past, here is how a young, CGT affiliated driver thinks of the more recent developments regarding the appeal of high speed rail:

By now it's not that beautiful. Now it's so generalized. Lately you have people who want to leave the AVE. "I don't care about the AVE.." Also, the type of work in AVE implies many hours far away and you have to sleep a lot away. It's not a journey in suburban rail [...] And then you get to an age and you say "What am I doing here? Yes, yes, I look at the silk tie but I'm the unlucky one...so little

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support in the railway almost during the same period as SEMAF, its beginnings also going back to the mid-1980s. In the following chapter I take up a separate analysis of CGT's role within railway unionism and worker organizing.

by little this also wears you out [...] So little by little people started leaving. Lately you have a lot of people from the AVE who have asked to move to Mostoles –Lesoto which is suburban rail. “I’m going to go with my t-shirt and my pants [...]

The narratives do confirm the prominence of the role once played by the high speed rail in the lives of the engine drivers. From anecdotes about the increase in the number of cars registered in Avila<sup>33</sup> to those about the symbolic weight of changing the title of the high speed rail drivers to that of “train master” (*jefe de tren*) these alternative recollections speak about working on the high speed rail as an unprecedented source of distinction in the lives of engine drivers. That which they unsettle, though, is their durability and the history of linear progress. Rather, they feature as an episode in an overall cyclical history of the railways, one which confirms the erosion of work standards and the vulnerability of a divided workforce. Or, as in the exchange in the interview I carried out with Álvaro and David, of the mirage that made workers believe that they could be inheritors of the prestige of the high speed rail:

**Álvaro:** they insisted that they would put the symbol of AVE, that they would put the three lines on the sleeve because that way they would look like...

**David:** ...like captains.

**Álvaro:** yes, captains, or doormen at a luxury hotel.

**David:** [...] so I think little by little it has been going down (i.e the appeal of high speed rail), it is not so penetrating as it used to be.

**Álvaro:** in the beginning they were pilots, and now they are Easyjet pilots.

**David:** definitely.

These accounts, then, also speak to the importance of the same events that feature prominently in the recollections of SEMAF affiliated drivers. Even more importantly, these transformations are clearly identified as a source of professional prestige in the life of the drivers. However, their exposure as a company smoke screen is seen as imminent. As soon as the necessities of privatization will unravel the full extent of the planned transformation, the train masters will again find themselves threatened as workers, a status which they were lead to believe they had elevated themselves from. This, then, just like the single agent issue, will be proven as a battle lost to the company that has managed to deceive the drivers to act against their own interest. While no doubt immediate company calculations and the history

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<sup>33</sup> An anecdote I repeatedly came across during my fieldwork was that in the first years following the inauguration of the high speed rail service, railway workers and especially drivers affiliated to the AVE project would register their cars in Avila, a smaller town close to Madrid, so as to have a license plate with the initials AV; supposedly the sudden increase of the number of cars with Avila numbers in the parking lots of the railway offices was common lore in the 1990s.

of changing union – company relations must be accounted for, the understanding of the SEMAF affiliated drivers' sense of the past is not exhausted in it. This can be clearly seen in the contradictions that arise at the meeting of the drivers' understanding of the evolution of their profession and the expectations regarding the future evolution of the railways.

### 3.5. To feel like a railway worker, to remember as a generation

The previous understandings of the recent transformations affecting the engine drivers, when measured against the celebratory tone of the SEMAF related accounts, leave behind an image of the train driver duped by the company to buy into a never meant to be fulfilled promise, the socialization of the advances of the post-Francoist railway modernization project. The different account of the recent history of transformations and the unsettling of the optimistic narrative of grade development is usually joined by some kind of diagnosis of drivers having been maneuvered into lesser deals, as against their expectations. But a closer look at the way SEMAF and affiliated engine drivers understand their historical positioning yields a quite different image, one in which drivers seem to be aware of the uncertain futures of future generations of drivers, both in terms of the nature of the work they will carry out as well as the overall work experience in relationship to the liberalized company:

Those of us, the colleagues that have been here ever since, we go on believing, inwardly, that we are working in the same company. This weekend, no, two weeks ago, we were together in the place where we started for celebrating 40 years...We go on thinking that we are the same company, but inwardly we know that it is not, but we act as if it were...we keep on saying that we are railway workers (*ferroviarios*). And our way of expressing ourselves, this has not been broken. The perspectives there are...Well, the perspectives for those who will be staying here... We are going to leave from here with the perspective that it has been the same company. Nevertheless, we know that this is going to be different, that it's not going to be the same; that more people will enter to work, more companies. That which the railway is will diversify a lot [...] One will not get along with the other. The same that has happened with the airports will happen here. And then yes, it will be a shock, because before we were indeed a family. But I don't think this is bad or good. As I will not be here to witness it (*laughs..*) My perspective is that I will be retiring in three, four years. So I do not have much left.

This recollection, far from pointing in the direction of naiveté as tipping the scale in favor of certain decisions, brings to the foreground the role played by drivers acting as a generation in relationship to craft organizing. The attempts to resolve the tension between the celebratory sense of the recent past and the skepticism expressed in relation to the near

future through properties immanent to the grade or the reduction of the conflict to a synchronic intercompany balance of forces prove equally limiting. The attribution of drivers' behavior to the nature of their work is widespread, among workers as well as analysts of work in the railways. The first ranges from simple characterizations of engine drivers as "selfish" or "egoist" to more elaborate accounts that match if not surpass the insights provided by sociologists or anthropologists of work pointing out the individualization of the drivers as a result of the work process. Most of analysts' accounts then do not contradict the analysis elaborated from within the railways, yet both seem to be equally limiting when dealing with a diversity of positions taken by the drivers. What explains changes in the position of the drivers at different moments in history and what are we to make of a multiplicity of positions among drivers at the same moment in time? These are questions left unresolved by explanations which attribute the drivers' organizational practices to the nature of their work; i.e. drivers perform their work individually as opposed to other grades whose work implies unmediated, face-to-face interaction (Gago González 2006; Edelman 2004; Gamst 1980). According to this range of explanations, the drivers inward focus on problems narrowly pertaining to the grade, and their lack of solidarity across grades is a direct consequence of their work experience. The moment this explanation proves insufficient is when it is confronted at least with a hypothetical conflict within the grade itself. The reason this can be easily obscured, however, is that cases analyzed reveal a high level of inter-grade solidarity, therefore it is assumed that the corporate behavior of drivers is plausibly and sufficiently explained by turning our attention to the properties of the work process.

The case of SEMAF, though, points to the insufficiency of this explanation. As seen in Álvaro's account, the support of the union among drivers has not been constant, and the 'single agent' issue revealed the fragility of the consensus within the grade, as certain drivers felt marginalized or betrayed by the official union line.<sup>34</sup> This could be narrowly explained by pushing even further the discussion about the nature of work as an explanation for

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<sup>34</sup> Heuristically, though, even in the absence of the immediate facticity of the fragility of the inter-grade consensus, a hypothetical dissonance should prompt us to reevaluate the naturalization of grade solidarity, assuming the latter to be a property of the grade rather than a historical phenomenon.

corporate behavior, and arguing, for example, that the division has occurred along lines which correspond to divisions within the work process itself. So, for example, the dissent would be convincingly explained by many of the drivers being concerned with driving freight trains, where, for the driver, unlike with passenger trains, the single agent issue would mean not simply being alone in the driver's cabin but effectively bearing the responsibility for being alone on a train. This, undoubtedly, must be accounted for when explaining the scissions within the union. However, it does prove insufficient when trying to understand the union's action and its assimilation of the experience as part of a route of progressive betterment. It proves even more puzzling when confronted with the vision of the future development shared by drivers whose understanding of the history of their trajectories is fundamentally one of constant progress. As seen in Pablo's account, a vision of the grimness of the future and the celebration of the continuous progress in the work of the driver are not exclusive, nor are the two represented, retrospectively, as a sequence in which later developments force one to reevaluate one's previous experience. What seems to be recurrent in the recollections of the SEMAF affiliated drivers is their coexistence. Rather than looking for the explanation which would undo this as an apparent contradiction, my interviews suggest that this is foundational for the drivers "who feel and act one way, but know otherwise...".

This tension is the expression of the experience of a generation and of the force of the generation as a structuring principle of the lived experience of the drivers. The peculiarities of the sense of the past of SEMAF affiliated drivers are indissolubly related not only to the generation understood as shared experience, but also to the generation as a dominant temporal frame that structures accounts of the past. The history of SEMAF is in this sense peculiar, although as I will try to show this does not limit its value for understanding the role played by historical memory in contemporary labor organizing. The evolution of employment in RENFE overlaps with the history of the union in a profound way. While this is currently changing, until recently the workforce in the Spanish state railways was essentially a rapidly aging population. Company hirings in Renfe were essentially stalled during the 1990s, so that when the process of hiring in RENFE was reopened this essentially resulted in a situation in which those recently arrived to the company were separated by

most workers by typically more than 15 year age difference, matched by a difference in seniority, with most of the older workers having spent all their working years as railway employees<sup>35</sup>. The majority of the SEMAF affiliated drivers belong to the older age group, an effect amplified by grade specific selection procedures. The sense of the generation is strengthened by the homogeneity of their professional trajectories. Most of the SEMAF affiliated drivers still conform to the stereotypical image of the driver as a life-long railway employee, whose work experience is essentially tied to one company. Many of the drivers also share the experience of a training process essentially belonging to the Francoist railways, that of entry to RENFE through the military, a selection procedure abolished in the late 1970s. The unity of these professional trajectories includes the shared experience of being a driver through a decade in which the railways had been singled out as an antiquated, reactionary institution, the arrival of the sweeping high speed rail project and the putting into place of the new organizational structure required by the privatization plans. A unique historical conjuncture which is carved out as the experience of a generation, and which, as I will further argue in the following chapter, decisively influences the course of union politics.

### **3.6. Absent sites of memory?**

An insightful counterweight to the analysis of historical memory that I propose can be found in Birgitta Edelman's work comparing engine drivers and shunters on the question of occupational identity and trust (Edelman 2004). Leaving aside the adequacy of comparing US engine drivers through their union organization to shunters in one workplace in Sweden, the work remains interesting because of its treatment of memory and the question of solidarity within the driving grade. It is also a useful illustration of the broader analytical problems regarding the treatment of memory in the anthropology of work. Edelman's argument is that unlike shunters, locomotive engineers' solidarity and identification with the union results from the parallel experience of their work as a solitary task. Union history and sites of memory are essential for the locomotive engineers, the argument goes further, whereas for shunters memory is little more than "local lore" (Edelman 2004:12) and their solidarity is rooted in local, common work experience. When assessing the usefulness of this

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<sup>35</sup> In 2013 the driving branch of Renfe Operadora employed 5618 men and 87 women. The majority of the driving grade is concentrated in the 46-55 and 55-60 age group (see Renfe 2013; Renfe 2010).

work for a broader discussion about the question of memory in relation to railway workers' occupational identity it is revealed to be doubly misleading. Taking for face value Edelman's work, on the immediate empirical level one would expect to find the same unitary sense of a threatened craft, while as already discussed this is not the case for SEMAF. Moreover, one would also be misled to assume that the union's identity is the source of the grade's solidarity, rather than being prompted to see the way in which the two are mutually constituted. More problematically, though, the treatment of memory in Edelman's work is symptomatic for an analysis which, although ethnographic, treats memory almost as a controllable variable the influence of which is relevant when it can be positively identified. Absent stable historical markers, the localized memory of the shunters is in itself seen as an insufficient source of solidarity, thus, to the extent that this exists, it must originate in their shared work experience. This, we are led to believe, explains a situation in which the drivers are likelier to defend, to their advantage, craft boundaries, as opposed to the shunters. That the political vigilance and expectations of this analysis are most likely profoundly misplaced can be left aside here. What, however, remains fundamental, is the way in which the diagnosis of the lack of "sites of history" for the shunters is essentially used to convert the shunters into a "craft without history", and that the failure to positively identify a certain view of history is resolved as a question of history's lack of influence for the question of solidarity. This, as I will show in the next chapter, is profoundly misleading since it obscures the conflicts between different modes of historical explanation and the multiple possibilities for anchoring local memory in broader regimes of historical representation.

Read against such an analysis, my treatment of the case of SEMAF is revealed as quite different. The history of the Spanish drivers' union is a story in which the sense of the past features prominently but not as nostalgia or as part of the recognition of a contemporary threat; it features as the story of the evolution of a profession understood as access to previously denied professional prestige. This is, essentially, the story of a generation that has passed its 1980s long working hours on the uncomfortable stools of aged locomotives and moved to knotting a silk tie as the landscape evanesced at 300 km/h. The memory of these transformation is intimately tied to the professional identities of SEMAF affiliated drivers, so is the role played by the union in safeguarding the improvements in the recent history of the

grade. Nonetheless, the existence of a repertoire of historical markers in relation to the union's past does not reassure us about the possibilities of the grade maintaining its privileges nor does it speak to the univocal power of union history as a source of solidarity. Between the image of the selfish driver duped into acting upon his own egoistic inclinations and the political naiveté of analysis that rescues union history as a progressive force at the cost of substituting grade solidarity for workers' solidarity, we find the triumphant, yet defeated, generation of SEMAF affiliated drivers. Those who, against the course of change, keep expressing themselves as *ferroviarios*. It is the political responsibility of ethnographically informed writing, I argue, to understand this contradiction rather than deaden it or explain it away with analytic impatience. To flatten the meaning of experience and its contradictory expressions can only result in an abandonment of social reality which is bound to return as fragmented, if seemingly abstract, empiricism in disguise.

## 4. Anarcho-syndicalism: “No one is indispensable”

### 4.1. CGT

CGT, or *Confederación General del Trabajo*, represents the majority sector of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism. With the number of affiliates estimated at over 80,000 and that of delegates at over 5,000, it is currently the third largest union confederation in Spain. And while some might argue that its overall presence is still modest, those numbers should be broken down into understanding the differential support CGT has across different sectors. Aggregate numbers obscure more than they reveal. The railway section of CGT is among the strongest in the confederation and the 2015 elections, despite a frontal attack against the union aimed at reducing its representation<sup>36</sup>, secured the presence of CGT in the works’ council of both Renfe and Adif, with two members in each. The total number of delegates was 118.<sup>37</sup> As seen, the aggregate numbers can be doubly misleading. Not only do they obscure the internal differences between different branches of the union, thus diluting the relative strength of some of its sections into a misleading average, but the relationship between affiliation and support that the union enjoys shows the number of affiliates to be consistently below the share of votes in the elections.

Talking to the full-time union representatives could easily put one on the track of the harshest evaluation, since they stand out as severe critics of their own activity. If one is looking for the most detailed overview of all criticism raised against the union the best place to start would be the union itself. There was no criticism I had heard raised against the union that had not been considered by union representatives themselves. But the observation is not meant as an act of flattery; it is meant to establish the way I approach the activity of CGT in this section. While I believe the argument about the overall role of anarcho-syndicalism in contemporary unionism to be important, I believe that the sheer focus on numbers, considered in terms of electoral percentages and numbers of affiliates has very much dominated the debate about unionism, to the detriment of debating the actual substance of

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.sff-cgt.org/actualidad.php?ind=155>

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.fsc.ccoo.es/webfscferroviario/Actualidad:Sindical:Actualidad:804461--RESULTADOS\\_ELECCIONES\\_SINDICALES\\_2015\\_EN\\_ADIF.\\_ADIF\\_AV\\_Y\\_RENFE](http://www.fsc.ccoo.es/webfscferroviario/Actualidad:Sindical:Actualidad:804461--RESULTADOS_ELECCIONES_SINDICALES_2015_EN_ADIF._ADIF_AV_Y_RENFE)

the contemporary visions of transformation endorsed by union organizations. And if the majority unions in Spain can claim around 1,000,000 affiliates each<sup>38</sup>, these numbers are far from flattering when it comes to the share of unionized workers in the total number of workers. As a matter of fact, if we were to follow strictly numbers, there is a stronger case for paying attention to minority unions than there is an argument for paying attention to unionism in the overall landscape of labour relations. Or, put otherwise, minority unionism is to unionism what unionism is to workers in general.

If anything, though, minority unionism is much closer to the spirit of contemporary oppositional politics in Spain than it is to majority unionism. The search for a left wing alternative, with varying degrees of distance or proximity to electoral politics, is one that is founded on the belief that majority unions have betrayed the working class and traded in its historical wins in exchange for the privileges of union bureaucracies. The social movements that have gained prominence during the last years all share this view. To show up at a massive antigovernment protest with a majority union flag was, until recently, anathema. This is a vision shared, to a large extent, by minority class unions. Why the social movements that have gained prominence since 2011, with the explosion of the 15-M movement, have not revitalized Spanish unionism, is a question beyond the scope of this discussion. Some incipient arguments can be formulated by looking at the case of anarcho-syndicalism in the railways. But these are starting points rather than full-fledged answers.

The analysis in this chapter is grounded in the belief that in order to meaningfully address contemporary unionism, we should reverse our customary course of investigation. We usually start from disappointing numbers and move into the territory of the organized few. The harshest critics of social democracy can exhibit incredible leniency in the lamenting of the fall in union affiliation rates, falling back on some type of assumed, (but never specified) golden era of unionism.<sup>39</sup> If union affiliation can be perhaps convincingly

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<sup>38</sup>According to 2013 data, the affiliation level at the national level was around 19%, or approximately 2,47 million affiliated workers. In absolute numbers this meant a decrease of approximately 400,000 affiliates from the beginning of the crisis in 2008. The dropping trend has remained constant throughout the last years, with the main union confederations reporting a constant loss of affiliates. According to 2015 data the affiliation levels have dropped to 17,5%. Aggregate data about the smaller unions as potential beneficiaries of some of the loss of affiliates of CCOO and UGT is unavailable. (see Alós et al. 2015; “Cara a cara sindical” 2015; Gualtieri 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Even valuable contributions to the anthropology of labour unions tend to overlook or silence the role played by unions in regulating and containing collective action. See, for example Durrenberger and Reichart 2010.

embraced as an indicator of class consciousness at some moments in history, that relationship is clearly unreliable in the present. There is, then, a strong case for starting from the substance of union agendas, rather than approaching them as the residual matter of union affiliation rates and electoral percentages. The case of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism speaks prominently to this. While its success cannot be detached from its following, nor can we be blind to that in discussions of political strategy, the first thing we need to do in order to assess its importance is understand the type of alternative it defends.

