

The background is a vibrant, abstract collage. It features a central black rectangular area with jagged, torn edges. This black area is set against a bright red background. Scattered around and overlapping the black area are various shapes in yellow, blue, and white, resembling torn paper or fabric. A prominent yellow shape at the top right resembles a stylized 'C' or a partial circle. A blue shape at the top left is a broad, sweeping curve. A white shape at the top center is a vertical, slightly curved strip. A red line, resembling a tear or a crack, runs vertically through the black area, intersecting the main title. The overall composition is dynamic and visually striking.

THE NEW SPANISH REVOLUTIONS

*A REBELLIOUS JOURNEY
ACROSS A CHANGING SPAIN*

Christopher Finnigan

NEW SPANISH REVOLUTIONS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Finnigan worked for three years as a freelance journalist in Barcelona, during which time he wrote for the magazine *Barcelona Metropolitan* and blogged for *El País's* English website. His work has also appeared in the *Guardian*, *New Statesman* and the *Independent*.

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**CHRISTOPHER
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ZED

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For my parents and Meela

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

I

In May 2013, when I was twenty-five years old, I moved from London to Barcelona. My girlfriend joined me two months later and in August of that year we moved into a tiny apartment in a six-storey building on a busy road in the centre of the city. Downstairs was a Galician fish restaurant, opposite us a school, and on the corner a bakery and supermarket. The road's four lanes pointed to the beach, and taxis, motorbikes and delivery trucks thundered down it day and night, rattling the thin glass of our old, second-floor windows.

Late one afternoon during the first week in the apartment the noise of the traffic stopped. The silence was quickly replaced by another sound, at first seemingly far away but suddenly as deafening as the roar of the traffic. I went to the window and looked down: two police cars, blue and red lights flashing, were crawling up the road; behind them followed unbroken rows of people carrying placards and banners, marching in step to the beat of a drum somewhere in the middle of a crowd so enormous that the hot tarmac had disappeared beneath their feet. The marchers repeated the words thrown out with a metallic echo by a megaphone at the back. The street's stone walls amplified every word, reflecting them forwards and up into the kitchen.

It was from this apartment in the centre of Barcelona that I heard a new sound of the city, a sound that revealed the anger, discontentment and deep desire for political change in a country that, between 2010 and 2020, experienced two of the biggest political crises it has faced since its return to democracy in 1977: the breaking of the two-party system, at first from pressure from the radical left, later from the far right, and the attempted break away of Catalonia from Spain. That sound from the street below was at first a novelty and soon became as reliable and as frequent as the one-way traffic. It was then that I discovered that our apartment was located not just on a busy road, but on one of several of the city's official routes for political protest. On weekday afternoons and late weekend mornings for the next twelve months I came face to face with the huge numbers of people expressing their public opposition to corruption cases, to the refusal for Catalans to be granted a referendum, to proposed changes to abortion law, to public sector cuts, to the continued legacy of General Franco, to fascism, to evictions, to unemployment and much more.

But I hadn't just moved to a city of engaged, active, politicised citizens; I had moved to a country full of them. In 2016, two academics from the University of Salamanca studied the data on demonstrations around Europe and concluded that 'the propensity to participate in street protest activities is much higher in Spain than in other European countries'. According to their data,¹ the Spanish protest more than any other Europeans – a social norm even before the 2008 financial crisis, that profoundly destabilised Spanish levels of

unemployment and income. In 2006, the percentage of people who participated in a demonstration was higher in Spain than in Germany, France, Portugal or Switzerland.

In 2012 and 2013 the number of protests in Spain reached a staggering 45,000, meaning that 25 per cent of the population had participated in at least one demonstration that year. The huge number of protests occurring were, of course, not limited to the ones we saw from our window in Barcelona. In the capital city of Madrid in 2013 there were 4,500 registered demonstrations – around twelve demonstrations per day. To compare that figure with another European country – say, with the one I had just left – the same research data revealed that there were just ninety-two recorded demonstrations that year.

