CHAPTER 14. CONCLUSIONS: BRIDGES, TUNNELS AND WIDENING SPACES

The questions this study set out to answer have to do with women as individuals, cultural constructions of "politics", public space and the reproduction of the gender order – and the interaction between all of these.

Why do some women participate in a neighborhood association instead of staying "in the home"? Why do many women participate in this form of political work rather than in political parties or trade unions? What does participation in the movement mean for the participating women themselves?

The neighborhood movement as a whole seems to transcend the dichotomy of public/private and this makes it interesting for feminist theory, and also for general political analysis. What sort of semi-public space is the neighborhood movement? How is it related to the genderization of the dichotomy? What cultural negotiations around gender are going on in it? What does the participation of women in the movement mean for the wider gender order? Can we draw some general conclusions about gender and politics from what we have learned about this specific Spanish movement?

Let us start with the issue of what the presence of women has meant for the movement.

Women's impact on the neighborhood movement

In all of the towns and cities included in this study, except Linares, a common remark was that "the role of women in the movement" had been "very important". Both men and women underlined that women had left their mark on the movement. Had they? How? What created this impression? After all, men had dominated the movement throughout most of its history and in many ways they still did; nobody denied that.

First of all it was a matter of a clash between facts and cultural expectation. The presence of a woman in a space culturally constructed as masculine stands out. More than one is a crowd.

Second, it was true that women had been very active. They were not just symbols of change, not just outstanding individuals; after 1980 they have been present in considerable numbers. This is no mystery. The historical conjuncture of the transition to democracy produced a cultural and political climate that favored mobilization, questioning and protest, and the openly patriarchal traits of the Franco regime made it seem very logical that the questioning should include the gender order. Women moved "out of the home" in many ways. But in spite of everything, they did not join general political activities en masse.¹ They did not participate much in political parties or labor unions even in such places as Elda where most women were also industrial workers. They might be workers, but they were also, and above all, mothers and housewives, so therefore – according to the cultural logic – politics was not a "natural" field for them. But they did enter the neighborhood movement, which thus became an exception in the political field when it came to gender. The activists were generally aware of that, and that was one reason they felt women had had a strong impact.

Third, there was probably a hint of political correctness in such remarks. Most activists had a view of society as something that should be changed in the direction of "more justice", and they felt, some strongly, some only vaguely, that the gender order was not just, and that it was

¹ This has been shown in many studies and much commented on. See e.g. Aguado 1999, Aguado and Ortega 2011, Alberdi 2001, Alborch 1999, Asociación "Mujeres en la transición democrática" 1999, Astelarra 1986 and 1990, Campillo Iborra 2000, Ortega López 1995, Ortiz Corulla 1987, and many others. Plus of course similar debates about women of other countries.
necessary for women to move away from their "traditional role". The abolishment of the most evidently oppressive gender laws of the Franco regime was not enough. So it seemed convenient to say that the neighborhood movement was one appropriate place for furthering gender change.

As a whole, women have participated in the movement on terms rather similar to those of men. They have been interested in similar issues and they have worked in similar positions. True, they came into the movement later than men, but in the 1990s the times of strong male dominance were receding in memory; what stood out in most people's views was the increasing presence, strength, voice and influence of women, and even if this was in part because it contradicted expectations, there was a lot of truth to the impression.

Judging from the changes that occurred during the time lapse of this study, the similarity of women's and men's preferred areas and methods of action was increasing. Male dominance was still stronger the higher up the organizational pyramid you looked, but even in this respect the neighborhood movement was less gender hierarchical than most other associational contexts in Spain.

And in spite of this invasion of women, the men were not generally abandoning the movement. What happened in La Esperanza (chapter 10) could happen here and there, now and then, and it goes to show that substantial pockets of men's resistance to women's presence could exist, but it was not very common. The movement was not changing from being gender marked as masculine to being gender marked as feminine, but from one where gender counted to one where gender counts ever less. This was a major change. And the fact that it was uncommon in the associational field as a whole makes the neighborhood movement stand out. If it wanted to, it could have something to say to the rest of society about the experience of degendering. But since the dominant movement discourse was that what was happening was "completely normal", there was little reflection on it.