#### **4.1.1. What, then, does CGT defend?**

Today's Federal Railway Sector (SFF - *Sector Federal Ferroviario*), the railway section of CGT, was born in 1986 as *Sindicato Federal Ferroviario*. The year warrants an observation on the shared timeline of three of the important histories that I track through the thesis. The railway section of CGT was formed in the mid-1980s, just like SEMAF (the engine drivers' union), and around the time of the implementation of high-speed rail. The two unions, with a reputation for being the most confrontational in the company, represent opposed forms of unionism and have a fundamentally different relationship to HSR.

In the railway sector, the most often heard summary of the alternative that CGT defends is "public and social railway" (*ferrocarril público y social*). While the most recent articulation of the meaning of the proposal is found in a 2012 document, systematic treatments of this position could already be found in 2001, when the union published what they themselves consider to be, up until then, the most complete document<sup>40</sup> devoted to the railways. Put succinctly, the CGT alternative can be summed up in 10 demands, which, in turn, can be summarized as follows: the railways must continue to be a public service, placed above economic criteria favoring the interest of the few. The railways must be maintained as public property. Investments in railways must prioritize conventional rail and safety must be guaranteed above all other criteria. The railway system must maintain the concept of integrated planning and services. The accounting criteria must take into consideration the savings in external costs. Users must benefit from these savings in the form of adequate service provision. Accessible and subsidized tariffs must support the development of railway service. Railway transportation must be promoted as a priority transportation service. And,

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<sup>40</sup> SFF-CGT. 2001. "Nuestro modelo de ferrocarril. Una alternativa de transporte social y seguro."

finally, a common employment framework across the sector is needed in order to guarantee work conditions as well as safety, both in terms of work safety and transportation safety.

Much of the organized defense of the public railway by CGT has been carried out in isolation, if we consider the unions represented in the works' council. The common accusation raised by the majority unions is that CGT is not interested in syndical unity. Talking to full time unionists and union delegates makes it clear that unity of action is an important principle for CGT organizers. What is decried is the instrumentalization of syndical unity for the benefit of union bureaucracies and the so called "social pact". Unity above all should be the unity of action of the workers, and syndical unity has become nothing but a word that justifies the undermining of the former, CGT members point out. But as soon as one starts looking at the alternative which CGT defends it becomes clear that their outspoken articulation of a public and social railway is well removed from the ambiguous statements of the majority unions.



CGT Demo: June 29, 2013 (photo by author)

If CCOO and UGT, in their propaganda as well as in the statements of full time unionists, mostly submit any type of explanation to a vision of the unavoidable course of liberalization, in which unions most often come across as powerless organism forced to react rather

than act, and in which later developments are retrospectively projected upon prior choices, CGT grounds its critique in a very different type of analysis. The course of liberalization is not inevitable, and proof of this is the timeline of liberalization in other European countries. The reluctance of some governments to accelerate or impose measures in the direction of privatization of national railway companies is also a response to the pressure and projected

force of the workers. Differently from France, for example, unionists point out, much of what the company has gained or the government has imposed has been “gifted” by the majority unions and conceded by the workers. In this lies the difference between being defeated or being a part of a concession. The moral authority to claim defeat is granted only by the refusal to willingly submit to certain agendas. And the ways in which the institutional unions have entered pacts and negotiation is a trading in of that authority.

It could be argued that the consistent and unambiguous defense of a public and social railway is a straightforward extension of the anarcho-syndicalist principles of the organization to its railway section. In what follows I challenge such a view, and argue that the railway section of CGT is as much tributary to its broader vision of societal transformation as much as the contemporary organizational expression of that vision is heir to organizing within the railways. In order to understand the contemporary majority sector of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism we need to understand the history of its railway section and the specific challenges it has faced.

#### **4.1.2. The “how?” of the defense**

On one of the first occasions I found myself in the offices of the CGT railway section, Héctor, its general secretary, unlocked one of their computers for me, invited me to have a seat and pointed out the folders that probably contained documents of interest to me. “Get those, look at them, let us know what else you might need”. As I was going through the folders containing their propaganda material, carefully organized company documents and internal correspondence, it was obvious to me, as much as must have been the case for him, that I had access to all the documents stored on someone's personal computer and the union's shared network. Taken by surprise and humbled by the confidence placed in me, I diligently copied the material that he told me might be of use and was left wondering if there was anything distinctly interesting in what I had not. I later came to judge this situation as the extension of the great emphasis all those I talked to placed on transparency in the organization. Used to the regular abuse the word suffered under its promotion by anticorruption warriors of the establishment, I was not exactly prone to exhibiting great excitement over declarations of allegiance to it. Legalistic and narrow, the term, I found, was commonly used to justify abuse in plain sight by those who claim neutrality of the law or naively commit to the possibility of reforming institutions from within, most often on terms established by those we would like

to see outside of them. Having arrived at it by way of trying to understand a set of practices rather than by variations of impromptu discursive analysis kept my attention heightened. If the same word was used by other unions, shared terms had little to do with shared practice. A good metaphor for it was, I thought at the time, the difference between being seated in front of that computer and my first visit to UGT's password protected website.

Nearly every longer conversation I had with a CGT unionist or affiliate included some attention to the issue of transparency. But as I learned quite early on, the meaning given to it was not loosely moral, it was more profoundly operational and strategic. The type of transparency they advocate for is not merely procedural, it is a substantive transparency largely directed against the company itself. Outwardly, it is manifested in CGT's stand that there are no issues that speak exclusively to those within the company, and that anyone affected by or interested in what is happening in the railways should be granted full access to relevant information. Legal considerations should not constitute a limit. Inwardly, CGT's commitment to the principle is reinforced by their struggles to gain access to information. Complaining about the constant efforts at marginalization directed against them by the company as well as the institutional unions, CGT members have many stories to share about the way access to information has been hindered. They argue that one of the main reasons for participating in union elections is that without representation in the works' council it is impossible to gain knowledge of important developments in the company. About the constant attempts at raising informational barriers speak not only the stories of union members. Traces of it, accidental confessions as well as proud appropriations of it, abound.

If this is a problem that could be easily extended to any hierarchically organized environment in which different interests collide, it is certainly facilitated and complicated by the highly elaborate internal divisions and functional specialization in the railway sector. A problem that has been only aggravated by the accelerating pace of subcontracting, where invisibilization finds its expression in the most serious of indicators: the number of work related deaths. As those working in the railway sector know very well, subcontracting has increased the number of deaths and work related accidents, but the data is increasingly hard to gather and present in official figures. The chain of subcontracting, protected by increasingly diffuse legislation, is built in order to hide its own weaknesses.

But the how of the railway section of CGT is not exhausted in its commitment to

transparency. From my discussions with full time unionists and delegates, from attending events and demos, as well as from reading the union press, a few undoubtable characteristics of their activity emerged. Their organizational efforts are aimed at enlarging the sphere of debates about railway issues and reconsidering the meaning of labour organizing in the public sector. The question of whose problem are the railways is not a trivial one. Fundamentally, the railway section has worked at forming alliances with groups outside the railways, from users' platforms and environmentalist groups to local authorities in regions affected by the closing down of railway lines. CGT's vision of the defense of the public railway is in this sense a fully social one, claiming that the decision about what model of transportation we should choose, on a local as much as on a regional or national level, is a social and political issue, not a narrow technocratic or policy question. This conviction explains part of the effort they have put into elaborating accessible, but reliable and detailed enough documents that present the current predicament of the railways to a general audience. And, as Álvaro puts it, it works. When you present information in a certain way people understand the issues at stake.

I noticed, early on, that CGT unionists were much less inclined to immediately describe themselves as *ferroviarios*, although most of them, like other unionists I had talked to, had spent their entire working lives in the railway company. *Ferroviario* for them appeared to be a term that encapsulated the contradictions between the unity of workers and narrow corporatism. The lenience exhibited in relation to those outside the railway world proper, in the insistence that it was the duty of the militants to adequately communicate problems, appeared less available when it came to judging railway workers and their responses to the recent transformations affecting the railways. From depicting the difficulties raised by a model of assembly unionism, as an expression of direct participation of the workers, to judging the passivity of the workers under the changes imposed by the liberalization process, CGT militants make for severe critics.

Many of the workers, I was quite often told, had become acclimated, either reluctant to see the dangers facing the company or narrowly following individual interests. This was often attributed to the inertia of a still relatively privileged position in a state sector. But, as I was most of the times quickly reminded, the relative privilege was eroding quickly and it has for a long while not been true for the sector as a whole. The latter is a reality which CGT

militants constantly point out. Traditionally, they remark, CGT's support and organizational basis had been in the state sector, and in many ways union organizing in the state sector is easier than in the privatized or more precarious areas. The railway section was one of the first that started focusing on the need to extend the struggle to the entire sector, so as to include subcontracted workers. The railways have been severely affected by subcontracting, and if there had always been a degree of subcontracting that the railway sector relied on, the more recent years have seen a significant acceleration in the privatization of work, as it is referred to. The railway section of CGT has extended organizing to the subcontracted area and is a staunch defender of unitary agreements for the entire sector. The lessons learned in dealing with the relationship between state employment and the extension of subcontracting in the railways have been extended to the telemarketing sector, one dominated by subcontracted work. The strategies employed in the fastest growing sector in the union, one in which CGT plays the leading role at the national level, are many of them lessons learned in railway organizing.

#### **4.1.3. Railway history, otherwise**

One of the first times I stepped into one of the CGT offices I noticed, next to Durruti's photo, what looked like a recently taken photo of a CGT militant. Those were the only two photos displayed in the office, and I immediately wondered who the person was. It did not take long before I received an answer. I did not even have to raise the question. The name of the man in the photograph was Eladio Villanueva. He had passed away 5 years before, in the autumn of 2009. That was the first of many instances in which I was introduced to a topic by first being asked whether I had heard of him or knew who he was. At the time of writing this, it appears to me that the first time I saw the photo of Eladio Villanueva next to Durruti's was my first meaningful encounter with the two historical levels to which dominant historical representations within CGT belong: railway history as part of the history of twentieth century capitalism, and the personal and organizational history of the beginnings of CGT.

Flipping through CGT leaflets immediately alerts you to a story told differently. As opposed to the timid recuperation of state ownership that CCOO and UGT sketch, where the state owned railway is at best opposed to the private one, the brief historical sketch that the union promotes for general audiences speaks of the cyclical history of the railways. Twentieth century railway history, we are told, is a history of oscillation between public and

private ownership, where liberalization, privatization and (re)nationalization represent different moments in processes of capital accumulation. There are phenomena which cut across the public/private divide, it is argued. The discourse of the inefficiency of public management is one of them; the other is the constant issue of the railway deficit, an ever-present pressuring instrument. The capitulation of railway management to economic criteria occurs in both phases, with the state implementing policies that are designed to benefit capital and the private accumulation of profit. The phase which Spain is currently traversing corresponds to one of liberalization, which can be roughly said to be the European case, although there are renationalization tendencies as well (such as the case of the partial renationalization of infrastructure in the UK). So while defending the public railway, CGT appears to qualify the history of public ownership as state ownership. This qualification of public ownership, relevant to the question of self-management as well, is consistent with what one could schematically describe as the basic historical tenets of anarcho-syndicalism, according to which the state acts primarily on behalf and in defense of the ruling classes and capital owners. But that the broader historical vision is also informed by analysis carried out in consideration of the railways can be seen in the same reclaiming of the public.

Unlike for other productive sectors, where self-management of production or collective ownership have a straightforward meaning and referent, the question of the public railway and public ownership is more complicated. The “social” of the “public and social” is in many ways the shorthand expression of those complications. But before returning to the question of historical representation and the articulation of the public as reflected in the problem of self-management, I will briefly consider the second level at which historical representation informs CGT's vision of transformation.

#### **4.1.4. The double referent of a generation of organizers**

One of the first things that surprised me in my discussions with CGT representatives was how conversational they were with two referents. The institutional unions, CCOO and UGT, seen as aligned with company interest and invested into defending union privilege rather than workers' rights, and the currently much more marginal, but still ideologically important, articulation of anarcho-syndicalism as represented by CNT. My experience of talking to full time unionists of CCOO had been substantially different. In their case, I found that polarizations were generational. Young unionists confidently employed the division

between majority and minority unions. The latter usually made for some version of radical populists and the majority unions made for the responsible option. Differently from that, union members who had a personal memory of the reorganization of the union in the late 70s and early 80s, still primarily situated themselves against UGT, despite the overwhelming evidence that the similarities between the two unions are currently much more significant than that which sets them apart. But most of the CGT members I talked to located the history of the union and its organizational activity in relationship to both institutional unionism and the contemporary history of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism. And these were equally stories of personal and generational struggles that belonged to the history of union organizing in post-Francoist Spain.

Talking to full time unionists of the railway section, it became clear that most of them belonged to a generation that contended not only with how to face institutional unionism but also with how to build an anarcho-syndicalist organization for contemporary times. They were of a generation that took part, or remembered the beginnings of the organization and the splits that it had been marked by. And they all, invariably, brought their stories to Eladio Villanueva, and sometimes pointed at his photo. Eladio Villanueva passed away prematurely in 2009, at the age of only 49. But he was leaving behind a long trajectory of organizing alongside and from within CGT. Between 2001 and 2008 he had been general secretary of CGT, and prior to that he had been secretary of syndical action and general secretary of the federal railway union. He also had ample experience at the level of regional and local organizing, having been general secretary of the Barcelona local federation of CNT-Congreso Valencia<sup>41</sup>, as well as the Cantabrian Federation. At the time of his death he was involved in organizing the *Escuela Confederal de Formación*, in the founding of which he had played a central role.

His trajectory was not necessarily atypical, in as much as it involved moving between different levels and branches of the organization. It was not uncommon, I found, for long standing members to move internally within the organization in an effort to disseminate and

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<sup>41</sup> Breakaway section of CNT-AIT, formed after the 1979 CNT-AIT Congress. It was later joined by other sections of the former CNT-AIT. A defining moment in the history of unification was the 1984 Madrid Congress. After 1989 and the loss of the trial for the official name against CNT-AIT (today the minority section of anarcho-syndicalism), it took up the name CGT.

share various forms of experience. My conversations with CGT members as well as the reading of their union press converged in the direction of the humble appraisal of a comrade who had devoted himself fully to union organizing. In the words of an article published after his death in *Rojo y Negro*, titled “Two years without Eladio Villanueva”, he had

contributed to the development of broad international relations, favored the insertion of CGT into the struggles of the social movements, contributed to defining social action, laid the bases for non-sectarian relations with other syndical organizations, understood the paramount importance that training had to have, together with the recuperation of anarchist memory/history or the necessity to equip ourselves with *Ateneos Libertarios*. Of all these he was a pioneer and worked for developing them to full expression, all of it with a conception of modernity, an anchoring in present times and always with a crystal clear understanding that his project was CGT, that he was fully devoted, 24 hours a day, to working for CGT.” (*Rojo y Negro* 251:8)

Described as “railway worker, anarcho-syndicalist militant, natural born revolutionary and organizer” (“Surco y simiente” 2010:16), the portrait above is a summary of the many features that CGT members I talked to attributed to Eladio Villanueva. CGT's current preoccupation with safety and training were most commonly traced to his own militant priorities, but so was the need to establish broad alliances or to actively engage with social movements. A lasting influence of Eladio Villanueva can also be seen in the yearly commemorative article featured in *Rojo y Negro*<sup>42</sup> or the emotion with which he is referred to even by those who did not have close personal relations with him. Many of the written references to him usually include a certain type of disclaimer regarding his singling out as a militant, given his own and the organization's commitment to a certain type of programmatic militant anonymity, doubled by the belief that “no one is indispensable”. But, I found, in the cautious but profound homage to Eladio Villanueva's commitment to the organization, a different type of anonymization was at work.

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<sup>42</sup> CGT official union publication.



Portrait of Eladio Villanueva in Rojo y Negro, November 2010. ("No one is indispensable. Self-management is our strength.")

To speak about Eladio Villanueva was to anonymize oneself in the story of a generation that built the organization as it exists today. This was a generation that relied on the scarce resources of the 1980s to rethink both the potential role of an anarcho-syndicalist organization as well as to decide on the most effective forms of organizing. More than once I heard the recollection of the early years of the union, when disseminating information as widely as possible effectively meant jumping into a car and traversing the country to personally reach villages and remote areas, in an attempt to ensure the broadest reach of the organization. In this CGT was pioneering, and later the majority unions were forced by this model of diffusion to make changes in their own communication strategies. The company, I was also

told, had also learned across the years more about how to adapt to the union's strategies, and that made for another challenge in their own activity.

Today's CGT, as well as its railway section, is heir to their early years in all these ways: the effort to achieve things with fewer full time unionists, the encouragement to devote the resources of the full time unionists of the section to strengthening the organization and not just the railway section, and the active search for extending alliances outside the limits of the company. All this is indissolubly related to the organizing virtues of Eladio Villanueva. And to speak about him, as his contribution to the organization is kept alive, appeared to me, far from the occasional hesitation that this might happen at the detriment of the memory of other less prominent CGT militants, a way to ensure the anonymity of those who still work in the direction of organizing along the same lines. To speak about Eladio Villanueva is to speak about a generation, and to speak about the generation was in many ways a form of anonymizing those still currently working along the same lines. If there is a dividing line in terms of the prominence of militants, that, in the way the railway section presents itself and

thinks of itself, has less to do with an internal hierarchy, and more with a temporal division. Speaking about Eladio Villanueva was not simply a way of keeping alive his contribution to the organization, it was also a way to speak about the past so as to abide by the fact that no one is indispensable in the present. Every time his name was mentioned, the “I” in the story of the person I was talking to seemed to be effaced in favor of a story that was about ways of acting before it was about the people doing it.