Trade unions organised around half of all these demonstrations. Spain has three major unions that all have deep, historic roots across the country. They are unions that have organised armies for war, clandestine resistance to dictatorship and strikes against the expansion of neoliberalism. But organised labour alone didn't plan the thousands of other demonstrations across Spain. These were coordinated by groups unaffiliated with this more traditional form of political activism. Free from institutional traditions and arrangements, they emerged from local neighbourhoods, plazas and squares across Spain, some in the form of neighbourhood associations, others as single-issue campaign groups or collectives. Defined loosely as 'social and grassroots movements', they enabled people across Spain to make sure that their voices were heard outside the traditional established structures.

Their presence would be so powerful that their activism would set the country's political agenda for the coming years. Spain, the Salamanca academics concluded, is nothing less than a 'country of street protesters'.

Our new Barcelona neighbourhood was the Eixample (Catalan for the Enlargement), a district unfamiliar to both of us. From the plane it presents itself as a rectangular carpet of octagonal blocks that sits between the old, medieval centre and the point where the city floor begins to rise until it reaches the arid forest of Collserola. The neighbourhood's geometry is angular and precise, a direct contrast to the twisting lanes and cobblestone alleyways found in the heart of the city more familiar to tourists.

Designed in the mid-nineteenth century by Catalan engineer Ildefons Cerdà, the Eixample was built to solve the problems created by Barcelona's rapid industrialisation: overcrowded housing, Dickensian working conditions and vast inequalities of health, wealth and income, as well as an unsanitary, disease-spreading sewage system. Every one of these social and economic problems had been exacerbated and had reached intolerable levels as new factories threading cotton and weaving silk transported their goods from the Catalan countryside to Barcelona's harbour and beyond. Cerdà's vision for a new Barcelona was egalitarian and his plans for building it were scientific. He mapped out a new city of affordable apartments around inner gardens on large blocks whose edges had been clipped to allow clean air to circulate around the densely packed city. He calculated the exact volume of fresh air required to flow around the massive urban development in relation to

the strength of the coastal winds blowing in from the east. He evenly measured the location of new schools, libraries, markets and hospitals to distribute key public services in an equitable manner. While one side of the Eixample was designed to be more upmarket than the other, residents of all classes began to live next to, on top of and under one another throughout the city's enormous grid of new apartments. Cerdà reduced inequality and rid Barcelona of its urban squalor through the revolutionary power of architecture: the project was so radical that it gave the world the term 'urbanisation'.

These nineteenth-century apartment blocks still possess a particular romance. Our apartment's entrance featured a large glass door framed with intricately moulded iron; in the lobby sat a wooden lift with a glass door; and next to the lift, on the ground floor, a tiny closet with a single bare bulb for a *portero*, who, in his cigarette-scented blue jacket, still signed for your post and washed the same patch of pavement outside the building each morning.

Cerdà had designed apartments in buildings like ours with families in mind. Their long, thin corridors had space for four bedrooms and two sets of large French windows at either end: one overlooking the street outside, the other overlooking a hidden interior garden. We were on the third floor on the left of our Eixample building and a property developer had recently sliced our apartment in two, leaving us with a view only of the road.

Despite the grid layout, Cerdà's Barcelona is easy to get lost in. We found our bearings by furnishing our new home with what we found on the street. The apartment came with

only two beds and we had heard that the council offered a free evening collection service for any unwanted household items: *Dia de los Trastos* (Junk Day). Once a week, among the old kitchen fittings, toilet seats and dirty sofas, there were mahogany tables, terracotta flower pots and tatty wicker chairs. In just two weeks, we had found our bearings, as well as furnishing our home.

There were reference points in the city, however, impossible to miss, that expressed a much harsher underbelly of Barcelona – not too dissimilar to the medieval injustices that the Eixample was built to help banish. Now they were caused by globalisation, not the industrial revolution. It was subprime mortgages, financial market crashes, austerity, an age of boom and bust and bankruptcy – all of which left the city, the region and the country in a permanent state of crisis. Looking at just the area immediately neighbouring our apartment, at least one person slept every night in the twenty-four-hour ATM in the bank on the corner; two apartments lay empty with bricked-up windows next to a five-star hotel a few doors down; people sat begging outside the supermarket and bakery in shifts; and one day a few blocks away a forty-year-old man took his own life on the day bailiffs came to repossess his home after he defaulted on his mortgage. This, too, was Barcelona.

