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Culture, crisis, and renewal: Introduction, Part I

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When asked about the recent Greek debt crisis that resulted in a political upheaval and eventually led Alexis Tsipras into government, Jean-Luc Godard made a remarkable statement: “We should thank Greece.” The filmmaker, who was at that moment presenting his movie *Film socialisme* (2010), reversed the dominant media discourse by underlining the tendency to reduce every kind of crisis to economic terms. In his opinion, the real creditors were not the members of the European troika (i.e., the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) but the cultural legacy established by ancient Greece:

It is the West that has a debt to Greece. Philosophy, democracy, tragedy [...] The technological world in which we live owes everything to Greece. Who invented logic? Aristotle. [...] Logic. This is what the dominant powers use all day, making sure that there is not any contradiction involved, we stay in the same logic. Hannah Arendt did argue that logic induces totalitarianism. So everybody owes money to Greece today.¹

With his statement, Godard not only repositioned the centrality of Greek thought in Western civilization but introduced one of the key aspects regarding the contemporary crises that our societies have been suffering from in the last few decades, which is the necessity to link the notions of crisis and culture. By doing so, we will not be tempted to sum up the origin of the critical situations as a mere consequence of financial and budgetary adversities, so the possible solutions can be traced by considering the cultural, historical, political, and also economic features that helped build our current predicament. As Jacques Le Goff puts it:

[o]ur Europe [...] has existed for a very long time, marked out by its geography and modelled by its history ever since the Greeks gave it the name that it has retained to the present day. The future must rest upon the legacies which [...] have made Europe a world of exceptional richness and extraordinary creativity, in both its unity and its diversity. (ix)

Therefore, we find that constant allusions by government authorities to improving “recovery policies” would be better expressed as “renewal policies.” This nuance would also denote that efforts must be made, not based on the consequences of the unpredictable flow of supposedly invisible free-market ideology, but rather in the active actions carried out by executive powers (in areas such as education and health), which would stimulate the economy.

Crucial to the success of possible renewal policies in the configuration of alternative social imaginaries not univocally dictated by their relation with the economy is the reassessment of the notion of progress. Until the 1980s, progress was understood as economic growth, but in the MONDIACULT forum that took place in Mexico in 1982 (organized by UNESCO), progress was redefined as the enriching of people’s

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identity and of their aspirations, foregrounding quality of life at a collective and individual level (Maccari and Montiel 38–39). In this sense, the Indian economist Amartya Sen (Nobel Prize for Economics in 1998) declared that it is possible to understand progress as a process destined to increase one's freedom in the pursuit of one's aspirations. Thus what lies behind this overemphasis on the economist approach to progress is, according to feminist Italian economist Antonella Picchio, an ill-intentioned perversion of the foundations of free-market ideas as expressed by their pioneers:

Picchio reminds us that the so-called classical political economics of Smith, Ricardo, and Marx always kept very clearly in mind the cultural—ethical and political—dimension of economics, beyond its technical, quantitative, or specialized aspects. And that the field was originally presented as being in the service of the common good or happiness, with the understanding that such happiness did not mean mere physical subsistence, but the possibility of a life worth living, a life that has value and meaning; in short, a 'decent life,' which included culture and sociability. Picchio shows that classicalists like Adam Smith never understood the 'wealth of nations' as something separate from happiness, customs, or social tastes, and definitely not separate from *how* those nations wanted to live. (cited in Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone* 29–30)

With the publication in 1932 of *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* by the British economist Lionel Robbins, Picchio identifies this text as a milestone insofar as “with the purpose of reaching his goal of redefining economics, he trades the analytical object of wellbeing—understood as effective living conditions—for the more general, abstract idea of utility as optimization of individual choices, under the bonds of scarcity” (Picchio 35). This transformation has resulted in the configuration of a new way of living in which, as Verónica Gago argues in *La razón neoliberal*, calculus has become the primordial subjective matrix (Gago 25).

Needless to say, however, neoliberal discourse has increasingly obtained a hegemonic status in the public agenda since Margaret Thatcher's (1979–1990) and Ronald Reagan's (1981–1989) years in office, after the first attempt to fully implement neoliberal policies in Chile, importing the Chicago School of Economics neoliberal agenda led by Milton Friedman during the Pinochet regime (1973–1990). Lakoff identified the conceptual metaphors used by neoliberals in their process of framing the public debate in a polarized environment and, most importantly, linked the social impregnation of the neoliberal agenda to the funding of think tanks and research institutes that provided a plethora of rhetorical strategies. It was during the 1980s that certain ideas of this doctrine, which are still commonly accepted, were infused into the public debate, such as the perception of governments as inefficient entities. Oddly enough, what proved inefficient were the economic policies of the neoliberal movement: despite the emphasis on the economy, their impact on macroeconomic indicators is irrelevant at best (Krugman, *Peddling Prosperity*). Spain presents a peculiar case study in relation to the role played by the government in the cultural field with the return to democracy after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975 and the signing of the Constitution in 1978. The Socialist government elected in 1982 happily funded the cultural explosion of the so-called *La Movida* movement to project a new modern vision of Spain, represented by a young generation of artists, musicians, and filmmakers. The newly gained liberties, infused by an increasing hedonism and consumerist practices as reflected in many lyrics by pop singers and groups such as Mecano or Alaska (“En tu fiesta me colé,” “Hoy no me puedo levantar,” “Horror en el hipermercado,” and “Bote de Colón,” among others), promoted the transformation of Spain into the new bastion of neoliberal economics. Or as the saying went during those years, Spain became the best country to get rich quick.