#### **4.1.5. Self-management, the easy and the hard way**

The attempt to find contemporary answers for the old questions of anarcho-syndicalism is perhaps most evident in CGT's treatment of the question of self-management. In most of the conversations I had with CGT unionists I sooner or later brought it up. What, if any, was the role they still attributed to self-management at times when struggles seem to have become overwhelmingly defensive? I was surprised to mostly find my question taken up with organizational precision and realistic application to the contemporary situation of the railways. If some of those I talked to doubted the likelihood of the issue appearing on the agenda any time in the foreseeable future, no one among those I talked to approached the question as irrelevant or utopian. Many of the mainstream defenses of state ownership of the railways implicitly or explicitly relegate the issue to such a corner. In the arguments for the centralized control of the railways one can often see the roots of a defense of the strict organizational hierarchy that appears to have always been characteristic of the railways. That the two, however, stand in a complicated relationship and that self-management is a challenge to both, in different ways, is something that CGT militants seem to still know very clearly.

In my discussion with CGT members the question of self-management of the railways was most often one about understanding the nature of work and assessing the degree of workers' autonomy in the production process. Most unionists I spoke to took quite a bit of time to talk about the way in which various aspects of running the railways are interconnected, but also to describe the degree of autonomy of the different types of work involved in the running of a national railway. In the words of Álvaro, most of the essential tasks in the everyday running of trains are carried out by groups of workers independently of managerial intervention. As we further discuss the problem, he reminds me that the contemporary managerial structure of the railways is one which is mostly dominated by

economists, whose actual knowledge of the production process is often times very limited. Contrary to the idea that efficient organization is some natural emanation of top-down organization, workers know how to run a railway by themselves, that's the easiest part of the problem. That, however, is self-management narrowly defined. The vision CGT is trying to promote is a broad vision which extends self-management to broader social control. The question, he says, is not merely how to have the workers run the trains; the main challenge is how to extend decisions about the railways to users and potential users, or put briefly, how to turn the railway question into a social question about what kind of train we want and for what kind of society. And this brings us back to the problem of CGT's attempt to escape the strict company focus of unionism and the necessity to expand strategic alliances.

#### **4.2. Self-management from above**

The last decade has seen the rise or the reigniting, on academic terrain, of the dialogue between anarchism and Marxism. In the aftermath of the alterglobalist movement and seemingly responding to the wave of mobilizations that began with the Arab Spring, Marxists and anarchist academics have diligently taken to disputing the title of self-crowned theorists for popular movements in need of revolutionary guidance. The debates, in spite of the proliferation of writing (Franks 2012; Graeber 2004; 2009; Harvey 2015), seem to have moved around in circles rather than gain in depth with the passing of time. In this debate, on the one hand, we have David Graeber's caricatures of Marxists; to them stands opposed anarchists' reinvention of revolutionary practice for contemporary times. On the other, the condescension of those who have true theoretical rigor on their side, their Marxist companions, who seem to believe that anarchists refuse to engage power and are trapped by their own fetishistic concern for horizontalism. Anarchism, we are told, does not hold solutions of the type the transformation of advanced capitalist society requires. And thus David Harvey:

The big problems arise, however, when you seek and try to ask yourself the question how can the international division of labour be so orchestrated so that all of us have enough to eat and reasonable material need are met and that - right now that is organized, of course, partially through command and control structures of corporate capital and partly through market engagements and when you start to think about replacements of that you start to think about forms of coordination which ... require a form of political organization that is not horizontal, that can be rather hierarchical, and a lot of people on the left are rather hostile to that idea. But, as I

try to say, well, next time if you fly the Atlantic and you're half-way across the Atlantic and somebody says, "Well, flight traffic controllers in New York have gone into assembly-mode right now and they are going to discuss which airline should get priority landing," just imagine what you would think! There are many aspects of contemporary life that are now organized in what you might call 'tightly-coupled systems' where you need command and control structures. I wouldn't want my anarchist friends to be in charge of a nuclear power station [laughter from audience] when the light started blinking red and yellow and all that kind of stuff.<sup>43</sup>

The final aim of Harvey's irresponsible intervention is unclear.<sup>44</sup> A blunder at a conference does not count as a position, it could be said. But Harvey's caricature of workers' self-management, a history and tradition completely lost in its rephrasing as "horizontalism", is far from an accident. A clear articulation of Harvey's view of the relationship between Marxism and anarchism can be found in "Listen, Anarchist!" (2015). The text is a response to Simon Springer's provocation according to which radical geography should look for its roots in anarchism, rather than ossified Marxism (Springer 2014). David Harvey frames his response to appear as an invitation to a much less sectarian embracing of radicalism, one which would draw on the lessons of both traditions. However, we should not be fooled by the seeming conciliatory tone, but rather try to understand what kind of reconciliation Harvey talks about and what basis that would have to occur on. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in depth with Harvey's reconstruction of the anarchist tradition. The cynical reader could easily say there is not much to engage, given Harvey's reliance on one

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SNj1ttIQBY>

<sup>44</sup> Probably the most sympathetic reading would treat Harvey's response as an entirely defensive reaction to the rather farcical interventions on behalf of "academic anarchism". Springer's text, to which David Harvey responds, is in many ways a good illustration of a rather dishonest representation of the Marxist tradition and in this sense reveals the shallow foundation of most arguments in favor of anarchism in the academia. For a broader discussion on the misrepresentations that the proposition of an anarchist anthropology is steeped in see Buier 2014. However, the argument here seeks precisely to signal the narrowness of a debate that replaces the real movement of anarchist praxis with an ossified reconstruction of the anarchist tradition based purely on its otherwise marginal representation in the academic field. In the way David Harvey sets up the conversation with anarchism he refuses to challenge the misrepresentations of his interlocutors and therefore remains trapped in a historically inaccurate and politically dishonest reading of the anarchist tradition. However, it is fair to signal that much of his language and his reading borrows the terms of his opponents who labour under the label of anarchism. The fallacies entailed by this type of reconstruction of the Marxist and anarchist tradition extend beyond the debates about self-management. This discussion is a clear illustration of the way in which privileging academic history or academic historical representation can lead to silencing the real historical movement of both the anarchist and the Marxist traditions. It is therefore a clear illustration of the political implications of the production of history focus.

book (Ealham 2010) for describing the history of the anarchist movement in Barcelona up until 1937 and the misrepresentations and historical errors he consequently perpetuates.<sup>45</sup>

There is, however, something essential to the arguments in this thesis which concerns the way Harvey sets up his argument. David Harvey would have us believe that he is courteously giving voice to the anarchist tradition. In reality what he does is to conjure the specter of anarchism through the work and positions of a narrow range of US based academics who have built careers on adding the prefix “anarchist” to the title of their discipline. As such, anarchism is a tradition just in name, since in reality the only way in which Harvey engages it is as a sum of ideas reflected in the contemporary interventions of a handful of Western academics. While Harvey benevolently makes passing references to 2013 Brazil and Turkey there is no crack through which those events could actually transform our understanding of the relationship between the Marxist and the anarchist tradition. That is because for Harvey, there is no real historical movement corresponding to the relationship between anarchist theory and anarchist practice. Social relations and the conditions of production of theory have fully disappeared in his account of anarchism, which becomes an object with no real correspondence in the actual world.

Curiously, Harvey goes as far as invoking Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) to pinpoint how ludicrous the idea that capitalism would co-opt the organizing forms of the working class is. A strange choice indeed, since unlike Harvey, Boltanski and Chiapello seem to have fully understood the need to take seriously the social conditions of the production of knowledge. Their sociology of critique, unlike Harvey’s account of anarchism, leaves room for an analysis which, quite simply, acts on the assumption that the movement of ideas and revolutionary imaginaries does not correspond to the selected writings of David Graeber. While this might sound like a harsh evaluation, it is well earned by the fundamental act of violence perpetrated by Harvey’s writing. Harvey’s newly found idealism, in which anarchism is brought into being by the back and forth movement of the arguments of Murray Bookchin, James Scott, David Graeber, John Holloway and Noam Chomsky is not only a

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<sup>45</sup> Harvey’s range of historical errors (e.g. describing Spanish anarchism around the time of the Spanish Civil War as a localized urban movement with no structures of regional representation) is perplexing, as much as his invocation of Ealham’s book appears to be anecdotic rather than substantial.

dubiously partial and incomplete history of anarchist theory. It is, primarily, a view that disconnects anarchist thought from its actual conditions of production. It is a form of silencing the anarchist tradition as a true historical process by cleansing it of real historical actors.

To this type of recovery of the anarchist tradition we must oppose, urgently, one that recuperates it as a historical process. But, moreover, we must decenter our reading of it through the contemporary works produced for the American academic canon. The anarchist tradition is a paramount example of the fact that our narrow naturalization of intellectuals as privileged producers of knowledge quite simply does not hold water. It is rather ironic to hear that Harvey supports Syriza and Podemos “not because they are revolutionary but because they help open up a space for a different kind of politics and a different conversation” (Harvey 2015) yet seems to be oblivious to the fact that workers themselves might have considered how to carry out their work in the absence of managers. Perhaps it is time we truly opened up the space for a different kind of conversation. In the remainder of this chapter I further follow the anarcho-syndicalist response in the Spanish railways, where workers seem to have given some thought to the running of tightly coupled systems, as the conversation between Marxism and anarchism goes on undisturbed.



CGT demo (photo by author)

### 4.3. SF -Confederación Intersindical

In discussing the relationship between CGT and other unions I often came across the opinion that the minority union SF (*Sindicato Ferroviario*) was a union that was ideologically close to CGT, and sometimes that CGT's strategy for the future included winning over the base of SF. Many of the CGT militants I talked to seemed to be of the belief that the ideological tenets of SF are similar to those of CGT, and that the main differences between them lie in everyday practice, where SF, according to CGT militants, showed a willingness to compromise that did not correspond to its discursive position. Indeed, the first time I came across some of SF's propaganda I expected them to be close to anarcho-syndicalism, given their radical anti-privatization position as well as talk about self-management. I soon came to learn that SF was originally a breakaway faction from CCOO. The decision to form a separate union came after the railway section was pressured by the central organization into accepting the terms of an agreement that the railway section found unacceptable. It was then that approximately a thousand former members of CCOO decided to form SF. Today SF remains a minority union, but not a negligible one. With 2000 votes in the 2015 union elections (a 400 vote increase from 2011), SF has secured a representative in the work councils of both Adif and Renfe (Clarion no 43:18).

The first time I sat down to talk with Eduardo I heard a lot about the need for workers' unity, fighting for a railway run by the workers, strikes and sabotage, but also the historic achievements of the railways. Suburban rail was an impressive service, and as I learned from his anecdotes about arguing with dissatisfied travelers, not something to *belittle*. In the mix of workerism and identification with Renfe, one could easily discern an almost stereotypical representation of what being a *ferroviario* could mean. However, as soon as we approached the question of SF's relationship with CGT, his position changed to a much more defensive one. CGT, I was told, were simply too radical. "Not everything can be for free", I was reminded, as Eduardo appeared to believe that CGT argued for free travel on the railways. Later, Gonzalo, Eduardo's young friend, who I met during the annual SF congress to which I was invited to participate, voiced the same opinion. CGT are too radical, he believed. Company issues should have priority in the union activity, he told me. Over and over, with few exceptions, the SF members and delegates I met seemed to side with radical workers' action

but not with CGT's radicalism. "I don't know of any society in which anarchism worked", Fernando told me in what was a side conversation in our discussion about the unrecognized health problems of movement workers.

Among those present at the SF congress I met two generations of delegates, corresponding to the generational gap in the company. Most of the older delegates had over 30 years of service in the company. The young ones were in their early thirties or younger, demonstratively pessimist, most of them working for the subcontractor Nertus. They were being singled out by their older colleagues as the image of the precarious future of the new generations of workers. None of them displayed the proud workers' identity that their older colleagues did. If their older colleagues talked about the days in which the workers at Villaverde would stop work because of an issue as modest as the lack of toilet paper, they seemed to revel in displaying generalized pessimism. What united them with their older colleagues was dissatisfaction with the majority unions and a sense of the overall corruption of both the unions and the political mainstream. The representation of generalized hopelessness would be every now and then interrupted by the kind of emotion that political partisanship can so easily summon. Like their older colleagues, the young workers swayed to the left. Almost all identified as such. Some had been voters of Izquierda Unida (IU) but were now moved to vote for Podemos. If the latter seemed to be favored by many of those I met, in my conversations with SF members I encountered a host of the small(er) leftist parties in Spanish Politics: Podemos, IU, PCE, Equo and UPyD.

When discussing railway issues most of those I talked to immediately stood defensive against radicalism like the one they attributed to CGT. The referents of struggle that the older members of SF had were diffuse images of a combative, organized workforce belonging to an unspecified past or one loosely identified with the early years of transition and the 1980s. Company issues in the narrow sense and self-management as workers' self-management and autonomy dominated strictly the combative attitude of the majority of those I talked to. Many seemed to place some loose hope in Podemos or small leftist parties that claim to be heir to the massive waves of popular mobilization that have dominated Spanish politics throughout the last years. However, their willingness to convert railway politics into broader social questions seemed to be modest. Narrowly defined workerism appeared to have a correspondent in party politics that claimed allegiance to the spirit of 15M. Few seemed to

share CGT members' concern for connecting the railways as their field of struggle with broader social struggles. Corruption, electoral bankruptcy and dissatisfaction with workers' docility all appeared loosely, but unmistakably connected to the image of a lost or unachieved workers' unity at the company level.

The time I spent with SF members led me to believe that CGT militants' estimation of the ideological proximity between them and SF was an overstatement. In trying to understand the kind of rejection of radicalism that SF members expressed in their criticism of CGT, I found on the surface a fairly common rejection of what was understood as demonstrative populism or untenable rejection of compromise. But beyond the occasional repetition of stock images, there appears to be proof of the importance of CGT's reformulation of the question of self-management. In the rejection of CGT's radicalism by SF members a clear difference between workers' self-management and the broadened meaning attributed to it by CGT was visible. To CGT's social and public railway stands opposed SF's railway by the workers. And to the recollections of the 1980s efforts to broaden the alliances between the railways and those affected by line closures stand opposed the recollections of a time when the *ferroviarios* were still strong. The two stand separated by the belief that not everyone can travel for free.

#### 4.4. CNT

Before I met Daniel, who is a long standing member of both CNT and Renfe, he had been presented to me as a real railwayman. His younger comrade and fellow union member who introduced us had insisted I met someone who unlike him was a railwayman not by circumstance but by vocation. Daniel had joined Renfe in 1981, through one of the first public exams (*oposiciones públicas*) for jobs in the railways. Access to the company through the army had been abolished in 1980. At the time Daniel applied for three openings, but by the time he received notice of the other position he had received in the health sector, he was already content with his job driving trains. He entered Renfe as fireman (*ayudante de maquinista*), and being the son of a railwayman, he saw himself following a personal preference, as well as continuing a family tradition. He had, however, arrived to CNT before having joined Renfe. His first years as a CNT militant go back to the last clandestine years of the organization, so around the age of 17 he was already close to the union. The first years of the Transition found

him working in the construction sector in Asturias, and in 1977 he became involved in one of the most important strikes of the post-Francoist period. This has become a legendary conflict, which he remembers as perhaps the only strike in the post-Francoist years to have resulted in a full concession of the workers' demands. At the end of the strike he and many of his colleagues were blacklisted. The ensuing difficulty in finding construction work pushed him into searching for other types of work. These were the events that finally led him to continuing the family tradition, nowadays also taken up by his son, today an engine driver in Barcelona.

His early involvement in autonomous workers' organizing is still alive in his union affiliation. Today CNT's presence in the railways is negligible. This, however, was not the case in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the union still had a strong mobilizing capacity. Following the decline of autonomous workers' organizing in the 1980s as well as the internal conflicts which eventually led to the split between CNT and CGT, the role of the organization declined. But the type of unionism it defends is still important not only because of the relationship in which it stands to the majority sector of anarcho-syndicalism, but also because of its articulation of a certain model of assembly unionism. Regardless of how one evaluates the future of CNT as an organization, it is clear that its model of unionism goes well beyond the limits of the union as an organization. The conversation with CNT members is still, importantly, about the possibilities and horizon of autonomous workers' organizing in an era of the decline of majority unions and generalized discrediting of the type of unionism they represent. Minority unionism speaks closely to the most important oppositional movements of the last years. CNT's rejection of electoral politics, hierarchical organization and state unionism, and its defense of radical class politics and assembly unionism brings it closer to today's core political disputes in oppositional politics than any of the institutionalized unions.

The first times I met CGT and CNT members I expected to find the irreconcilable bitterness of militants defending two union models. What I encountered, however, was that today's organizational marginality of CNT had not translated, in the case of the railway militants, into a sectarian defense. Nor had it silenced the political conversation between the majority sector of anarcho-syndicalism and its more radical version. CNT members seemed to be thoughtfully appraising the contemporary relevance of a model of unionism that rejects

union elections and full time unionism, while CGT members were constantly conversing with criticism against participation in the works' council and the employment of full time unionism. The type of unionism CNT defends also extends, in this sense, beyond the limits of the organization, by way of the alternative it represents to CGT.

In terms of the analysis of the contemporary predicament of the railways, CNT and CGT coincide almost fully. Unambiguously opposing the division of the railways and the course of liberalization, CNT, just like CGT, rejects the model of development supposed by high speed rail. Firm defenders of conventional rail, CNT militants speak similarly about the privatization process not as new, but as the old, if not the original condition of the railways. They univocally reject the attempt to submit the railways to mercantile criteria, and argue that the railway deficit is nothing but the provisional expression of a political compromise at a given moment in time. Or, in Daniel's words:

From this point of view to talk or not to talk about deficit is purely a political decision, it is not economic. Because these are issues which cannot be expressed in economic terms. You cannot talk about the deficit of the health system. It is not a business that can generate profit. There are costs which must be assumed among all, which is why in economic terms there is no talk of deficit. The same would apply to the railways. What happens is that when they are interested, given that we are talking about numbers that you distribute between the 'owns and has' as you wish...well...if we are interested in counting what we pay in interest for the purchase of high speed trains we do. If we are not, we don't. If what we are interested in is to pull down the work of negotiating a collective agreement, or closing down lines, then we say that the deficit is extremely high. If we are interested in generating political trust, we say that Renfe is about to generate profit, like this thing from the other day. Well, then, the circumstances are exactly the same as 5, 10, 15 or 20 years ago. It is simply the form in which you can manipulate all this.