Women's impact on the movement, then, was far from negligible. But for the most part it was not distinguishable as a feminine or feminist impact.

Some spaces within the movement had a clear flavor of femininity; women's traditional interests had been accommodated, e.g. in the shape of handicraft courses. But such spaces had had little effect on the work of the movement as a whole. To the extent they had, the consequences had been negative according to those activists who thought they had siphoned off resources, space and energies from "reivindicaciones" to "service". If that is correct, the major contribution of women would be to the growing innocuousness of the neighborhood movement. That would seem to confirm old figures of thought according to which women's presence is bound to undermine serious political projects.

Feminist issues had been mostly avoided. The arguments against introducing them did not usually refer to any defense of the existing gender order but to the fact that feminist issues and vocabulary would "scare off" "ordinary neighbors" and thus endanger the movement.

As we have seen, women in the movement could not avoid working with (what I consider) feminist issues, along with whatever else interested them, since they had to struggle for their right to be active and to be heard, but most of them did not see this as a feminist struggle, and most of them had ambivalent feelings towards more "advanced" feminist issues such as abortion, sexuality, divorce and debates on equality versus difference. Which were the prominent ones labeled feminist in Spanish media.

For all these reasons, feminists reciprocated the feelings of ambivalence. This is clearly not a feminist movement. On the other hand it is not a gender conservative movement, either. My effort in this study has been to show that there are more subtle consequences that escape easy classification along the lines of the usual debates around conservatism versus change in a short or medium time perspective, but that in the longer run these consequences for the gender order lie in the direction feminism desires, and that the characteristics of the neighborhood movement make it an appropriate space for changes that will reach everyone, not just an elite.
Women becoming persons

However, there is a certain risk that the way many women have been incorporated into the movement may reinforce traditional gender ideas. There was tension around this, as we have seen, and many activists were worried. One explanation often heard of women's presence in the neighborhood movement was that they see their work there as an extension of their duties as mothers and housewives. They do not see any breach of logic between the two spheres in what they do, it was argued, by Spanish feminists as well as by activists in the movement itself, implying that this was a shortcoming on the part of such women. Rather than conceptualizing what they do as a move into the public sphere of politics, many women do what they have always done, adapting pragmatically their already varied and flexible "private" role according to the needs of the moment. 2

The plausibility of this explanation varied from place to place and among individual women. I met all kinds, from women who fitted the description rather well to women who would reject it with disdain as out of touch with today's women's reality. There were also women who rejected it in words but still seemed to conform to the description in their actual way of life, and, vice versa, women who did not explicitly question the "traditional role" but had abandoned it in practice.

The dominant feminist discourse in Spain was very much opposed to the image of the good mother; it is beyond doubt, according to this discourse, that trying to live up to that ideal entails serious drawbacks for women's opportunities for self-realization and autonomy. For the gender order to change in the direction of "more justice", the image of the good mother must change. There is no other way. Further down the road, other choices must be made, but they cannot even be fathomed as long as the ideal of the Self-Abnegating Perfect Mother blocks all vision. 3

But this is a dangerous proposition that contributes to the bad name of feminism, since many Spanish women experience attacks on the ideal of motherhood as an attack on their dignity and deepest sense of self. It is dangerous, too, because the ideal often serves as an effective defense for women, a legitimation not only of "traditional" or "feminine" acts and attitudes, but for anything a woman does. If she can arrange things to make whatever she is doing look like the actions of a mother struggling for her children, she can break all other norms. 4 To give up such a formidable defense before anything anywhere near as useful has become practicable can indeed be negative for individual women's emancipation, in practice, even if it is necessary for the collective emancipation of all women in the long run.

Were the women in the neighborhood movement there as mothers, then? Or were they women who had decided to break with that legitimating discourse, having switched to one of modernity, progress, emancipation and politics? Or were they trying to balance those opposites? Or transcend the opposition itself?