Nevertheless, it is widely assumed that the deepest effect of these policies lies in the crisis of the welfare state as a result of budget cuts in education and health care, threatening democracy itself. Chomsky (403) perceived it when he asserted that “[p]redatory capitalism created a complex industrial system and an advanced technology; it permitted a considerable extension of democratic practice and fostered certain liberal values, but within limits that are now being pressed and must be overcome.” The social perception of the systemic crisis has increased since the diagnosis made by Chomsky, to the extent that a number of surveys estimate that two-thirds of the U.S. population consider capitalism to be a broken system (Fontana 133) and that Europeans are experiencing a “culture of defensive individualism [that] fuels xenophobia, racism, and widespread hostility, breaking down the social fabric and increasing the distance between governments and their citizens” (Castells et al. 4). In this context of social fragmentation,

a possible solution may emerge by rethinking the concept of globalization separated from its neoliberal component, that is, that the idea of culture should not be disregarded in behalf of the economic discourse (Friedman and Friedman 252) while avoiding the temptation to forget the systemic component of the global problem (Laibman). The constant repetition of crises (welfare, housing, migration) and, in particular, the 2008 economic crisis has had a cultural dimension of intensifying and accelerating nothing less than the emergence of a new historical consciousness (Williams 30). In this regard, Glassner detected in 1999 that neoliberal politics used the “culture of fear” as a tool for capitalistic consumption that would become more evident after 9/11 by reaching into every aspect of Western society (Croft). It has been a lengthy process involving several censorship movements against cultural production and the right of free speech and artistic expression. While economic deregulation was in progress, conservatives developed a strong control on dissidence, even promoting legislation against popular culture in order to make it fit the moral right-wing agenda, as exposed in several studies (de la Fuente; Méndez Rubio). In Spain, the approval in 2015 of the Organic Bill for Citizen’s Security by the People’s Party government—popularly called *Ley Mordaza* (“gagging law”)—has restricted fundamental rights for Spanish citizens such as the right to take part in demonstrations.² In addition, government culture departments and ministries have been exposed to successive funding shortages, with these actions being justified by the need to save money (Ordine). In other words, the political use of culture has shifted from the basis of the system to a mere distraction/entertainment element that must be erased.

The unsustainability of this model became obvious with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008 since it also represented the crash of the neoconservative dogma based on systemic corruption. In fact, the fall of Lehman Brothers was followed by the proliferation of political scandals in the media. As Levine (162) pointed out, “[c]orruption is not simply pursuit of primitive forms of gratification, but the use of a moral order as means to achieve such forms of gratification,” so that we are dealing at the present moment not only with the consequences of a financial crisis but also with urgency for the renewal of a system that has been proven to be inhuman and incompetent in its determination to negate cultural heritage in the evolution of contemporary society. The problem is not the implementation of certain well-known economic measures for recovery, which are generally assumed to be viable and effective (Krugman, *End This Depression*), but to find a new model that might appeal to citizens by overcoming exclusive individualism and eliminating social inequalities. The right procedure could be regulatory reform once the inconsistency of the corporate freedom discourse is realized (Tombs), after identifying the real causes of the crisis to stop the decline of public services (Cremin).

This debate is particularly revealing in the case of Spain analyzed in this dossier. The social evolution of this country has also experienced a progressive drift to neoliberal policies from the 1980s onward. However, the point of departure was the trauma of a cruel civil war giving way to a long-term fascist dictatorship that showed off a permanent disdain to any form of culture (Morán). The Francoist dictatorship interrupted the liberal tradition by condemning to exile several generations of artists and intellectuals ranging from literature (Valdivia) to popular culture (Catalá-Carrasco). The transition to democracy, despite its violence (Sánchez Soler), resulted in a constitutional system reinforced by social democratic policies that did not avoid a deregulation economy but embraced neoliberal policies as a sign of progress. Thus Spanish economic development ran in harmony with the American and European neoliberal movements to the extent that it even eventually created a leading economy based on the housing bubble, which inevitably burst following the crash of Lehman Brothers.