CNT's and CGT's analysis is informed by a similar historical vision. Arguments against liberalization are phrased historically, and opposition to high speed rail is informed by an analogous understanding of the contemporary phase of capitalist development. Railway section militants talk about coinciding and collaborating in shared fights. Yet when the removed possibility of a formal reconciliation is brought up, the skepticism is firm. "For those of us who lived through the years of separation...it is impossible to see any type of coming together. If it will happen, I assume this will be by way of the younger ones coming together

in the streets”, I am told by Jorge, a CGT militant who remembers the years of the division. The personal memory of the internal fights is claimed as an insurmountable barrier.

The main issue that divides CNT and CGT, participation in union elections, seems to be one which is, in turns, dependent on clashing historical interpretation. For the CNT delegates I talked to, CGT is the victim of its own strategy. The tactical use that they claim for participation in union elections is undermined by the demands of the electoral process. At election time, CGT also becomes absorbed by campaigning and trapped by the need to maintain its share of voters, I am told. Daniel tells me that there was a moment, in the early 1990s, when a minority section of CNT proposed to grant individual delegates the freedom to participate in union elections, if they found it made tactical sense:

It was a minority position (*that was rejected*) but it did not cause any type of division, nothing of the sorts; and here I am to this day. At the time, and faced with the debility of the organization, this could have made for tactical help, and not more, without any type of abandoning of principles, nor other stories. It didn't have to employ CNT as an organization. We were proposing accepting a certain type of incoherence: CNT says no to elections, but if you in your own company can place yourself on some list and use the opportunities offered by the works' council to do anarcho-syndicalism, why not? But the majority of the organization did not understand it like this and it did not pass. That which nowadays occurs in relation to the differences with CGT is that this, which could be posited at the time as a tactical question, converted into a matter of principle for the organization. And at election time, CGT as an organization, well.. let's say it starts conspiring as if the future of CGT would reside in union elections.

But nowadays, he argues, given the generalized corruption in the majority unions and the negative image of the works' council, presence in the works' council could even be considered a weakness. CGT members seem to believe otherwise. Laura, who tells me, half laughingly, that she sold herself by becoming a full time unionist, says that when you have the strength of workers behind you you do not need official power. That had been the case historically with CNT. But nowadays not to participate in union elections leaves you fighting without any instruments. The answer to the dispute cannot be solved simply by comparing affiliation rates. Whether assembly unionism at the company level requires of a strong organization, whether it precedes it or expresses it, appears rather as an unresolved question and a tactical challenge for the future. For the time being CGT does, however, make for the

only visible and organized internal opposition to the privatization of the railways. On the other hand, as Jesús points out, remembering the strike in opposition to the *acuerdo marco*, there is, even in the recent past, proof that workers can organize and win, absent the mediation of official unionism.

As I talk to Daniel and we take up the question of self-management, I find myself surprised, yet again, by the confidence and detail with which he starts to describe an alternative model for running the railways. The many years of identification with self-managed workers' struggle are not merely projected upon a fundamentally different reality, rather, they seem to orientate the attention to that which still confirms the relationship between autonomy in the work process and self-management:

I think it is an ideal sector for (workers') self-management. It is an ideal sector because most of the work in the railways requires important specific professional knowledge. And when somebody knows their trade it is very easy to manage it. As a matter of fact you have examples of co-management in the AVE since 1992. They sold it as self-management. They were using the term. In Madrid it did not happen, but in other areas, in Sevilla and Córdoba, high speed rail workers used to say they self-managed work because work was co-managed. Decisions were not. Which is a difference; but effectively shifts, timetables, holidays, these type of things were decided by the workers. They would get together in an assembly and decide the schedule, the work shifts etc. What was missing? The decision making aspect. The decisions about what vehicles to buy, what kind of lines to build, these type of things. But there are many professionals, a lot of them, including many of higher qualifications, many of them holding positions today, who were previously workers, qualified personnel, clerks, heads of stations."

Whether stressing the need to enlarge the meaning of self-management for running the railways, or focusing on the conditions of possibility of workers' self-management in the strict sense, CGT and CNT's opposition to the liberalization of the railways and high speed rail is not simply a defense of the state-owned, vertically integrated railway. However one judges the organizational limitations of today's anarcho-syndicalist unions, it is clear that in spite of the ever tightening straightjacket of defensive struggles, their vision of transformation has not succumbed to a vision of inexorable historical change. The referents of struggle of a generation that had to respond to the 1980s defeat of autonomous workers' struggle, strengthened by the historically phrased arguments of an anarcho-syndicalist reading of 20th century capitalism, back the oppositional stances of militants who defend the

possibility of a fundamentally different railway.

Jesús is telling me about SEMAF's corporatist defense of its own membership as it decided to internally divide the engine drivers by subordinating professional privileges to seniority. "Basically you are paid less although you do the same work." He goes on to explain the various types of privileges that are now tied to seniority and the splits between newcomers and old timers among engine drivers. He swiftly moves to summarizing his criticism: "But well, after all, time is not a military rank." Much like in the case of seniority, which assumes the one directional movement through successive stages of a life-long work cycle, CGT and CNT stand against an official history told in terms of two corresponding historical movements: decline and progress. To the historical determinism of the vision of the inevitable decline of conventional rail and the corresponding rebirth and forward march of high speed rail, what they oppose is not simply a political reading, but a historicizing argument. One which argues that the current development of the railways is both an expression of the structural constraints of capitalist development during the transition years, as well as the political choices which have favored one economic arrangement over another. The confrontation between the two visions is more than discursive. Between voluntary enlistment and conscientious objection to the violent order of history cleansed of possibility stand the silenced histories of alternatives.

### PART III The proven past

High-speed rail (HSR) is typically referred to as the most recent of revolutions in transport. Analysts of the cultural history of the railways have treated the 19<sup>th</sup> century railway as a central symbol of the rise of capitalism and modernity (Schivelbusch 1986[1977]; Revill 2012). Widely accepted as a “defining technology of the modern world and archetypal symbol of progress” (Revill 2012:8), the status of the railways as co-constitutive of both industrial capitalism and modernity is today beyond dispute. If HSR is yet to be established as a legitimate contender for a central place in the cultural histories of contemporary capitalism, its development is nonetheless accompanied by a proliferation of images of twenty first century modernization and progress. As I discuss in the first section of the thesis, the development of HSR in Spain is no exception to this. However, just like the nineteenth century railway, its implementation is accompanied by controversies that bring to the foreground not only the clash between different models of development, but also the different stakes of the actors brought together by the sweeping transformations HSR engenders.

The controversies surrounding HSR begin with its very name. While the provisional and relational character of something called “high-speed” is immediately evident, the technical definition of HSR usually identifies it as a certain combination of designated infrastructure and rolling stock that makes possible train operation at significantly higher speeds than those of conventional rail. Today there are various definitions of this technology. In the narrow, and commonly used definition, HSR must be an ensemble of newly built technology. Otherwise put, HSR, in this understanding, is the material expression of a type of rail service the maximum speed of which requires the construction of new infrastructure and rolling stock. With increasing frequency, this type of rail service is today designated as “very high speed”. The EU definition belongs to a second category of definitions, which rests on a broader classification, and includes not only “very high speed”, but also already existing infrastructure upgraded for a new maximum speed.

The technical definition employed at the EU level designates HSR as a combination of infrastructure and rolling stock built for operating at speeds above 250 km/h (and above 300 under certain conditions) and lines specifically upgraded for travel at above 200 km/h.

On the ground, HSR is materialized in a more complicated infrastructure, as HSR systems get to be differentiated according to whether they represent an exclusive infrastructure (designated tracks and rolling stock isolated from conventional rail) or whether they represent a mixed infrastructure, in which conventional trains can run on HSR tracks, or designated HSR rolling stock can be operated on conventional lines (see Campos and de Rus 2009). If for most people HSR gets reduced to stock images of “those super-fast trains”, without a necessary rupture or discontinuity with conventional rail, in practice the HSR classification implies a discontinuity with a technology identified as “conventional”, unsuited for achieving the new potential maximum speeds. Under EU legislation, Spain has had to incorporate in its operations the broader definition, but in practice for a long while HSR in Spain was understood as what is commonly designated as “very high speed”, and the Spanish AVE project has been broadly developed with this type of understanding. As a matter of fact in Spain there is a record of failing to propose “high speed” as a legitimate companion to “very high speed”, and the difference between *alta velocidad* (used to designate “very high speed”) and *velocidad alta* (“high speed”) has become politicized (see Audikana 2012; Libourel 2011).

The flagship numbers of the speed wars on rail are today 320 km/h as a maximum speed for trains in operation, while the world speed record today is held by Japan, where in 2015 a passenger train reached 603 km/h. If the sensationalist potential of these numbers is fully exploited in the fashioning of the image of HSR globally, the reality of actual HSR operation, better captured by average speeds, brings it closer to numbers more fathomable by the average traveler. In Spain, in 2015, the average speed of a commercial ride was 222 km/h, and on the website of ADIF the reader is immediately reminded that this makes for a higher commercial speed than that reached in France and Japan. But the impact of “very high speed” and “high speed” is certainly less spectacular when looked at in terms of average performance or when measured against the maximum speed that can today be reached through the deployment of technologies classified as “conventional”. These can also bring maximum travel speeds in the range of 200 km/h. Far from trying to further naturalize the speed rush as a one directional competition, the reason I bring in these numbers is to already point to the provisional and political character of the taxonomies into which the elaborate ensemble designated as HSR is fit.

The beginnings of the technical assemblage that is today designated as HSR are to be found with the by now iconic Japanese bullet trains, which were operational as early as 1964. It took another 17 years for the first European HSR to become operational. 1981 saw the inauguration of the first French TGV line, on the Paris-Lyon route, the inauguration of which was an important precedent for the development of the first Spanish HSR line. The next European country to launch a HSR service was Italy, in 1988. Spain, today unmatched leader of European HSR, inaugurated the first line in 1992. At present, the global leader is China, with over 20,000 km of HSR constructed since 2008. Today, according to UIC, there are almost 30,000 km of HSR across the world, and over 3500 high-speed trains in operation.

Respect for the environment, safety and efficiency are the common tropes of the HSR-friendly narratives. However, the development of HSR is far from uncontroversial. The combination of extremely high financial costs, a mixed environmental record and contested territorial effects has turned HSR globally into a highly disputed technology. The sleek images of a second railway revolution promoted by the defenders of HSR are well removed from the social and economic realities required and engendered by this system. Contesting its meaning as a force of development, the critics of HSR construct it as an elite service that aggravates territorial imbalances at the cost of massive financial investment and environmental degradation.

This third, and last section of the thesis looks at the origins and development of the HSR project in Spain, discusses the historical representations it is embedded in and locates the development of HSR in relation to the process of liberalization. In chapter five I look at the early history of the AVE and its current status, and try to show that both at its origins, as well as contemporaneously, the history of the AVE was essentially constructed as a “revolution without alternatives”. This process can become fully understood only when the AVE regains its place in relation to that which has become designated as conventional rail. To proclaim the AVE as a necessary railway revolution first required declaring the death of conventional rail, and the railway policy of the first PSOE government played a central role in this. Contemporaneously, the same type of vision of inevitable modernization characterizes the now convergent railway policy of PP and PSOE. Presented as an engine of growth and territorial cohesion, HSR has consolidated as a symbol of integration. To remain outside the network has become a powerful symbol of disconnection. Critique and

opposition to HSR both reproduces and confronts the dominant historical visions its proponents try to impose. As I show throughout chapter five and six the debates surrounding HSR are further proof of the fact that conflicting visions of development are also fundamentally about competing historical explanations.

In chapter six I look further into the anchoring of visions of progress and decline through certain claims to truth. With a vision of progress broadly synonymous with economic development, defenders of HSR must produce the type of evidence that would support this dominant historical interpretation. But the record of the AVE is actually very complicated in this regard, since it has not managed to meet the economic criteria that the commercial orientation of the railways requires. HSR was born as the twin of the liberalization process, since they were both seen as solutions to firmly situating the railway of the twenty first century onto a competitive basis. Yet, the objectives of liberalization are today threatened by the very conditions brought about by the AVE. In order to contain this contradiction defenders of the AVE have had to mobilize a range of instruments and calculative devices. This is a contradiction further heightened by the fact that EU policy has enabled the development of the AVE, at the same time as it has constrained its operation.

## 5. A Revolution without Alternatives

### 5.1. No railway quite like this

Since the early 2000s, infrastructure policy in Spain has been dominated by the accelerated development of the high-speed rail network. Spain is currently the country in the EU with the largest share of spending on rail (in relation to GDP) and the lengthiest of networks among OECD countries. In effect, in 2011, at the height of the global financial crisis, out of every 5 miles of HSR under construction in the world one corresponded to a mile of AVE, and with China excluded, half of the km under construction in the world were being undertaken in Spain (Bel and Albalade 2012). In early 2016, the Spanish high speed rail network in use extends to over 3,100, or roughly 10% of the world's total HSR. To this should be added another 2800 km under development. Spain is currently the uncontested global leader in terms of the size of the network in relation to population and territory. In terms of the absolute length of the network Spain is globally surpassed only by China. The bulk of this network was built between 2005 and 2013, period during which the network multiplied its length approximately 5 times. Between this same period the number of cities connected by HSR grew from 7 to 31. The first high speed rail inaugurated in Spain was the Madrid-Sevilla line, in the year 1992.

When browsing through the facts and figures of HSR as presented on the International Union of Railways webpage, the foremost rail transport international body, the celebratory history of HSR is told with almost no reference to Spain. The same holds true for many of the global surveys of HSR by promoters of it. Spain, a global champion of HSR implementation on the national level, is conspicuously invisible in international accounts of the success of HSR. Yet, today's Spanish high speed rail network is by all accounts exceptional. According to official data, the total amount of investment into HSR infrastructure, from its inception, adds up to approximately 45,120 million euro. For the last 24 years this would mean a *daily* investment of approximately 5 million euro into HSR, but if we adjust the numbers to reflect the actual pace of investment we arrive at a projected daily expense of 40 million euro for the last decade. In yearly figures, this means a 1,880 million euro investment per year, although the actual pace of investment as we have seen

has been much more accelerated during the last 10 years. For a sense of comparison, the total public spending on education in 2015 was of 2,273 million euro, social services received 1,944 million euro, the budget for health was 3,864, while the entire public spending on something known as “culture” was 749 million euro. It is true that the yearly figures for investment in high speed rail add up to only a fourth of the total public spending on the police and the prison system.



**HSR line in use, December 2015**

Spain is also exceptional in terms of the figures that account for passengers on these trains. The 300 high speed trains that run daily in Spain, connecting 80 municipalities, transport over 100,000 people. The total number of passengers for the AVE exceeded 31 million in 2015<sup>46</sup>, a record number in terms of yearly figures. Expressed in daily thousands

<sup>46</sup> <http://railpressnews.blogspot.hu/2016/01/el-ave-alcanza-un-record-de-casi-31.html>

and yearly millions, the official administrator of the Spanish high speed rail infrastructure would have us believe these are numbers that speak of success.<sup>47</sup> The meaning of these figures remains rather opaque, though, until we compare them to the equivalent numbers for the smaller networks of Japan or France, which, according to official data, in 2015 transported 355 million and respectively 130 million passengers.<sup>48</sup> Put otherwise, Spain has an impressively long, an impressively expensive and an impressively underused high speed rail network.



HSR line in use and under development, December 2015

<sup>47</sup> For details see [http://www.adif.es/es\\_ES/infraestructuras/lineas\\_de\\_alta\\_velocidad/lineas\\_de\\_alta\\_velocidad.shtml](http://www.adif.es/es_ES/infraestructuras/lineas_de_alta_velocidad/lineas_de_alta_velocidad.shtml) and the ADIF yearly reports.

<sup>48</sup> For comparative figures see <http://www.uic.org/highspeed>.

## 5.2. A Story of Origins

### 5.2.1. From distinctive policies to exceptional railways

The story of Spanish HSR, commonly designated as AVE, or *Alta Velocidad Española* (“Spanish High-Speed”), begins with the inauguration of the Madrid-Sevilla line in 1992. In the 24 years that have passed since the first HSR journey in Spain, the AVE (bird in Spanish) has become a symbol of national development and 21<sup>st</sup> century modernization. As the authors of a recent volume on high-speed rail observe, “such nomenclature of an identifying nature is unique among developed countries”, with all states but Korea (*Korea Train Express*) designating national HSR systems without markers of national identity (Albalade and Bel 2012:95). The AVE, today often referred to as the “Spanish model” of HSR development, has well earned its national profile.

The origins of Spanish HSR are to be found in the decision to modernize the Madrid-Sevilla line, which goes back to 1986. At the time commonly designated as the Brazatortas-Córdoba project, the modernization of the line was not planned from the very beginning as a turn to HSR. It took more than two years of announced and revoked plans until the turn to HSR was made official, without virtually any public debate. The decision to build a new HSR line, rather than upgrade the existing one, was shortly followed by the announcement of the historic decision to build the new line in standard international gauge and not the Iberian one. The event made the media rounds as Spain's “entrance into the High Speed Rail Club”. The imagery of international connection was not incidental. The railway modernization plan that HSR was part of follows quite closely the timeline of Spain's accession to the European Community. The year of the announcement of modernization of the Madrid-Sevilla line is the same as that of Spain's entrance to the EC, 1986. During its first year of existence, the Madrid-Sevilla line, and Spain's “entrance into the HSR club” became authoritative images of European integration. The decision to build the new line in international gauge became part of the discourse of integration. The Iberian gauge, a powerful symbol of railway history, has also been a forceful image of Spain's distinctiveness and isolation, sometimes of its backwardness. With the decision to construct the new HSR line in international gauge, the socialist government was strengthening its determination to make Spain a fully European country. And in this sense, the international gauge represented the material foundation that

would make international connection possible. The early AVE was, in this sense, not only a revolutionary technology transporting Spain to the forefront of European modernity, but also the carrier of Spain's material integration into the European network from which it had been separated by the Iberian gauge since 1844.

The successful completion and inauguration of the Madrid-Sevilla line was firmly established in the 1990s as a victory of the socialist government. For the next decade the Madrid-Sevilla line became a story of success and the articulation of a momentous turning point in Spanish railway history. The new railway represented a new era, and heralded a fully European Spain. It was nothing short of the revolution unfolding. The Madrid-Sevilla line has also become an important referent within the shorter history of Spanish HSR. Its history has been made into evidence of the potential of HSR when thoughtfully implemented. The line's successful attraction of passengers from competing modes of transport, air and highway, serves as a constant illustration of the competitive strength of HSR.

