Political Discontent and Societal Learning in Spain – Or: How Democracy Tames Conflicts

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How (rather than why) democracy tames conflicts?
Overview of the Argument

**Guiding question:** how democracy tames conflicts?

- Public sphere approach.
- Case study: recent political developments triggered by discontent in Spain.

**Answer:** public communication triggers learning processes that regulate political *interactions* (rather than contribute to the legitimacy of specific policy decisions)

- Spain has become arena for political experimentation and diffusion of political practices, which are consolidated or abandoned depending on their public acceptance → “toolkit” of socially accepted practices from which actors draw to develop their own strategies.
- By regulating practices, conflicts are shaped (i.e. tamed).
Theoretical Framework: 5 Thesis about Public Communication in Democratic Polities

1. Public communication is a *relational* process.
   • Interactions rather than actions/ intentions matter.
   • Publics’ reactions to public communication also have to be taken into account.
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   - Actions, events, practices...are interrogated for their meaning – even apathy and lack of observable reactions are interpreted.
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3. Public communication is a punctuated process sparked by contingent events and actions, but it’s not an arbitrary process.
   • ~ Structuring structure where stable beliefs, values, interests coexist with short-lived ones.
   • Effect of public communication should not be observed in the rise/introduction of (contingent) new topics, ideas, beliefs, etc. but in their consolidation.
Theoretical Framework: 5 Thesis about Public Communication in Democratic Polities

4. Public communication has a **rational** dimension: arguments matter (sometimes).
   - Implicit/explicit claim making is constitutive of everyday communication (and thus implicit/explicit give and take of reasons).
   - Public communication constantly exposes actors to reasons → actors “can learn – and in the long run even cannot not learn” (Habermas)

Well, @police, can you explain what 2 hooded leftist radicals are doing handcuffing a detainee?

A ver, @policia, ¿podéis explicar q hacen 2 radikales de izquierda encapuchados esposando a un detenido junto a ULP?
Theoretical Framework: 5 Thesis about Public Communication in Democratic Polities

5. Specific feature of public communication in democratic polities: “democratic functionalism” (Trenz & Eder)
   
   • “To the extent that a polity conceives of itself in democratic terms, it builds into its *autopoiesis* a mechanism that pushed towards democratisation” (Eder), i.e. as long as a polity justifies itself in democratic terms, these same terms can be taken up by social actors to criticise and reform this polity in a more democratic direction.

   → Not only what people say matters, but also what they *do* when they say what they say.
Spanish Case: New Communicative Context

- Rise of new social & political actors.
- Increased electoral competition.
- Changes in the public space of reasons:
  - (Re-)emergence of old & new topics (e.g. social cohesion, market vs politics, “new politics,” etc.)
  - Dissemination of relatively new/ thus far marginal policy ideas (e.g. public debt audit, unconditional basic income...)

→ More precarious position of political actors, i.e. greater pressure to consider others’ perspectives + new ideas & arguments → greater learning possibilities.
Spanish Case: New Communicative Context

As regards specific public policies:

- Learning, if any, circumscribed to specific groups.
- Greater fragmentation of the electorate.
- Neither broader agreement nor legitimate dissent among major actors.
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  - But radically conflicting interpretations.
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From a sceptical / external observer perspective:
- No or little contribution to legitimation of specific political decisions.
- No democratising dynamic – new communicative context: pluralism of political & social actors, policy ideas, etc., but pluralism per se does not amount to more democracy.
Cultivated Conflicts: Learning How to Express Antagonisms

From policy issues to political *practices*:

- Spain as an arena for political experimentation: testing of new / thus far marginal forms of organisation (e.g. “popular platforms”), transparency practices (e.g. live streaming of post-electoral negotiations), funding practices (e.g. crowdfunding, microcredits), frames (e.g. 99%), forms of communication (e.g. humour, nanostories)

- Practices are not only tested but communicated – for in the public sphere one cannot not communicate

→ Potentially, practices can also become part of learning processes.
Cultivated Conflicts: Learning How to Express Antagonisms

Indeed, learning process. Two dimensions:

A. Filtering out of practices.
     - Harsh criticism by political elites
     - Differences within 15M movement
     - No enough public support
   
   → *Plataforma ¡en pie!* acknowledged failure.
   → Weakening of the radical / alternative “soul” (Taibo) of the 15M movement.

Practices not democratic enough
Cultivated Conflicts: Learning How to Express Antagonisms

B. Public communication as a subsequencing structure.
   - E.g. Consolidation of Podemos: ~ synthesis of alternative and reformist “souls”, biased towards the latter.
   - Criticism of 15M movement: utopian, not practical.
   - After defeat of alternative “soul,” rise of Podemos, intended to provide “a candidacy that advance[d] from spaces already conquered and manage[d] to go beyond the present paralysis. A candidacy that ma[d]e the move that turn[ed] pessimism into optimism and discontent into popular will for change and democratic openness.”
   - E.g. Modification of consolidated actors’ practices: according to government’s own account, citizens’ distrust encouraged new regulation of economic and funding practices of parties, new regulation of rights and obligations of high-ranking officials, new regulation to crack down harder on corruption.
Cultivated Conflicts: Learning How to Express Antagonisms

- Latitude of tolerance is greater for practices than for policies (the former do not impose obligations, but have to be justified only to the extent that they interfere with rights and liberties of others).

- Still, structuring effect of public communication is observable:
  - In the filtering out of socially unaccepted practices;
  - In consolidation of socially accepted practices;
  - In modification of practices in a socially desired way.

  ➔ “Toolkit” of practices not embraced by everyone, but considered acceptable (i.e. legitimate dissent around practices).

  ➔ Antagonisms persist, but the expression of conflicts is tamed.
Cultivated Conflicts: Learning How to Express Antagonisms

Helmut Dubiel: “democratic societies are held together not by the mute concord of their citizens but by the forms that give shape to their antagonisms” → “cultivated conflicts,” i.e. conflicts where actors exercise self-restraint.

→ Societal learning processes (i.e. Trenz and Eder’s democratic functionalism) shape how antagonisms are carried out, i.e. turn conflicts into “cultivated conflicts.”
Thank you