When asked why they participated, the women themselves usually began by denying emphatically that what they were doing had anything to do with politics. Then they would go on to say that they happened to know someone already active who explained to them what it was all about, or similar tales. That is, their explanation was almost always phrased in the "traditional" terms of personal relations.

But once in they would never want to quit! As we have seen, this was true for both men and women in the movement: once they join, they stay in and they stay active for many years. The most common motive given by either gender was that they wanted to work for the good of their barrio. But the women also stressed something the men talked much less about: the fun. They would say they loved meeting all the people, being in the midst of things, knowing what was going on. The men had other places to meet, talk and socialize, like work or bars, so they could describe the sociable advantages of being in the movement in the light of other options.

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2 Cf. note 25 in chapter 3.
3 One ethnographic description of this is found in Oeveraas 2003.
4 She can even work as a prostitute. Cf. e.g. Molina 1984. Cf. also Thurén 1988.
The women compared associational life with staying in their home, which was usually their only alternative.5

One clear example was what one woman in Malvarrosa said, "I don't feel like staying at home! That is the first thing! So if there are classes or lectures or something..." It was evident that she wanted to give more examples of what she could do outside her home, and she gave one, she had joined a group at the health center of the barrio, but she seemed to mean something more than that, something she could not quite express. For her, as for many women, work in the neighborhood association was only a part of something more general. It was about going into the public sphere, in a broad sense. Associations, yes, but also education, information, supporting others, changing life conditions.

This was related to what people said in other contexts, with a feminist tint but much more generally accepted: that women had become, or were becoming, persons.

What does that mean? Nobody denies women's personhood in a legal sense, today, nor is there any doubt that a woman is an individual in a psychological sense, including a religious sense. But there was another meaning to the word that was used as a key symbol in discourses on changes in the gender order: for a woman to be a person is not to be shut up in her home, in "her role", 6 but being outside, where she can see and be seen, learn, know what is going on in the world, take her own decisions, be recognized, widen her horizons, and have resources to help others widen theirs, accumulate social capital. All of this had always been part of the male role, and it had been denied to women. So it is logical that the word "person" should be used about the way women have to change if they want to transcend the traditional definition of what they should be and obtain full social capacity. For the women in the neighborhood movement who had not participated in other non-domestic activities, this was the direction in which they were moving, and it was fascinating and positive to them.7

In terms of the division of spheres, they were moving from the private one, where relationships are based on personalities and needs, toward the public one, where roles are more abstractly defined. The move from multi-stranded to role-specific relationships is one aspect of general modernization processes, as many have shown. But such analyses usually forget about gender. As long as women are socialized mainly for duties in the private sphere, they will handle particularistic multi-faceted relationships much more skillfully than role-specific ones. One reason they prefer the neighborhood movement to conventional politics is certainly that the former is based on personal relationships much more than the latter are. But it is less so than family life, and to move towards more abstract and universalistic roles is to move along with modernization, instead of being left on a sidetrack. This meaning is also embedded in the idea of "becoming a person".

Coming to the association, meeting other women and men, learning about their barrio and about local politics, connecting to a social context beyond everyday routines and family concerns, meant a lot to most of the women in the movement, and they expressed strong awareness of this both in interviews and in spontaneous conversation.

It is not easy. It is not just an extension of previous duties and ways of being. One must learn. Thus we cannot conclude that the women were just extending their "traditional" roles. They were breaking with them, doing new things, and the neighborhood movement was one place where each woman could choose the speed, methods and reach of change that fit her personal background and wishes. And she would do it with the help of other women. They would teach each other, and cover up for each other when someone made a mistake or did not want to admit that she was afraid or ashamed of doing something. So they were ushered into politics step by step. They did not have to know to start with, they could learn by doing.

But they denied that it was politics.