Nowadays, the story of HSR is still mostly told as one of a rupture and an irreversible turning point in railway history. The story of HSR is backed by another teleology, that of the inevitability of the modernization process. In most contemporary accounts of the 1980s, as already seen in the previous sections, the 1980s figure as a dramatic era in the history of Spanish rail. Having reached its historical low, rail was facing the threat of extinction. Between its unprecedented low market share and the burdening deficit of the railway company, the very existence of rail as a mode of transport was at stake. Under these conditions, the choice became either that of abandoning rail or radically breaking with the past. The decision to invest in HSR became the symbol for the latter. Today the teleology of rupture is firmly established in most of official railway history. The HSR revolution is a historical account that as already discussed accompanied HSR from the beginning of its implementation. But the establishment of this narrative as a dominant historical representation also rests on several layers of silencing to which I now turn.

The socialist government's commitment to HSR was from the very beginning presented as a historic decision that would put an end to decades of decline threatening the very existence of the national network. Amidst a generalized atmosphere of hopelessness, fueled by decades of declining market quotas in both passenger and freight transportation, the overall disinvestment and poor state of the national network, and, most importantly, the

constant pressure represented by the company's ever rising public deficit, the decision to invest in HSR was infused with messianic properties. Entering what was commonly described at the time as the “HSR club” represented a genuine rebirth of the railway and a jump over centuries, from a railway that still belonged to the 19th century to a future that put Spanish rail at the vanguard of 21st century innovation. The most common trope accompanying the presentation of the investment plans was at the time “*el ferrocarril tiene futuro*” (“The railway has a future”), the accompanying descriptions of which suggested that more important than the projection into the future were the corollary images of a shiver inducing past. Or, in the words of Eduardo Romo, president of the *Caminos de Hierro* Foundation for Investigation and Railway Engineering:

Without HSR, our mission, railway technological innovation, would be impossible. Is it an exaggeration to claim that the N.A.F.A. project was the gate through which our railway exited the 19<sup>th</sup> century to enter the 21<sup>st</sup>? (*Via Libre, Especial veinte años de alta velocidad* :53)

In opposition to the seizure of the future stood the prior condemned existence of a railway heading towards extinction, burdened by its own inadequacy in relation to the necessities of a developed contemporary society. Most historical recollections of this process, as discussed in chapter 2, accept and reproduce the primary elements of this narrative: the decision to invest in HSR represented a change of paradigm; this decision belongs to the mid-1980s and it represents a definitive rupture with the earlier railway. The other of HSR, I will argue, is concrete as much as it is elusive. In effect, securing support for HSR required a sustained reproduction of the antagonist of HSR.

The majority of contemporaneous accounts of the decision, as well as typical recollections of it, evoke either an elusive sense of that hopelessness or a standard description of the inexorable end of conventional rail, burdened by its obsolescence. Revisiting the prior contemporaneous coverage of railway issues and following its traces in the recollections of those with a personal memory of the period suggests a rather different course of events. What is conventionally described as an era of linear decline and generalized hopelessness was in reality a period of profound clashes between various models for reorganizing the railways. It was also a period during which debates surrounding the reorganization of the railways gained impressive public prominence. Contemporary historical accounts, in the form of academic history or official company history, marginalize

both decisions taken and options forgotten in the years immediately prior to the announcement of the turn to high speed rail.

The difference between the dominant historical readings and the one I propose in this chapter is perfectly captured by looking at the opinion of Muñoz Rubio and Vidal Olivares regarding 1980s railway policy. According to the prominent railway historians, PSOE, throughout its first mandate, was merely carrying out the program established by UCD in the late 1970s (Muñoz Rubio and Vidal Olivares 2001). On the surface, this view would contradict the idea of a revolution in railway transportation the primary agent of which was the socialist government. But this is indeed a surface impression. More deeply, the view of the full continuity between PSOE's program and the UCD agenda and the dominant representations of the HSR revolution are both instrumental in silencing the discarded alternatives and conflicts of the era. On the one hand, Muñoz Rubio and X's emphasis on the continuity of the program between PSOE and UCD does not contradict the narrative of the HSR revolution; it merely clouds the question of who its primary agent was. But as already discussed, Muñoz Rubio's own work, together with the bulk of Spanish railway history, is instrumental in reproducing the idea of a 1980s railway revolution. On the other hand, accounts critical or supportive of the view of the Madrid–Sevilla line as a socialist victory rarely, if ever, question the turn to HSR as a change of paradigm and they almost always assume the inevitability of this radical modernization program.

In opposition to this, in this chapter I argue that if there's both continuity and rupture with the previous era in the 1980s socialist railway program, this was articulated in a fundamentally different way from what dominant historical representations would have us believe. With regard to the late 1970s, the first PSOE government brought fundamental changes to the way railway management was constructed and railway policy conceived, even if overall it remained consistent with a long history of marginalization of railway transport. Essentially, what was achieved under the PSOE government was to ground in a fundamentally different way railway policy. This, even when the railway policies of different governments coincided, had important implications for the future of the railways and the type of possibilities it opened or foreclosed. At the same time, this regrounding of railway policy made it possible to establish not only a continuity, but a definitive legitimation for the effective marginalization of conventional rail. The HSR revolution, and the dominant

historical narratives it is anchored in, are fundamental to erasing the conflicts internal to this transformation. Told as a history of the inevitability of rupture, the narrative of the HSR revolution is an essential instrument in silencing the alternatives of the era. The “inevitable revolution” is the affirmative moment and discursive articulation of almost three decades of railway policy that must appear as the only possible course of action.

### 5.2.2. PGF

The transport policy of the UCD government, the first post-Francoist government, saw the birth of the first massive modernization plan for the railways. The year 1979 marks the birth of the *Plan General de Ferrocarriles* (PGF – General Railway Plan), a planning document that had its origins in the 1978 *Libro blanco del transporte* (White Paper for Transport). The latter is a document which, indeed, as other commentators have noticed, already contained some of the main planning directions that would take root in the 1980s. Concerned with delineating the temporal horizons of railway planning, it proposed the implementation of management contracts, the delimitation of infrastructure and service provision, opted for railways' specialization in freight and metropolitan passenger services and called for a greater autonomy for the railway company, Renfe. The PGF was the specific planning document that took the propositions of the *Libro blanco del transporte* to the railway sector. Similarly to subsequent foundational planning documents, the PGF conceded both the poor state of the railways and their poor standing within the national transport system as well as the need to strengthen the specialized competitive advantages of the railways.

Unlike the planning documents that would eventually become the foundation of railway policy in the 1980s and 1990s it explicitly rejected the development of HSR. From the several scenarios it analyzed, the PGF supported a policy of modernization based on the upgrading of the existing conventional network, with a view towards maximizing the social benefits of the national railway system. Importantly, it discarded both the HSR alternative and the radical downsizing of the existing conventional network under a policy of financial profitability. And, essential to the argument that I pursue here, it identified underinvestment as the main cause of the problems facing the railways. The announcement of the PGF stirred great hopes within Renfe and was hailed as a vote of confidence for a mode of transport that needed to recover its former centrality.

The celebration was short lived. The arrival to power of the first socialist government in 1982 meant the abandonment of the PGF and an important change of course in railway policy. This was not achieved overnight, but was based in rather elaborate work that was meant to reveal the “true state” of the railways. The 1983 governmental commission for the analysis of the railways played an essential role in this. Known as the “Roa Commission”, the report it published in 1984 was central to defining the future railway policy of the socialist government. The conclusions of the report elaborated by the Roa Commission would end up reflected in the second management contract between Renfe and the government: the 1984-1986 management contract (*Contrato-Programa*). The report also represented an important precedent for the elaboration of the *Plan de Transporte Ferroviario* (PTF), which would become the foundational document for the railway policy of the second socialist government. Against the discarded PGF, the new direction in railway policy placed the emphasis on the poor management at the level of the railway company. The abysmal results of the national railway company were to be explained primarily by the managerial philosophy that Renfe embodied rather than by systemic underinvestment and governmental neglect. This shift in explanation would become the foundation of the vision of the new generation of railway managers that began with Julián García Valverde. The objectives of García Valverde’s administration were aggressively carried further during the presidency of Mercè Sala.

### **5.2.3. A contemporaneous account**

An interesting reflection of these years can be found in *Vía Libre*. A revisiting of the issues published during the first half of the 1980s gives a picture of the swift changes of plans that marked the period, and constitutes a good entry point into the important ideological clashes intrinsic to those changes. Perhaps one of the most revealing traces of the silenced importance of those years is in the very change of tone in the coverage of railway news by the magazine. The claims of political neutrality that accompanied years of following the official company line in reporting had also been reflected in formal editorial choices. While the magazine diligently recorded all official changes at an institutional level, it had always carefully filtered them so as to construct the image of a conflict free environment, in which facts could be carefully removed from any polemic context. Whether reporting under the official corporatist line of the Francoist regime, or during the first Transition years, the effort

to maintain the appearance of distanced neutrality had for many years characterized *Vía Libre*.

The first half of the 1980s records a change of tone unlike before or after the mid-1980s. The announcement of the PGF was enthusiastically reported on in the magazine. Interviews with higher management and even the readers' mail rubric at the time capture a sense of excitement for the unprecedented scale of announced investments. This was the period in which the trope "the railways have a future" made its appearance for the first time and images of the return of the railways to the center of infrastructure policy proliferated. "The railways are called upon to be the great environment of collective transport", records the magazine the opinion expressed by the then president of Renfe (*Vía Libre* 195:6). Heralded as the potential star project of 1980s infrastructure development, reporting on the PGF was accompanied by lavish descriptions of the historic moments Renfe was about to experience:

The past can here serve as a lesson for redressing or at least for not repeating those mistakes. What is certain is that today we are living through the hope that the historic moment of Spanish rail has finally arrived. This mode of transportation, with a long history and promising future, as proven by international experience and demanded by the new socio-economic circumstances, can convert into one of the most important national projects of the decade of the 1980s. (*Vía Libre* 200)

In *Via Libre*, initially the news of the withdrawal of the PGF produces little more than the swift shift from hyperbolic reporting to an expected quasi-silence. By April 1983, the magazine seems to have recovered from its hangover and is ready to report through the official lens, as statements about the need to commit to a realistic assessment of the financial situation of the company and concerns about the constant increase in production costs begin to proliferate. But within a few months the tone of reporting changes again, as the magazine shifts to one of the few moments in which it directly engages into a conflictual situation and overtly expresses some form of partisanship. The introduction to an interview with Ramón Boixadós, president of Renfe between 1983 and 1985, and the first president appointed by a socialist government, is worth quoting in full:

Euphemisms do not hold. The company RENFE is suffering from a tough and generalized critique coming from the mass media. A preliminary report of the Commission for the Study of the Railways (Comisión de Estudios de los Ferrocarriles), created by the government in response to the 'difficult financial situation of the railways', has been the starting point from

which the commentators have arrived at alarming conclusions in relation to RENFE and its future as a company and social service.

Having identified the grounds on which the lines of attack against the company began to be formulated, the editorial intervention moves on to speak about its aftermath:

Naturally, public opinion has been sensitized as the creditor of a state dependent business organization, which these days has been considered, with barely any clarifications, as a 'true bottomless pit of losses' (*ABC*, 10th of October). On the other hand, all this has meant a battery of criticism of the thousands of employees of the company, and equally, of the numerous companies that directly or indirectly depend on the railway activity. Among the personnel of the company it is easy to detect an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty. This comes across in some of the employees' letters to the newspapers, and the same letters also show a spontaneous reaction to that which the press is claiming. *VÍA LIBRE*, whose mission is to serve the railway, and those who make its existence possible, in its most noble meaning as a service to the collectivity, cannot stay at the margins of this generalized mood. And for this it turns to the most authorized part, the president of the Network, don Ramón Boixadós, in order to clear up for our numerous readers the questions that arise from this situation, which is reflected in the more or less slanted daily coverage by the media. (*Vía Libre* 237)

The sway from the seeming habitual neutral reporting of the magazine is a reflection of the magnitude of the attack that Renfe was suffering at the time. But more importantly, as the previous quote indicates, it records a now mostly forgotten or silenced clash between a time at which Renfe was still defined, from within the company, as the provider of a social service and the major redefinition of the role of the company as the deliverer of a commercial service that was implemented with the arrival to power of the socialist regime. Up until 1986 traces of this conflict abound, either in the explicit defense of the company as a provider of a social service, or in the ever more settled calls for unity in carrying out the necessary adjustments required by the unsustainable financial situation of the company. Between explicit references to a grim future and implicit images of workers' unrest, the reader of *Vía Libre* can follow the unfolding of the new institutional logic that was being put in place with the objective of turning Renfe into a commercial company operating in a competitive environment.

Most recollections of this period note the establishment of the management contracts and generically describe it as a period of modernization when the first real efforts to answer the demand for a modern, commercially adequate service were made. Almost none mention the PGF and its abandonment as more than a cursory detail. The media campaign targeting Renfe is forgotten but for passing remarks about the public's dissatisfaction with an

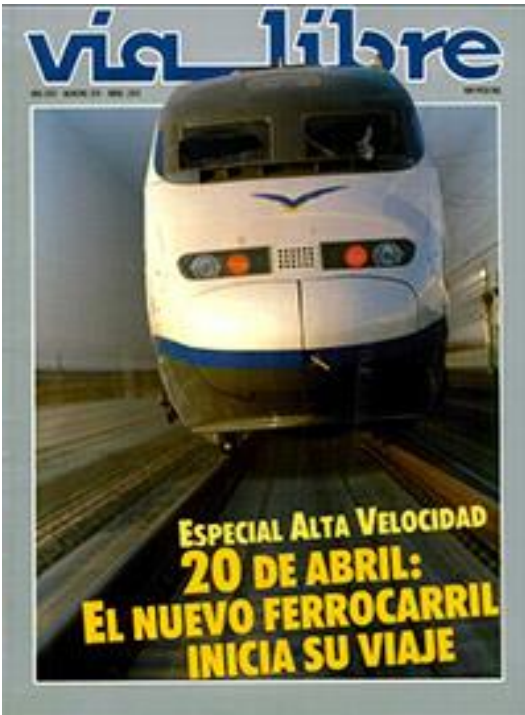
outdated service provision. In October 1983 (issue 237) *Vía Libre* was reassuringly restating the words of the company president Ramon Boixadós, “In no case will Renfe take the decision to close down lines” (237:5). By December, the same magazine was announcing that the closure of lines would begin in January 1985, and was quoting minister Enrique Baron describing it as a painful but necessary measure. Within less than two years the biggest closure of lines in the history of Renfe had been completed. An aspect today rarely mentioned save for the few fighting against the contemporary closure of lines. The cover of issue 273 announced Spain’s entry into the “high speed rail club”, immediately followed by a Fiat car advertisement on the first page and ample coverage of grandiose statements about the most important decision in the 20th century history of Spanish rail. In the words of Juan García Valverde, the decision to build the first HSR line marked a conceptual break with a period of almost two centuries: “The president of Renfe announced decisively that 500 years from the discovery of America we are going to reach Sevilla from Madrid in three hours, and this with 50 years of Renfe.” (273:9)

The *Vía Libre* coverage preserves the traces of a series of events today mostly invisible in official histories. In the aftermath of the publication of the report of the Roa commission, Renfe became the target of a media attack spearheaded by the daily *ABC*. Having picked up the conclusions of the report, the daily led a virulent campaign that constructed the company as a bottomless drain of public resources. The campaign picked up widely spread sensibilities of the era, centered around very negative evaluations of the services provided by Renfe, but was also advancing, if in more virulent terms, the conclusions of the Roa report. The coverage in *Vía Libre* spoke to the repercussions of a “truth revealed from within the company” (as discussed in chapter two), which essentially made it possible to attack Renfe as being at the root of the railway problem. As seen in chapter two, this essentially translated into a public attack against a workforce aggressively portrayed as undeserving public employees, and internally into a conflict between socialist modernizers and their opponents, seen as resistant Francoist administrators. But importantly for the problem of HSR, this was also a crucial moment in decisively shifting the explanation of the decline of the railways towards a managerial problem. The railways were indeed in decline, and they had to recover their former centrality by becoming commercially viable. This was, indeed, something that the UCD and PSOE governments had agreed on. But differently from the formulation of this

question under UCD, the new PSOE government created the conditions for the problem of the railways to be viewed not as a problem of underinvestment, but as the failure of a management model. The birth of HSR belongs to this constellation of transformations and cannot be adequately understood outside of it.

#### **5.2.4. From underinvestment to mismanagement and the promise of HSR**

Looking back to the early days of Spanish HSR the making of the Madrid-Sevilla line as a socialist victory becomes apparent. But, importantly, in order to fully understand the contemporary meaning of the Spanish HSR revolution the multiple silences embedded in the narrative of the socialist victory must be revealed. The early decision to invest in HSR was portrayed against the inevitable decline of conventional rail, and this up until today, remains the standard narrative. What this obscures and silences is the origins of HSR in an era of massive cutbacks and austerity policy spearheaded by the socialist government. This, unlike contemporary historical accounts suggest, was not the only way forward. The grounding of the socialist government's policy occurred in the context of a change of diagnosis in which poor management at the company level became the main culprit of the poor state of the railways. The work of the 1983 Roa Commission was essential to grounding this new orientation. The diagnosis would trigger a new planning orientation, with HSR subsequently becoming part of the modernization program that got constructed as the only possible remedy and alternative to the dramatic situation of the national railways. This, however, is not a unique episode in the history of silencing alternative development possibilities. The discourses surrounding infrastructure policy in the 2000s plays a similar role in constructing HSR as an "inevitable revolution".