After a year, we left the Eixample for an apartment in the quieter district of Gràcia. Once an affluent suburb of nineteenth-century Barcelona, Gràcia was absorbed into the city when the Eixample was complete. The neighbourhood's narrow streets, lined with orange trees and jasmine bushes, still leave it feeling more like a village than a district of a busy

city. The squares of Gràcia are the epicentre of the barriò: elderly people dressed in their finest clothes and sitting on low benches fall into conversation with strangers as easily as if they were seated at a bar; teenagers with sandwiches wrapped in foil sit in a circle on the floor for hours; young children run around as parents chat at a table on the terrace of a café. There is always at least one sticky puddle of dog piss drying on the pavement, along with the odd cockroach scuttling under a bin. With the arrival of spring, barbecues and swing classes appear in the squares and for one week in the summer residents from different neighbourhood associations compete to design the biggest, most elaborate street carnival. When we moved to the neighbourhood the festival was in its 198th year.

Gràcia has long been one of the areas in Barcelona most likely to vote both in favour of a secessionist or at least a pro-devolution party, and for a radical left-wing party, two facts that encouraged our Catalan friends to tell us we were moving not to any old neighbourhood but to the 'Independent Republic of Gràcia'. Of course, the very reason why Gràcia is so unique is the reason why an unrelenting wave of gentrification was taking place, of which we were very much part. Combined with an out-of-control, unregulated tourism sector, this meant that the neighbourhood was changing rapidly. Following the 1992 Olympics and the remaking of large parts of the city's infrastructure, including the creation of the beach, Barcelona became one of the continent's most popular tourist destinations. Today it is the jewel in the crown of Ryanair's Europe: in 2016, eight million tourists visited a city that has a permanent population of only 1.6 million. Barcelona has

become as overrun with tourists as Venice, and the graffiti in Gràcia when we lived there included signs written in English, such as ‘Tourists Go Home’ and ‘Gaudí hates you and spits in your beer! Tourists Fuck Off.’

Gràcia was on the front line of the battle against these pressures bearing down on Barcelona, a fact made evident when a community social centre, known as Banc Expropiat, was closed by the police. Local activists had occupied the abandoned building for five years and it had been one of the key political centres in the area, where the two main grassroots movements – anti-austerity and pro-independence – had organised under the same roof. The building, on the corner of a market, had once housed a bank that closed after the financial crash. In 2015, a deal made by the ex-conservative mayor to pay the owner rent and avoid moving the activists had expired. It was now the job of the police, working for the newly elected left-wing mayor Ada Colau, an ex-housing activist and former ‘occupier’ herself, to end the occupation.

I remember the euphoria when Colau was elected. I received a flurry of WhatsApp messages from Catalan friends of a photo of her being escorted out of a bank by police after occupying its shop floor. Their messages proudly read: ‘This is your new mayor.’ During Colau’s first term in office as mayor of Barcelona and head of the grassroots municipal coalition *En Comú Podem*, she cracked down on the unregulated activities of Uber and Airbnb in the city, increased the council’s social housing portfolio and ensured that all new builds would contain at least 30 per cent affordable sales or rentals. She led a campaign to ‘feminise politics’ and fight gender-based

violence while increasing funding for the city's budget for housing victims of gendered violence. She ran a campaign for Spain to take more action to house migrants coming to Europe and ensured that the city assisted more refugees than in previous years.

The week-long riot over the community centre revealed many things about Barcelona and many things about our place in it. I didn't hear the resistance to the eviction the first night, but when the bins along our street were set on fire and the shop windows of a newly opened Decathlon sports shop were smashed, it was impossible not to notice what was taking place. For nearly a week activists attempted to re-enter the building, forcing the police to solder its doors and windows shut. Each night until the early hours, a police helicopter hovered low in the sky as groups from across the city gathered in Plaça de la Revolució until the square was so full that someone sent a bottle flying through the air towards the wall of police guarding the building. The police then charged the square in an attempt to disperse the crowd. As they chased groups of protestors around the neighbourhood, local residents didn't make their task any easier: I remember seeing residents drop empty glass bottles from balconies at baton-wielding riot police as they chased protesters. For the next few months, flowers placed by residents hung from the sealed, empty building. Returning a few years later, I found the building had become a health food store run by the French supermarket chain Carrefour.

The riot was as much about gentrification as it was about an eviction. But it did highlight what the loss of a social