To this date, few studies have analyzed the cultural narratives articulated around the financial crises in 2008 and its aftermath in the Hispanic context. Among these contributions, it is important to note the work developed by the research project “Cultural Narratives of Crisis and Renewal (CRIC)” under the Horizon 2020 European Commission Excellent Science Marie Skłodowska-Curie RISE. Coordinated by Jorge Catalá-Carrasco and Patricia Oliart from Newcastle University, it comprises an international consortium of four universities in Europe (Newcastle University, University of Groningen, Universitat de València, and Universitat de Lleida) and four in Latin America (Universidad Austral de Chile, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, and Universidad Nacional de Córdoba and Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero in Argentina) and more than 40 researchers. In parallel, some remarkable academic contributions have appeared in a more or less dispersed manner such as Sanz Villanueva; Ingenschay; the

monograph *Cultures of Anyone* by Moreno-Caballud; and the collective volume *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis* edited by Manuel Castells, João Caraça, and Gustavo Cardoso. Therefore, this current special issue for *Romance Quarterly* contributes to a growing literature on the topic, but also fills an essential gap with its focus on the 15M movement, media coverage, and cultural production (literature, music, theater, and comics) engaging with the 2008 financial crisis. In the Hispanic context, there are two publications that CRIC researchers consider key to the study of the crisis: the special issue of *Hispanic Review* edited by Luis Moreno-Caballud titled “La imaginación sostenible: culturas y crisis económica en la España actual” and the special issue of *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, “Spain in Crisis: 15-M and the Culture of Indignation” edited by Bryan Cameron. In addition to this, from the Spanish social sciences have emerged five significant attempts to map the economic and political implications, responses, and aftereffects of the 2008 crisis in Spain: (a) *Atlas de la Crisis* by Ricardo Méndez et al.; (b) *Geografía de la crisis en España* by Juan M. Albertos Puebla and José L. Sánchez Hernández; (c) *La urna rota: la crisis política e institucional del modelo español* (2014) by Jorge Galindo et al.; (d) the special issue for *452° Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada* titled *Literatura y crisis* (2016); and (e) the dossier on literature and crisis published by the literary journal *Quimera* (2016), edited by Stefania Imperiale. These volumes provide a multidirectional approach to the 2008 crisis by presenting data and indicators that have not been considered in the mainstream quasi-scientific literature, a product of the social emergency attempting to provide answers in a traumatic context of unemployment and unrest that has received most of the attention of Spanish media conglomerates. Therefore, we can already identify two general lines of work when dealing with the study of the 2008 Spanish crisis. One path was created by publications made of impressionistic views of the crisis and its aftereffects that provided personal subjectivity to this convulsive historical context and proposed solutions or diagnosed problems from a nonscientific perspective. The other path is followed by researchers and projects mentioned in this introduction. The contributors for this special issue of *Romance Quarterly* adopt an analytical approach to the complexities, tensions, and conflicts resulting from the implementation of neoliberal ideologies and specific economic and social policies.

This special issue is presented in two parts. Issue 64(3), part 1, includes four articles covering socially interrelated angles with relation to the crisis: anthropology, history, memory, and cultural politics. Carles Feixa analyzes the “Indignant” pilgrimage through the lens of Guillermo, a member of the 15M movement in Lleida as well as a university student. This alternative pilgrimage undertaken in 2011 by six columns of marchers, which crossed the Iberian Peninsula after the 15M, walked for weeks until reaching their final destination: Puerta del Sol in Madrid. The “Popular Indignant March” had been conceived as an original way of rounding off the occupations of hundreds of squares throughout Spain in a ritualization of a festive and reclaiming appropriation of the territory. Alejandro Quiroga explores the propagation of national narratives through football in both the Spanish and the European media in the period 2008–2012. The “narratives of glory,” following the successes of the Spanish national football team, operated as a compensation mechanism as crisis deepened in Spain and diehard stereotypes resurfaced throughout Europe to make Spaniards the scapegoats for the crisis. Fruela Fernández studies the legacy of the “Transición,” intersecting art, memory, and politics to identify two complementary trends: first, the will to recover the ethos of the transition to democracy in Spain through musical imagery; second, identifying a rejection to the aftermath of the transition through a conscious critique of its musical canon. Finally, Montserrat Iniesta explores memory politics through two museum exhibits that provide a temporal arch for the before and after of the 2008 crisis and its social and political aftereffects: the 15M movement and the rise of the pro-independence movement in Catalonia. Iniesta focuses especially in the 2005 exhibit “Escolta, Franco! El purgatori d’un dictador,” for which she conducted curatorial work while serving as director for the Museu de Vilafranca-Museu del Vi (Catalonia, Spain).

Therefore, our aim in studying the Spanish crisis is not only to analyze its peculiarities (the history of political transition or the 15M movement) and similarities (economic policies or the growth of inequality) in Western democracies, but to trace a global reflection on how culture must be restored as a crucial tool for understanding our society, and also to find far-reaching solutions to structural problems. In other words, we consider culture the key notion of our political world since, as Godard stated, we

must challenge the ideas of inexorability and immutability established by certain governments and powers-that-be as irrefutable dogmas.

Notes

1. What is interesting in Godard's statement is the opportunity to remark on the Greek cultural legacy when the Greek debt crisis dominated news in the media. In fact, the filmmaker was doing nothing more than remembering the importance of this legacy. In this sense, a similar position was expressed recently by the philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah reflecting on Western civilization. Appiah (2016) argued that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the great German philosopher, told his students of the high school he ran in Nuremberg that "the foundation of higher study must be and remain Greek literature in the first place, Roman in the second."
2. This legislation can be accessed at https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2015-3442.

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