**Front page of *Vía Libre* in April 1992:  
"The new railway begins its journey"**

### 5.3. Back to the future (II)

#### 5.3.1. The case for the AVE

If the origins of the Spanish HSR project are tied to the history of the Madrid-Sevilla line, today's HSR network can only be understood in relation to the developments in infrastructure policy in the 2000s. As already pointed out, the inauguration of the Madrid-Sevilla line was widely perceived in the 1990s as a socialist victory, and throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s the right wing opposition was critical of the project. PP's commitment to HSR took a turn with its arrival to power in 1996 after 14 years of socialist rule. Rather than continue to act as a

critic of the HSR project, it is throughout its first governmental mandate that PP began forging a new infrastructure policy within which it could claim and prove its own attachment to infrastructure development through HSR. This commitment was inscribed in two essential planning documents, the *Plan de Infraestructuras de Transporte 2000-2007* (*Plan for Transport Infrastructure*, PIT 2002-2007) and the *Plan estratégico de infraestructuras y transporte 2005-2020* (*Strategic plan for Infrastructure and Transport*, PEIT 2005-2020). Throughout the first decade of the 2000s the infrastructure policies determining for today's extensive radial HSR network were put in place.

In the early 1990s, after the inauguration of the Madrid-Sevilla line, the future of the HSR project became ambiguous, as an incremental policy of railway modernization was favored. But this began to change again after 1996, and in the 2000s PP and PSOE converged in their seemingly unconditional support lent to the HSR project. The differences between the two parties have become reduced to questions of implementation of the HSR, but overall both parties have lent their full support to the development of HSR. In 2002, for the first time investment in railways surpassed investment in highways, with by now the stated objective of connecting all provincial capitals to Madrid. The foundation for an extensive radial HSR

network was laid. The radial character of the network gave birth to a discursive skirmish between the two ruling parties at some moments, with the socialists bringing to the table the question of building transversal lines. But in practice the development of a passenger HSR network centralized around Madrid has remained unquestioned.

The privileged position still enjoyed by HSR in Spain is perhaps best captured by the fact that as the 2008 financial crisis unfolded, HSR did not lose its position as the star project of infrastructure development. The relationship between Spain's economic development in the 1990s and the 2000s and the construction sector is widely known and popularly used as an illustration of the links between real estate speculation at all its levels and the financial crisis. Yet, HSR, as the main infrastructure development project of the 2000s has escaped these associations relatively unscathed. With the housing sector a primary target, HSR has actually become a promise and a potential response to the difficulties faced by Spain under the global financial crisis. This, of course, cannot be divorced from the consolidation of the construction lobby in the 2000s and the development of the railway industry. Equally, under PP's leadership the AVE has consolidated as a symbol of national vertebration. In 2013, at the inauguration of the Barcelona-Girona-Figueres line, in the presence of prince Felipe, the future king of Spain, and Artur Mas, president of Catalonia, prime minister Mariano Rajoy declared: "If the AVE is a track to prosperity, it is also a route to understanding, and it is only these tracks that bring us closer that make it possible for all of us to travel further."<sup>49</sup> In response, Artur Mas pointed out that the inauguration of the line was an act of "historical justice" and that Catalonia, the region that most contributes to the national budget, still suffers from an infrastructure deficit.<sup>50</sup>

In the symbolic confrontation between the prime minister and the president of Catalonia we can read a conflict that immediately alerts us to a cautious assessment of some of the opinions expressed by critics of HSR, who see in the AVE a centralizing force unleashed by the national government (Bel 2010; Gomez Mendoza 2001). While there is no doubt that the AVE itself and the radial structure have been integral to PP's defense of territorial

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.europapress.es/economia/macroeconomia-00338/noticia-economia-ave-ampl-rajoy-utiliza-tren-metafora-vias-entendimiento-union-territorios-20130108152214.html>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.abc.es/local-cataluna/20130108/abci-rajoy-presenta-como-instrumento-201301081319.html>

integrity and its rhetoric of territorial vertebration, regional governments have been highly instrumental in promoting the project at a subnational scale. The conflicts between most of the regional and national governments, for almost two decades, have been carried out mostly over questions of implementation but have rarely questioned the foundational legitimacy of the project. This situation is captured in the imagery of one of the phrases that I have most often come across in discussing questions related to the AVE: “now every region wants its own AVE”.

The case in favor of the AVE at the level of the government has become strongly tied to the discourse of territorial cohesion and integration. Between PP and PSOE supporters the argument of the AVE as an instrument of territorial development has been used with similar enthusiasm. Both prime ministers Aznar and Zapatero have become identified with the objective of connecting Madrid to all regional capitals. Cohesion, integration, vertebration have become words commonly associated with the development of the AVE.

At the regional level the AVE is also a powerful symbol of development. Regional administrations’ fear of not connecting to the new network has been a vehicle for expressing concerns about regional economic development. With the AVE widely portrayed as an engine of job creation and economic prosperity, to remain unconnected has turned, throughout the last two decades, into a symbol of being cut off from a main route of growth. The late 1990s saw some of the first waves of regional mobilization in accord with this type of defense of the AVE, as regional organizations, commonly identified as platforms (*plataforma*), actively mobilized in favor of the implementation of the AVE. Some of the early mobilizations took place in Cuenca and Albacete, two towns which clashed over which should be directly connected to the new high speed line. In the 2000s other such regional struggles emerged, in parallel to the extension of the HSR network.<sup>51</sup>

The governmental and regional defense of the AVE meet each other at the argument of the AVE being an engine of job creation, an argument that has gained more visibility with the economic crisis and with the backing of the construction sector. Commentators on the topic, and critics of the AVE seem to love to point out the widespread consensus in favor of the AVE. While it can be reasonably assumed that this might be an effect amplified by the

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<sup>51</sup> See [http://elpais.com/diario/1999/10/04/espana/938988014\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/1999/10/04/espana/938988014_850215.html).

time of writing, since most academic commentary does not include developments in the last years, it is quite clear that the impression of consensus is magnified by the institutional focus of this commentary, which privileges official or semi-official actors. An extreme version of this can be seen in Germà Bel's opinion that there is no reason to discuss alternatives to infrastructure policy since there effectively no practical need for them, given the constitution of the political field, reduced, in his reading, to parliamentary representation:

Stated in countable terms: 323 of the members of the 2008-11 Congress, from the *Socialist* and *Popular* groups, along with UPyD (Union, Progress and Democracy [Spanish: Union Progreso y Democracia]), coincide with the fundamental aspects of the applied policy of infrastructures. This number represents 92% of the Congress, and totals 85% of the votes cast in the legislative elections of 2008. Of course, this doesn't necessarily imply that each and every one of the 323 of parliament support such policy in its entirety; but this is a nuance that lacks practical relevance in an electoral and parliamentary system such as the one in Spain. It's what there is, and no alternatives are on the horizon. This is why formulating such alternatives, which may be of certain intellectual interest, lacks any practical relevance. (Bel 2012: xvii)

In the following chapter I look in detail at the actual type of solution the author does offer, even when claiming to have maximized his neutrality by removing all forms of partisanship that might be implicit in the formulation of alternatives. But for the purposes of the chapter it suffices to say that this view of consensus is well removed from the widespread discontent that can be picked up once we remove the implicit or explicit expectation that formally organized civic actors are the sole carriers of the status quo. It is true that with the exception of the Basque country, Spain has seen no organized mobilization against the AVE. However, traces of the case against the AVE were abundant in the media even before the 2015 general elections, which also saw the breaking of the electoral consensus over the merits of HSR, with the new contenders, Ciudadanos and Podemos opening up public space for a criticism of it. This, indeed, has not changed the ruling party's commitment to the AVE, with Mariano Rajoy still fully immersed in the public ritual of the inauguration of the new lines.<sup>52</sup>

### 5.3.2. The case against the AVE

A case against the AVE does exist, however, and as opposed to the support for the AVE it is less unitary in the vision of development it proposes. In the tensions and contradictions that permeate opposition to HSR we can begin to see and follow the possibilities and implications

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<sup>52</sup> See [http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2016/01/17/galicia/1453049712\\_307362.html](http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2016/01/17/galicia/1453049712_307362.html).

of contesting established historical representations. Where critique of the AVE perpetuates established historical explanations there is also an avenue for understanding the deep structuring effects of the silencing processes that crisscross the history of the development of Spanish HSR.

The most visible line of critique of the AVE is the economic one. The massive scale of resources required by the infrastructural megaproject has been the object of opposition phrased in terms of economic rationality. The AVE, the argument goes, is a drain on public resources that generates little return and fails to deliver on its promises of economic growth. A paradigmatic embodiment of this argument can be found in the academic analysis that looks at HSR through the lens of cost-benefit analysis (Albalade and Bel 2012; 2011; Bel 2010, 2010a, 2007; De Rus and Inglada 1993, 1997; De Rus and Nombela 2007; De Rus and Roman 2006; Mendez et al. 2009). Not unlike the profoundly negative critique that targeted Renfe as a company in the early 1980s, this vision constructs HSR as a drain on citizens' resources. At the center of the critique lies the figure of the taxpayer, current and future, burdened by the unprecedented strain on public finances that this model of infrastructural development brings with it. In the following chapter I take a closer look at the contradictions that this direction of opposition implies and the model of development it defends.

A rather different line of critique, a coherently articulated version of which I have come across in CGT's approach, is one that integrates opposition to the AVE within a broader systemic analysis of the state of the railways. Firmly rejecting the AVE, CGT is the only union with representation in the works' council that has been consistent in its opposition to HSR. CGT's official position, widely accepted by unionists and affiliates, is one that understands HSR not as the "rebirth of rail", but as a strategy coherent with the restructuring of rail in the pursuit of profitability. The AVE is this way revealed as a service that crowns the end of conventional rail. An elite service that reproduces a model of development that privileges major urban centers and which plays a key role in the encroaching privatization process.

CGT's critique borrows some elements of the economic critique, in as much as these are required to prove the massive amount of financial resources that are absorbed by HSR. CGT, an important ally of the environmental opposition to the AVE, has been also focused on making visible the partiality of rhetoric that aims to ground the legitimacy of HSR in its supposed environmental benefits. The model of social and public railway that the union

defends highlights the negative environmental impact of HSR when compared to conventional rail. This shared recourse to similar factual evidence has led some analysts of Spanish HSR to argue that the two lines of opposition lead to similar conclusions. Audikana, for example, notices that

the socio-environmental critique very often relies on the work and arguments carried out by the entrepreneurs of the economic critique, while the opposite is globally less likely. However, despite the differences in terms of approach, status or type of argument, in certain cases the two types of critique lead to the same conclusions.” (Audikana p.341, my translation)

However, this appears as a misleading argument as soon as the critique of HSR is placed in its broader context. The economic critique has at its core the opposition between political and economic rationality, and broadly assumes the development of HSR can be explained by the irrationality of *political* planning. Electoral interests and inter-party struggles become key elements in this type of explanation, but this goes even further in assuming or suggesting that political planning is by its very nature irrational, as opposed to planning through economic criteria. Naturally, attention must be paid to the particular inflection the term *political* receives, given the many occasions on which this term might from the beginning refer not so much to a rejection of the political as such, but referring to specific forms of doing politics.

This is no doubt a frequently encountered situation in the critique of HSR, yet, at its root and its most coherent articulations, the economic line goes further than this. It does so by assuming that there is a rationality intrinsic to the economy, which can produce formulas for development that are situated above political conflict. This is, of course, a pro-market argument even when in disguise. Germà Bel’s work, which made an important contribution to popularizing the economic arguments, is a straightforward illustration of this. The core of the argument is that for three centuries the political will of the central governments in Spain has been that of building an infrastructure network that would consolidate the status of Madrid as a total capital, emulating Paris. This, the argument goes, contradicts the logic of planning according to market criteria. Economic rationality, which appears to approximate market rationality for the author, would not have produced the radial structure that is today the defining feature of Spanish transportation infrastructure.

In opposition to this, CGT’s critique of HSR is one that is grounded precisely in economic critique. While many unionists I talked to would comment on the role HSR has

played in electoral politics, they would also be quick to highlight that HSR is nonetheless an economic project that embodies specific interests. Far from separating the political and the economic, CGT's critique highlights the specific articulation between political and economic interests. As such, the perspective of privatization as well as the role of the construction industry in promoting development through HSR become essential elements in their critique. The latter, on the contrary, makes for a conspicuous silence in the cost-benefit economic approach.

## **Conclusion**

The standard narratives of the implementation of HSR in Spain are built around the representation of a moment of rupture. The language of revolution and change of paradigm are the preferred forms for voicing a historical discourse that rests on two pillars: the centennial jump from a 19th century railway to the railway of the 21st century and the century of decline that stands between the two. In the historical visions that the rise of HSR is anchored in, the shift appears as both radical and inevitable. The alternative, we are told is non-existent. Or, otherwise put, the alternative would have been the abandonment of rail as such. The counterpart of the rise of HSR is the teleology of the decline of conventional rail. The consolidation of this process requires the silencing of key developments in the history of HSR. One important episode of silencing appears in relation to the early days of the AVE, and its birth in the context of the politics of austerity of the first socialist government. The dominant historical representations emerging in the 2000s are complicit in the same process of erasing alternatives to the current model of development. As HSR rose as the star project of Spanish infrastructural development and was embraced by both the socialist and the conservative governments, the narrative of its inevitability consolidated. In the final chapter I look further into the consolidation of the historical representation of the AVE as a unique and inevitable course of development. An effective exclusion of alternative routes of development requires anchoring narratives of decline and progress into specific constellations of evidence. The grounding of these historical representations into selected patterns of evidence makes possible their functioning as effective technologies of memory.

However, the dynamics of producing factual evidence that allowed HSR to be constructed as a remedy in its earlier days today threaten the legitimacy of the project.

## 6. The Alchemy of Numbers

“The only things known are those that can be counted and measured”  
(phrase attributed to Paracelsus by Gonzalo Martín Baranda, railway manager in  
Martín Baranda 2011: 71)

“This is alchemy, and this is the office of Vulcan; he is the apothecary and the  
chemist of the medicine” (Paracelsus, in Jacobi 1995:93)

High-speed rail (HSR) has become a key symbol of what has been often referred to as ‘time-space compression’, with even the technocratic language of EU policy now assuming the givenness of what not too long ago appeared as the sanctioned language of critical theory. HSR can therefore be easily assumed to be an extension of a contemporary regime of accumulation the fundamental attribute of which is acceleration: a privileged exponent of the speed rush that characterizes spaces and territories described and analyzed in terms of flows (Castells 2010[1996]; Urry 2007). In the final chapter of the thesis I introduce some initial elements for a critique of this view. While the focus on acceleration and its relationship to overaccumulation can provide essential elements for understanding the ideological articulation and on-the-ground legitimation of this project, such a focus is insufficient for understanding the contradictions the actual implementation of HSR rests on, generates and intensifies.

HSR is, of course, as a transport infrastructure system, a key element in the organization of territory. The ‘spatial order’ of HSR has been conclusively proven to be one that favours central urban nodes and end destinations, at the expense of intermediate regions. The underbelly of the discourse of cohesion, at a national or European level, is the widespread experience of disconnection that is cosubstantial to the development of HSR. For Spain, a country which from the 1950s onwards experienced an accelerated growth of the urban regions, with the 1960s and 1970s processes of concentration in metropolitan areas, and the more recent dynamics of peri-urbanisation of the decades of the 1980s and 1990s (Ureña 2012:79), this has meant that HSR inserted itself into a rather straightforward dynamics: between 1991 and 2007 “the part of Spain that was growing did so progressively and the Spain that was in decline accentuated its regression” (Ureña 2012:64). Despite the

efforts of proponents of HSR to prove the potential benefits of HSR in terms of the economic growth of smaller municipalities on the network, the bulk of the evidence is against this belief, increasingly seen as a HSR myth. Regional disparities are even more striking in the case of Spain, where the radial network of HSR and the strengthening of Madrid as central node leads to significant inequalities in the distribution of the benefits within the network.

The number wars for and against HSR often times reach significant levels of seeming methodological sophistication, although it is becoming increasingly apparent that proponents of HSR need to turn to different legitimation grounds as critics seem to be gaining the upper hand. The disputes often cloud the basic realities of HSR, which are much better expressed and captured by the daily experience of users having to turn to travel by bus as conventional rail services get canceled, or figures that leave little room for doubt: conventional rail makes it possible to have stations at every 15 to 30 km; the technological properties of HSR typically require stations to be separated by distances superior to 150-200 km. Straightforward evidence of the so-called “tunnel effect” of HSR, perhaps much better explained by the images of desertification that those negatively affected by the development of the AVE invoke. Where academics and experts see tunnels connecting end points, those who confront the experience of the AVE from behind the fences separating the unprecedentedly expensive infrastructure speak of deserts. Nonetheless, an ethnographic turn to the number wars can enhance our understanding of the AVE as a historically specific configuration. If the meaning of the most ambitious infrastructural development program in the history of Spain is certainly not exhausted in winning the number wars, understanding how to read them is a key element in revealing alternatives to the existing order.

In this chapter I turn to a discussion of the way in which the economic requirements of the functioning of HSR conflict with the articulation of HSR as a terrain for absorbing overaccumulation (Harvey [1994]1989). If HSR is indeed part and parcel of the contemporary processes of overaccumulation, it appears to constitute a distinctly unstable terrain. In what follows I look at the way in which narratives of decline and progress of the railways are anchored by certain types of factual evidence. The early days of the AVE are tied to a shift in the railway policy of the first socialist government, which began pressing for a rationalization of company management in line with the objectives of commercialization and profitability. Yet, thirty years of AVE have seen that logic turned on its head. The massive

investments required by the development of HSR infrastructure have become an object of contention during a period that is equally dominated by a policy of fiscal austerity. Unable to ground its legitimacy into the evidence of profitability, the defense of the AVE has been reconstructed as political, rather than economic. Between the two stand the numerous attempts at producing the appearance of profitability that would ground the teleology of progress of the second coming of rail.

### 6.1. Revealing the truth to the citizens

As discussed in the previous chapter, the arrival to power of the first socialist government was tied to a change in the direction of railway policy. The work of the Roa Commission sealed the death of the PGF as railway policy was being firmly established as a policy of deficit control, with the aim of aligning Renfe with the objectives of profitability. The early work of the Roa Commission was instrumental in establishing a shift in how the deficit of the company was viewed. If previously the deficit was seen as economic in origin, with underinvestment as a primary cause, a new consensus was put in place in the 1980s, as arguments about the managerial origin of the deficit gained weight. Company reorganization thus became essential to the pursuit of economic profitability. Remembering the arrival to power of the engineers close to Roa, Gonzalo Martín Baranda writes: “In order to close lines the cost of the train for the citizens had to be exposed to public opinion. This generated in the people an animosity against the *ferroviario* that was lived through with anger in Renfe.” (Martín Baranda 2011: 68).

In this sense, the origins of the negative campaign that Renfe was the target of are close to the company, with the “truth of the railways” being manufactured at the level of the government and the upper levels of the company itself. During the first socialist government the biggest closure of railway lines took place. The 1980s also resulted in a drastic reduction of the workforce, as a new philosophy of human resource management was put in place. In the words of Gonzalo Martín Baranda,

It was that team, the first one that estimated and compared the costs of accidents, pollution, the time lost between the highway and the railway. I usually give a phrase by Paracelsus which says: “The only things known are those that can be counted and measured.” (Baranda 2011:71)

The so called new team took up with diligence not only revealing the hidden benefits of the railways, as social costs started being computed. With similar enthusiasm they undertook

the task of rationalizing management and revealing the way in which the previous generations of managers had sidestepped the objectives of economic profitability. The entire architecture of the company had to be changed in order to reflect and aid the public company in the effort to emulate the successful recipes of the private sector. The autonomy of the company, a tenet of pro-market policies and a contentious issue for the railways for two decades already, became central to the dominant managerial vision of the 1980s and found a strong continuity in the presidency of Mercè Sala. The 1980s were the years in which reestablishing the company on a competitive base became the driving philosophy of railway management.

The origins of the AVE are firmly rooted in this context. It is unlikely that calculating the financial value of the so-called social benefits of the railways had much to do with regaining public sympathy towards this mode of transport. Rather, to the extent it occurred it was a combined effect of the new commercial policy that aimed to provide irrefutable proof of the fact that the company was ready to take the necessary measures to adapt to the rigors of the market, and the announcement of the historic decision to invest into HSR. The AVE was born in a context of intense debates about the competitive specialization of the railways. Effectively, the demise of the railways as a hegemonic mode of transport found its definitive legal expression in the second half of the 1980s. With the LOTT, it was finally established that the paradigm of the railways as a privileged transportation monopoly should be abandoned in favor of a transport market where each mode of transport specialized according to its competitive advantages. At the time it was firmly believed that HSR long distance passenger services would prove competitive in relation to air transportation.

This was also the time when the first efforts to separate the accounting balances for railway operations and infrastructure were made. As discussed in the first chapters of the thesis, the European policy of railway liberalization relies on vertical unbundling which initially took the form of the separation of the financial results of infrastructure management and service provision. However, the first efforts to go in this direction occurred before significant transformations in transport policy at the EU level and are tied to the early days of the AVE.

If the major investments required by the development of HSR were from early on the target of some criticism, the success of the Madrid-Sevilla line managed to support for quite

a while the idea that under well determined conditions HSR operations could be profitable. In the context of the changes in EU transportation policy in the 1990s, the dynamics set in motion already in the 1980s in Spain could become firmly established. Up until today the demands of restructuring inscribed into the European legislation are aimed at separating profitable services from the so-called public services which can be supported through public subsidies. Yet, Renfe and its subsequent divisions never managed to meet the deficit targets set at the national and European level. Repeated write-offs of debt, company restructuring and various forms of financial engineering have been mobilized throughout the years in an attempt to control the deficit or produce the appearance of the company registering profits. The development of the AVE in particular was a challenge in this respect, given it requires resources on an unprecedented scale for infrastructure development.

## **6.2. The economic criticism**

30 years later, the AVE has been firmly established in the converging infrastructure policy of PP and PSOE. As seen in the previous chapter, the development of HSR was not significantly affected by the unfolding financial crisis. At the same time, though, criticism of the AVE has gained momentum and the defense of the project has become ever more entrenched in the argument of a political choice in favour of territorial cohesion and solidarity. The most visible direction of the criticism is the economic one. This sees the entire project as an irrational squandering of resources with the promise of unproven returns. A salient incarnation of this line of opposition can be found in the cost-benefit analysis (CBA) of the AVE. The recent years have seen a multiplication of the studies that look at Spanish HSR through this lens (Albalade and Bel 2012, 2011; Bel 2012, 2010a; 2007; De Rus and Nombela 2007; De Rus and Roman 2006; Mendez et al. 2009). Taken up primarily by economists, and more specifically by transport economists, it typically involves the analysis of questions of profitability, demand, economic regional impact and environmental benefits of HSR.

If the proponents of this type of analysis usually like to maintain the appearance of a balanced tone, highlighting that under very special circumstances HSR might prove to be a justifiable investment, the practical conclusions most of the time lead to an unambiguous rejection of this path of infrastructure development. The special conditions that HSR must

meet are primarily related to estimated demand on a potential new line and expected returns on operation. This, the argument usually goes, only makes HSR worthwhile in the situation where it meets the function of alleviating congestion on corridors linking densely populated metropolitan areas. The verdict is out on this, we are told, with HSR as known so far only proving profitable in two cases: the Tokyo-Osaka line and the Paris-Lyon one. No other HSR project to date has proven economically profitable. This is backed up by evidence that shows that far from being able to recover the cost of investment in the foreseeable future, the AVE also generates losses at the operating level.

In the factual repertoire of cost-benefit analysis another important element is that of estimated or real demand figures. All HSR projects in Spain far fall from the EU guidelines on the matter, according to which “only under exceptional circumstances (a combination of low construction costs and high time savings) could a new HSR line be justified with a level of patronage below six million passengers per annum in the opening year; with typical construction costs and time savings, a minimum figure of nine million passengers per annum is likely to be needed” (Albalade and Bel 2012: 164). The levels of passengers transported fall well below those guidelines for all HSR lines in Spain, further evidence, for this type of analysis, that the explanation for Spain’s case must be related to some type of national anomaly.

Regional economic development, as discussed in chapter 5, is an idea well entrenched in the repertoire of the defenders of the AVE. The pro-HSR lobby on the regional level has essentially relied on the argument that it brings prosperity in the construction phase as well as in the operational one, by integrating towns into the most advanced transport network on a European level. To be left outside the network consequently became a symbol of being cut off not only from prosperity, but from claims to Europeanness itself. Cost-benefit analysis, however, is profoundly skeptical of this argument too. The counter-argument is convincing, as critics point out that there is no conclusive evidence about the growth of smaller towns following the arrival of the AVE. Even in the cases where growth has been observed, there is not sufficient evidence to attribute it to the AVE. And a good part of the growth attributable to the AVE has been obtained at the cost of diminishing number of overnight stays in the destination town or passengers that moved from one mode of transport to another. In the language of the critics, the AVE failed to generate new demand.

Finally, according to cost-benefit analysis, the environmental record is also much more complicated than defenders would have us believe. If the AVE is clearly more environmentally friendly in relation to air transport, its relative position in relation to transportation by bus and car is not clear. Even the latter, with a certain level of occupancy, might prove to be more energy efficient. In relationship to the environmental record cost-benefit analysis usually also points out that efficiency calculations for the environmental impact of HSR usually do not take into account the major impact of building the new infrastructure, focusing simply on the infrastructure in use. Further evidence that the HSR environmental record is slanted. At this level, this type of analysis usually also observes the by now well established fact that conventional rail is a much more sustainable mode of transport in comparison to HSR, yet it virtually never points out that conventional rail is a much more sustainable mode of transport than transportation by bus or car.

Some of the evidence that CBA relies on is employed by other types of criticism as well. Proof of the massive concentration of resources that this requires or passenger figures routinely show up in the argumentation of the unions opposed to this model of development or the environmentalist organizations that are against it. However, as pointed out in the previous chapter, it is important not to rush to the conclusion that this makes the arguments fundamentally similar, as the meaning of the opposition can only be understood when the arguments are placed in their broader context and their underlying logic is revealed.

The meaningful differences begin to reveal themselves as soon as we approach the *why?* part of the question. CBA does not usually venture on the terrain of elaborate explanation, nonetheless it usually schematically offers some type of story of origins for the Spanish AVE conundrum. In brief, this explanation is typically a variation on the idea of the irrationality of political planning, reflective of electoral interests and partisan positions. And, essentially, this logic of planning is seen as contradicting economic rationality. A qualification and extension of the *why?* can be found in a book important to the popularization of the case against the AVE written by Germà Bel (2010; for the English translation see Bel 2012). The original title, *España, capital París. Origen y apoteosis del Estado radial* (*Spain, capital Paris. Origin and apotheosis of the radial state*) is much more suggestive than the neutral English translation, *Infrastructure and the Political Economy of Nation Building in Spain, 1720-2010*.

The author is a central figure among the economists who do cost-benefit analysis of HSR and in this book he exposes at length his view that effectively, for three centuries, Spanish infrastructure policy has been consistent with the objective of converting Madrid into a total capital (that is, strengthening its role not only as administrative, but also as economic center), on the French model. Moving through the analysis of 19th century railways, motorways, contemporary HSR and airport management, the author advances an argument that is efficiently captured by the often repeated phrase “transversal market, radial state”. The main conclusion is that Spanish infrastructure policy, producing a radial network and supporting a centralized administration, is reflective of the political will of establishing Madrid as a total capital. The political logic, it is further argued, contradicts the economic, i.e. the market logic. This means two things, although they are not usually explicitly separated. On the one hand, infrastructure planning in Spain has deliberately ignored or worked against the structure of the national market. On the other, had economic criteria prevailed in infrastructure planning, the outcome would be significantly different from what the map of infrastructure today reveals.

The contradictions of the argument then begin to become apparent. Although the author insists on the lack of alternative to current planning, pointing out the convergence of all political forces in favor of the AVE, under this modified version of the “no alternative” narrative lies, in reality, an implicit case for liberal market criteria. If the model of infrastructure policy is not laid out, the critique itself is sufficient for determining the grounds on which any alternative could be established. This is an argument that extends to most works that employ CBA. It will perhaps not be too surprising to learn that Germà Bel himself is a transport economist with ties to the Catalan socialist party. For the second time in the rather short history of the AVE it appears then that socialist transport economists are instrumental in rearticulating railway planning on the basis of liberal market criteria. And just like in the early 1980s when engineers with ties to PSOE and trained in transport economics were setting the basis for the future liberalization of Renfe and officializing the demise of conventional rail, the proponents of cost-benefit analysis seem to have little to no interest in the defense of conventional rail.

This is fundamentally different from the critique that falls in the range of that illustrated by CGT’s position, summarized as “a public and social railway”. The affirmative

moment of this vision rests on an unambiguous defense of conventional rail as a preferred mode of transport and on a denouncing of the elite HSR undermining conventional services. The rejection of the development model that HSR reflects is complemented by an alternative proposal in which conventional rail features centrally. As opposed to the critique grounded in CBA, this type of opposition does not reject the political dimension of planning, but argues that it is precisely a firm political rejection of an uneven, unjust model of development that should set the basis for any alternative.

The governmental defense of the AVE has been, throughout the last years, grounded in what superficially, at least, can appear as a similar logic. During the Aznar and Zapatero governments the development of HSR has been inscribed and presented as an instrument of territorial cohesion and as a political choice. Public inaugurations of new lines have become a ritual display of talk of regional development and European integration, as politicians united across party lines as promoters of the AVE dispute the title of main patron. Words such as the ones heard early on at the inauguration of a HSR line in Andalucía have been firmly settled as the common tropes of the festive inaugurations:

Zapatero praised the development of Andalucía during the last three decades of "freedom and democracy". The region is, for the prime minister, a region that is "modern, transforming and growing at a pace above the Spanish average. It is firmly and decisively walking the path of full integration to Europe."<sup>53</sup>

Illustrative of both the convergence and the battle for symbolic patronage are incidents such as the fact that the absence of an important socialist official from the inauguration of the line can appear as sectarian and divisive. During the 2015 electoral campaign, when prime minister Mariano Rajoy failed to invite his predecessor Zapatero to the official opening of a line the construction of which had begun during the latter's mandate, this could be seen as "the end of a tradition".<sup>54</sup>

During my fieldwork I have heard many times a certain form of subtracting oneself from an evaluation of HSR. Its generic representation would be:

I cannot tell you if the AVE is good or bad, this is a question of political will. The government must decide if they want to construct a new line or not, but this cannot be decided in economic terms,

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<sup>53</sup>[http://elpais.com/diario/2006/12/17/andalucia/1166311327\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2006/12/17/andalucia/1166311327_850215.html)

<sup>54</sup>[http://www.elespanol.com/espana/20150929/67743264\\_0.html](http://www.elespanol.com/espana/20150929/67743264_0.html)

it cannot be formulated as an economic question.

Here, then, was the same logic that animated the most radical critics of the project. “The railway deficit is a problem that cannot be solved as an economic problem, it has been made into one through political will”, Daniel had told me. It should not be set out as an economic problem.” “If you look at this as an economic problem it does not make sense. But it cannot be decided like this. It is a question to be decided at the governmental level, it must be decided whether this new line is wanted or not”, Miguel, SEMAF unionist, had argued. But in his argument there was more than evasiveness and an encroaching understanding that the unfathomable investment figures for the AVE had started backfiring as talk of indebtedness. His argument echoed a managerial obsession that has haunted Renfe for decades. The memoirs of Mercè Sala speak saliently about her own interpretation of this problem.

In the long history of the disputes about the question of the autonomy of the public company, freedom from governmental intervention has implied several things. Prominently it has been used to highlight that such autonomy could allow for a *rational* management of economic resources, and that this way the functioning of the railways could be set firmly on a commercial basis. But the corollary of the argument has also been one that aimed to free the company from the investment decisions proper. Renfe would act, of course, as a modern company in the pursuit of commercial objectives, but it should not be an administration with the power to decide what lines should be built. This responsibility should belong to the government.

Here we are then, with 30 years of AVE, facing a situation that appears rather paradoxical. The strongest line of critique of the AVE, the economic one, alerts to the preponderance of political criteria in infrastructure policy. A more reserved, apparently neutral positioning towards the AVE, such as in the case of some of the SEMAF unionists I have interviewed, highlights the same divide between the political and the economic, but delegates decision to the political realm (and in this echoes some of the arguments of 1980s new management). The anti-capitalist critique of the AVE, as seen in the discussion about CGT, operates with the same political and economic distinction, but stresses the dominance of the economic over the political. On the other side, the defense of the AVE has come to increasingly be formulated in terms of territorial cohesion and regional solidarity. These arguments are advanced through a form of claim-making according to which the decision to

build this new infrastructure cannot be decided simply on the basis of a certain type of economic evidence. At least on the surface, then, it would appear that a government fiercely committed to a politics of austerity and privatization is defending a certain sector from the encroachment of economic criteria. In the following section I look more closely at this apparent contradiction.

### 6.3. HSR and the limits of markets

The commonly heard answer to the arguments of territorial cohesion and solidarity is that this is merely paying lip service to them, and that behind the discourse lies the reality of particular interests that the development of HSR serves. The academic response against the AVE has been mostly offered by the proponents of CBA, who, as already discussed, argue that in fact this is a centralizing logic, backed by the *irrationality* of political planning. A “romantic dream” chased at the expense of the taxpayers’ budget (Bel 2012). The reason we cannot be content with the common explanation is not its simplicity, but the fact that it fails to explain why and under what conditions it has become possible for those particular interests to become materialized in this project, and not a competing one. The CBA logic is problematic not simply because of the numerous areas that fall outside its purview. Ultimately this logic could also accommodate, and sometimes refers to, the question of particular interests of economic actors. But even when it does so it assumes that these actors act against economic logic, therefore against their own interests. This type of analysis shows little to no concern for the type of economic rationality that the defense of the AVE might embody. It merely relegates it to the sphere of the political, which it assumes to act in ways opposed to economic planning.

In order to understand why this happens a different engagement with the arguments of CBA is needed. As already discussed, CBA analysis constantly stages its neutrality. CBA is presented not as a type of intervention that aims to provide solutions, but rather as one that aims to set up a diagnosis. The diagnosis it offers can then be taken up as evidence to be employed in governmental policy. While I cannot discuss the broader history of the rise of CBA in the space of this chapter, it is important for this discussion that essentially it is an economic technique which from its origins was designed as a neutral arbitrator in questions of public finance and policy. It was made into a privileged tool of the US government in the

1980s, and became crucial in the implementation of the deregulation agenda of the Reagan administration. Its fortunes have also risen in the Obama administration, the endorser of a HSR project for the US. It has been widely applied in the field of transport economics. What CBA actually does is that it tries to express in monetary value both “hidden costs” and “externalities”. It does so by attempting to express flows of benefits and costs, which present different, and sometimes contradictory timelines, within figures that can capture their present value. CBA is notorious for trying to extend monetary calculation to those areas which, because of technical considerations, are considered to be difficult to capture through price. Put succinctly, CBA is a tool for extending the realm of market calculation and a set of instruments for determining whether state expenditure should be undertaken. But far from what its Spanish proponents would have us believe, it is straightforward prescriptive. After all, this is also evident in the defining contribution made by this type of analysis to the HSR debate: the belief that HSR spending is not economically justified. CBA, then, embodies not simply economic rationality per se, in opposition to political planning, but articulates a vision according to which public spending should be guided by free market criteria.

Once we begin to look at CBA as a particular economic technology with a certain set of implicit prescriptions for public policy, it becomes easier to begin to reconstruct the type of economic rationality that the defense of the AVE embodies. The defense of the AVE has of course not relied merely on its elevation from economic criteria. Rather, it exhibits a specific articulation of two types of arguments: on the one hand those that are constructed as non-economic, or the often repeated problem of territorial cohesion and solidarity. On the other, especially in the context of the sovereign debt crisis, HSR has been seen as a route to economic prosperity in the phase of development. For the defenders of HSR its development is an opportunity for both the construction sector and the rail industry, the latter constructed as a case of economic success. These are benefits which fall outside the purview of CBA. Another important argument for the pro-HSR case is the so called question of the “infrastructure deficit”. At the heart of this argument is the idea that successful economic development is conditioned by a prior adequate supply of infrastructure, and it is only on this basis that regional economic life can prosper. HSR is therefore a remedy to the “infrastructural deficit”.

The problem of the infrastructure deficit has been for decades an important one in

Spanish infrastructure policy. While this is not the space to review it, it suffices here to say that the view according to which Spain suffers from an infrastructure deficit results not only in a certain argument for governmental intervention, but also assumes that there is a pre-economic level which constitutes the conditions required for the development of economic activity, infrastructure being key among them. In this sense the image of tracks on which privately owned trains run is quite evocative. The infrastructure deficit argument maintains just that, namely that the successful operations of the markets requires governmental intervention in their favor. Otherwise put, successful functioning of the market requires the government to provide a good that is under-supplied by the market. The logic of liberalization extends and strengthens this argument, in as much the very form in which this takes place reserves a special role for the state in the form of infrastructure provision.

To accept then the representation of the main arguments for and against the AVE as a clash between economic and political rationalities is erroneous. But so is the conclusion that opponents of the AVE have carried their arguments to similar conclusions. The way I reconstruct the arguments between defenders and opponents of the AVE is first of all meant to highlight the shared market orientation between the governmental defense of HSR and opposition to it as reflected in CBA. Differences between the two begin to emerge once the question of the relationship between the market and the government is articulated. As seen, critics of HSR who resort to CBA oppose the logic of the market to what they see as the centralizing and centralized planning at the level of the national government. The form of the argument is that of a “preference for governmental agnosticism as a form of liberal neutrality” (Davies and McGoey 2012:77), which is why CBA does not consider itself prescriptive, but merely claims to provide the empirical data for policy makers. However, substantively, CBA is the empirical and methodological repertoire of a view that would fully entrust transport planning to the market.

In opposition to this, the defense of the AVE has taken the appearance of an argument for limiting the reach of the market. This, again, is misleading. When placed in their broader context, the arguments about territorial cohesion and solidarity reveal their meaning not as against the ethos of the market, but rather as a different defense of the “order of worth of the market” (Davies 2013). This is a view that ascribes a different role to the state, which maintains the role of organizing on the national scale the material basis for the successful

operation of markets. In opposition to this, arguments such as those favored by CGT maintain that the railways should not be subjected simply to market-based forms of valuation. It is indeed complicated to always separate this uncompromised position from the tactical repertoire and the factual evidence it employs. CGT, just like the environmentalist critics of HSR often rely on “social cost” calculations or the calculation of “externalities”. This is evidence that is summoned in order to prove that the railways could prove not only competitive but also that the only reasons other modes of transport appear as competitive is because the hidden costs associated with them are not taken into account. And this repertoire of factual evidence remains the result of extending market calculations to areas that were previously considered non-market. But if this repertoire of calculation is summoned, this remains subordinated to the argument that profit seeking should not be the foundation on which transport planning and territorial development occur. And this is most clearly articulated in not only the rejection of HSR, but in the defense of conventional rail.

#### **6.4. Competing calculative devices**

The reconstruction of the arguments between defenders and opponents of HSR could suggest that in effect the competition occurs on the terrain of disputing the limits of governmental intervention in markets, and in particular transportation markets. But the actual unfolding of the conflict does not merely oppose different pro-market visions, it involves the mobilization of an entire range of rival calculative devices. While it might appear that the EU budgetary cutbacks and fiscal consolidation are a recent enemy for the development of HSR, to exceptionalize the current pressures is misleading. In effect, the railways and HSR development have been facing fiscal policy constraints throughout their entire existence in the post-Francoist period. The implementation of HSR occurred around the time of Spain’s accession to the EC. The plans for the massive extension of the network were developed as Spain was preparing for the adoption of the euro. And finally, during the recent crisis HSR has remained a privileged infrastructure project. These are also periods during which the question of public deficit management was paramount to fiscal policy in Spain. This is not to say that during the periods considered of economic crisis the overall rhythm of infrastructure development was not affected, since in effect the commercialization agenda of PSOE during the 1980s and the resulting consequences for the railway company

were put in place in the early 1980s, during a period of economic crisis. Similarly, after the inauguration of the Madrid-Sevilla line the pace of investment in HSR slowed down. The more important point is that the massive concentrations of capital required by the development of the AVE and the problem of meeting them in periods of crisis is not a recent condition but rather a problem with an intricate history.

A commonly heard argument is that the development of HSR has been made possible by Spain's access to European funds. There is an important share of truth in this, as Spain has indeed been a privileged beneficiary of European development funds. But two simple facts will immediately alert us to the insufficiency of the observation: in practice, EU funds almost never exceed 25% of the total cost of any individual HSR project. And secondly, the development of the AVE has not lost steam as Spain's access to EU funds grew more restricted. With this observation in mind it is easier then to turn our attention to that part of the funding structure which exists in the shadow of EU funds. The question of the financing of HSR, corresponding to its organizational articulation, raises both the question of infrastructure development and actual provision of the service. The thornier part, especially on account of the much larger concentration of capital it requires, is the construction of the actual infrastructure.

As visible in the structure of liberalization on the European level, the provision of railway services today embodies a dual relationship with regard to the question of monopolies. With regard to infrastructure provision, it is still widely believed that the best form to organize infrastructure provision is on a monopolistic basis. Service provision, however, should be reorganized in line with the objective of creating a single European market. Otherwise put service is the primary arena for competition: public tracks, private trains. However, EU policy impacts the actual development of infrastructure through several channels. An already mentioned one is the availability of EU funding. Importantly though, on a national level, the question of HSR funding is tied to the broader question of the public deficit.

Throughout the post-Francoist history of the railways the question of the deficit of the railway company(ies) has been ever-present. This has also been essential to the way the problem of managerial autonomy of Renfe has been addressed. It has also been key to articulating the commercial orientation of railway services. The funding of HSR is likewise

an essential part of this, as a key concern has been how to devise funding instruments that would not impact the national public debt. This has generated, broadly speaking, two types of solutions: the extensive recourse to extra-budgetary funding and the attempt to attract private capital through public-private partnerships. The recourse to extra-budgetary financing has involved the setting up of public agencies which would allow for debt financed development to appear on the balance sheets of companies without counting towards the national public debt. The establishment of GIF (*Gestor de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias* – Railway Infrastructure Manager) in 1997 was a crucial development in this respect. However, although this has been a provisional solution, it has constantly fired back as the problem of indebtedness of the companies themselves. To this should also be added the rising share of subnational level financing.

The policy of vertical unbundling that is the foundation of the liberalization model also has its origins in the problem of deficit management. In the 1990s when this became officially inscribed in the EU agenda, it was articulated as a response to the problem of the massive indebtedness of railway companies across Europe. As a matter of fact, this priority can be clearly seen in the fact that the early EU policy required the separation of the balance sheets, with the purpose of separating investment into infrastructure from service provision. In Spain the solution pursued was that of fully separating the companies, which is how Renfe Operadora and ADIF were formed, but other national companies resorted to maintaining the separation on the level of independent accounting. The objective of this separation was the already earlier formulated ambition of turning railway service provision into a commercially profitable activity. This however is not a straightforward policy for the railways, since rail services are actually a bundle that includes goods which it is believed should be regulated and provided by the market, and those which are still considered as exceptions to the market-logic.

The space of this chapter does not allow for a broader discussion on the long history of this problem, namely that of the malleable border between services that is believed should be entrusted to the market and those which are considered, for various reasons, outside of it. But one essential difference is that the separation between these services corresponds to the type of financing flexibility available on the governmental as well as on the company level. Namely, those services which is believed are necessary but cannot be reliably entrusted to

the market are eligible for public subsidies. Such is the case of suburban rail and regional passenger transport, both of which are seen as providing an essential public service with social benefits. High speed rail, initially exclusively a long distance passenger service, was consequently not eligible for subsidies according to EU regulations. The underlying logic is that the operation of long distance HSR services should be financed by the users. However, HSR in Spain has not managed to cover the cost of its operations through the model of the user financed service. So, in addition to the massive scale of investments absorbed in the construction phase, the AVE has fallen short of its commercial objectives in the operational phase. With the estimated numbers of users ever lower for every new line opening, it is difficult to believe that this could change in any way in the foreseeable future.

However, the peculiarity of the regional Spanish HSR service can be better understood when approached from this angle. Known as the AVE Lanzadera, or AVANT, this so-called medium-distance service was the first European HSR line for which traffic flows were clearly separated (Ureña 2012: 110). The efforts to separate traffic flows so as to isolate services that are possibly eligible for subsidies must also be understood in the context of pressures from other private transport operators, which through the mediation of the EC have denounced the subsidies for long distance and HSR services.

It becomes clear then that the dispute between defenders and opponents of the AVE is not actually restricted to what critics would call the conflict between political planning and economic rationality. That is merely the ideological articulation of a vision of planning that aims to hide its own normative basis. Once we analyze this conflict, it is revealed that this has enlisted not only different pro-market economic visions, but also a range of rival techniques of calculation. Upholding the narrative of modernization through HSR requires the constant production of factual evidence that allows the integration of these contradictions into the teleology of progress.

### **6.5. Just how European is the AVE?**

The AVE has been made into an authoritative symbol of European integration. The availability of EU funds for infrastructural development has also been used as an argument in favor of the feasibility of the project. Yet, these say little about the actual degree to which HSR can be seen as an extension of projects formulated at the EU level and implemented in

convergence with EU policy, although they are crucial for understanding the legitimization of the project on the national and regional level. In fact, it appears that arguments that press for a continuity from the supranational level to the national one miss the complicated and sometimes contradictory interplay between the different scales at which these development plans are conceived and implemented.

As other commentators have noticed, the EU has directly influenced the development of the AVE, mainly through three avenues: railway liberalization policy, its Trans-European Networks programs (TENs), and finally its regional development policy (Audikana 2015:2). As already seen the scale and intensity of Spanish HSR is exceptional in the European context, and even on the global level. And moreover Spanish HSR does not seem to meet some of the widely accepted economic criteria that would justify its implementation. The AVE has not generated the expected demand in terms of numbers of users and the financial sustainability of investment in the infrastructure has met important criticism. As Audikana (2015) shows, the current centrality of this project in Spanish infrastructure policy does not have an equivalent in a similar centrality on the European level. Throughout the 2000s, as passenger HSR was consolidated in Spain, the EU railway policy was dominated by the problem of the liberalization of freight transportation.

The origins of the TENs agenda can be found in the 1980s, when, following the extension of the EC, and in preparation of the Treaty of Maastricht, the argument for strengthening the material connection between the members of the EC gained momentum. The successful economic integration of the member states required their material integration through infrastructure networks. The TENs program extends to telecommunication networks and energy networks. Its specific articulation for transport infrastructure is the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T) program; the first concrete actions in relation to it were carried out in the 1990s. Among the projects given priority in the 1990s, Spain was directly concerned by the South-West HSR project and the Lisbon-Madrid highway. The reorganization of the TENs program in the 2000s directly involved Spain through the railway interoperability program, the freight transportation corridor Algeciras-Madrid-Paris and the motorways of the sea project. Yet, as analysts have shown in terms of transportation policy the TENs programs have not made a decisive contribution to the actual materialization of these projects. And moreover, as the 2003 Van

Miert report emphasized, the plans for trans-European networks were still mostly “the result of the juxtaposition of national plans” (quoted in Audikana 2015). In Spain, the regional development funds, the European Regional Development Funds and the Cohesion Fund, have been much more important for the financing of HSR. These have been important to developing not only the HSR network, but have also been an important funding source for the development of the Spanish highway infrastructure. However, this source of financing was drastically limited after 2007. This has been partially compensated by the funds unlocked by the European Investment Bank, but not fully.

The availability of European funding can hardly be considered a cause for the development of HSR, and certainly not a sufficient one. It has been, as Audikana also observes, a facilitator. But in practice when faced with the shortage of EU funding the Spanish government has still shown an exceptional commitment to continuing the HSR project. Similarly, the Spanish HSR project does not have a correspondent in any other European case, with HSR quite simply not having the same centrality in any other national context. And, even more indicatively, the Spanish HSR contradicts some of the objectives formulated for railway development at the European level. Most notably the marginalization of freight transportation. But as previously discussed the actual implementation of HSR has further amplified some of the contradictions, as seen in the prohibition to subsidize long distance passenger service. The liberalization policy of the EU in this sense contradicts the possibilities and functioning of HSR, although they are born as twin responses to the crisis of the railways. The case of the AVE appears then as a useful avenue for understanding the articulation of the relationship between national and European sovereignty, strengthening the record in favor of the argument that “the EU is somehow an unusual case, in that its sovereign authority remains dependent on the recognition and cooperation of sovereign states that it hopes to restrain” (Davies 2013:34).

## **6.6. The return of incommensurability**

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July of 2013 the link between liberalization and high-speed rail found its most violent expression: the Angrois railway accident, one of the most severe in the history of Spanish rail, resulted in the death of 79 people. As company representatives and government officials rushed to defend the safety record of Spanish HSR or to clarify the

difference between high-speed and very high-speed, to most people it became obvious that neither speed, nor human error alone could adequately explain the public tragedy. While the official investigation focused on proximate causes, it became evident that the accident could have been avoided had the coordination between RENFE and ADIF been better and had the objectives of cost-cutting not taken priority. The generic fears about technological failure that were combated through official discourse appeared as a smoke screen that hid a very basic reality: a journey made possible by an investment of billions and billions of Euros had resulted in a tragedy on account of minor savings in operation obtained at the price of reduced safety. The rush for cost-cutting was enhanced by the competitive paradigm of the liberalized railway.

The widespread discontent with how the government handled the investigation and the attempts to turn the driver of the train into the single culprit captured a disposition that was not yet fully compatible with the cynicism of CBA calculations:

The Commissioner's advisory group noted that, in comparison with the road sector, rail was subject to onerous safety obligations. The group considered that, in determining requirements, the cost and benefits were sometimes not adequately considered and that rail safety investment decisions were based *on a much higher maximum value of a life saved than for road [...]* In view of these factors the group recommended that the Community should work toward development of common safety appraisal techniques and a probability based safety regime. (White Paper 1996 – A Strategy for Revitalizing the Community's Railways; my emphasis)

This condensed statement from a foundational document of EU railway policy synthesizes precisely the driving logic of neoliberal safety calculations in the paradigm of CBA. The history of railway liberalization and the rise of Spanish HSR, both of which find their early expression in the 1980s, can be efficiently described as the process of adjusting the value of a life saved. The high price of life is the paragon of an obsolete model of running the railways. The high price of life is incompatible with the objectives of the commercial railway, which must first and foremost prove that it can compete with other modes of transport which have been built on the assumption of the low price of deaths. The images of the conquest of the future through technological modernization are born in the context of a program the aim of which is to normalize a high level of casualties. The body count of the railways is suspiciously low for good business. The highways and their disastrous casualty record are

there to provide a new standard that can appear as a law of nature rather than the expression of the most ruthless search for financial gain.

But as the case of AVE shows, the calculative devices of neoliberal infrastructural development are fraught with contradictions. The AVE, hailed as the future of the railway and the remedy to a death foretold, is not merely a solution to the crisis of the conventional rail, it is an active force in the process of its marginalization. The type of competitive specialization that the AVE was meant to offer was the affirmative moment of the legal demise of the railways as a hegemonic mode of transport. The empirical techniques through which the valuations of the AVE are produced are essential instruments in maintaining the legitimacy of the normative imagination of 21<sup>st</sup> century modernity. However, the AVE, as a concrete force of progress, comes to undermine the regime of calculation from which it was born. The principles of calculation that offer the evidence of progress and decline function as technologies of memory that anchor specific visions of development. But in the confrontation between rival calculative devices the linear histories of progress and decline are threatened by the return of incommensurability.

## Epilogue

With the first months of 2016 marked by the postponement of the formation of a new government, the future of the liberalized AVE appears yet again uncertain. The *de facto* suspension of the introduction of competition on the Madrid-Levante corridor, a project awaiting implementation by the next government, appears yet again in the light of politics rather than that of necessity. Doubts can be heard more loudly than usual: the rush to open to competition passenger traffic before the EC recommended deadline is being connected to particular interests and political choices. In between the cracks in establishment politics the idea that liberalization is not inevitable insinuates itself.

Throughout this thesis the processes of writing into or out of history such critical points has been a central concern. The points at “which history could have been otherwise” are more than failed opportunities. These moments remain potentially subversive as long they can be remembered as a time of alternatives. The successful imposition of future development plans is also a battle for writing alternatives out of history, to a large extent by silencing the history of the search for them. The liberalization of the railways is embedded into a regime of historical representation the organizing principles of which are progress and decline. The ascendant logic of modernization is the dominant form of connecting the past of the railways to their present and future. The rise of the AVE and liberalization are both the expression of the ambition to subordinate the public company to profit seeking criteria. The battle for the authorship of the 21<sup>st</sup> century railway revolution is the terrain on which different factions of the managerial elite of the 1980s confronted each other.

To the railway of the future stands opposed an elusive, but always menacing railway of the past. Elusive enough for it to easily slip into the costume of conventional rail, the history of the railway of the past is one of inescapable decline. Its ruin, far from man-made, is presented as both symptom and cause. Obsolete because antiquated, conventional rail has been assimilated to a constellation of images of late Francoism, hierarchical administration and bureaucratic inefficiency: its servants, cultural dupes of the old regime. A death foretold

requires of nothing less than a resurrection, and it is on the remains of conventional rail that the appeal of the railway of the future has been erected.

In between the dissolution of the old railway and the promise of the new stand the battles for a railway that has never quite been. The public and social railway is the alternative born out of contesting the order of worth of the market. It is an alternative informed by awareness of the many ways in which the state has been instrumental to subordinating all forms of organization of life to profit seeking criteria. It is also an alternative that seeks to offer a choice for now as much as a horizon of development for later. In its ambition to be affirmative in the present, it cannot escape all contradictions. It must therefore bend and qualify its reliance on a form that it cannot fully dissociate from the state: public *and* social, as a reminder of the fact that the battle is not simply against the encroachment by private capital, but against capitalist forces and their history of coopting our forms of organization.

The qualification as social is the reminder that the public railway has frequently yielded to the profit motive. The qualification as public is a concession to the fact that in our search for a different world we still depend on the organizing forms of past eras. A qualifier is not a revolution, but the proposition that things can be otherwise, that this has been and keeps being a demand and that radical transformation and realism are not mutually exclusive should not find itself threatened by taboos. The public and social railway is not simply about the way to get from point A to point B. It is, fundamentally, about the questions we must ask and at least tentatively answer in the pursuit of a different world. The struggle for a public and social railway safeguards the political commitment to the search for organizing life on a non-capitalist basis. Through its very nature, this struggle pushes us to ask questions not about how we can resist capitalism at its margins, but what kind of forms of organization we can oppose to it that hold the promise of coordination and transformation on a large scale. *Por un ferrocarril social.*

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