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5 In the working class, that is. Middle class circumstances are different. Cf. Thurén forthcoming.
6 “Her tasks” – sus labores – used to be the official designation for housewife, entered e.g. under profession on documents like the national identity card. Feminists as well as others like to adduce this as a prime example of the patriarchal oppression of women in "traditional" Spain.
7 Cf. note 13 in chapter 1!
**Women's "non-political" choices**

We have seen that one very common attitude was: "No, I am not here to do politics, I don't like politics and I don't understand it. I just want to contribute, I want to make my barrio a better place to live." Such comments show that women's non-domestic activities cannot be sorted along a single continuum from being an extension of "traditional" motherly and housewifely duties to a "modern" position as "a person". The opposite of "politics" is not just "private life"; it can be another kind of politics, or politics with a different vocabulary.

When I mentioned the word "politics" in meetings where the women did not know me well, the atmosphere often turned almost hostile. So I had to explain quickly what I meant. I would begin by asking what they meant by politics, and it practically always turned out that they were thinking of corruption, party in-fighting, the style of pushing ahead without consideration for others, trying to obtain power for oneself, etc. And they emphatically did not want to do that. They did not want to "become like men", some said. But they would add that "some women, too, behave in that way, nowadays".

Then I would suggest another definition of politics, approximately: "trying to influence what happens in society outside your own family". Then the women would agree and the atmosphere would relax: yes, if that was politics, they were doing politics.

During most of fieldwork, this satisfied me. I had found a way to avoid misunderstanding and to bridge our different perspectives, setting the stage for further friendly discussion on what they were doing.

But towards the end of fieldwork, I realized that it was not just a matter of how to define a term. The women would admit they were doing politics, yes, but they would admit it with hesitation. And only to me; I am sure they continued saying to others and to each other that they were not in politics. Suggesting my definition, implying that I knew better than they did what politics really was, I made them say something that did not really fit their practice. Perhaps there was a significant but not quite verbalizable reason for women to deny that what they were doing was politics. Perhaps by denying that it was, they could do politics without being overtly subversive, without evidently stepping into a masculine world, risking hostility from husbands and male comrades?

Or is that an interpretation that falls into the trap of considering the movement women as more "behind their times" than they were, and believing Spanish society as a whole to be less "evolved" than it is? That was a common reaction I met when I tried out my hypothesis on more sophisticated women activists.

True, the force of the denial of politics certainly varied with individual women's schooling and length of experience in the movement. It also varied with the size of the city or town and with the region. The more women active in a given context (association, town or region), the easier it seemed for them to say that they were doing politics. But that would actually support my hypothesis.

Be that as it may, it is clear that participation was more than politics to the participants. There was agreement on that among all kinds of activists and I could discern no difference on this point between women and men.

The characteristics of the neighborhood movement – premises close to home, a relaxed style of interaction, social purposes mixed with instrumental ones – have been shown to facilitate women's participation in political life in other countries, too. The cultural emphasis on barrio life is more specific to Spain. The idea of barrio is of a good, safe, home-like place that it is natural to love and want to do things for; that is what gives cultural sense to this kind of political organization, and it seems to facilitate women's participation in that the barrio becomes a metaphorical being to be cared for.

The neighborhood movement is certainly not a feminist or generally democratic panacea. If anything, doing fieldwork in it decreased my former activist optimism. But it does

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8 The description of this as it occurred in Malvarrosa is quite typical, cf. chapter 7.
9 Cf. note 19 in chapter 5.
demonstrate some unusual combinations of opportunities for change of, even while adapting to, social and cultural facts, including the gender order, and it is producing small but real and viable results for barrio women.

Most women in the neighborhood movement direct their practice towards the immediate environment. It concerns the social and material conditions of the barrio they live in, i.e. of the possibilities for the people they care about to obtain what they (variably) define as a good life. But as they adapt to changing times, searching for new forms of activity, they upset the gender order, and they notice that and define it as a good thing. In this sense they become feminists, with or without the label. And since they are many, and since they work with practical matters, their activities may have a stronger impact on the gender order than those of feminist theorists.

According to a common stereotype in middle class feminist circles, most barrio women are caught in a traditional trap they do nothing to break out of. The neighborhood movement is "progressive" but not feminist, and the more explicitly political it is, the less feminist it tends to be in its actual expressions and effects, many feminists reason. At that point their anti-political argument becomes paradoxically similar to that of the barrio women, and I believe the reason for that is the common rejection of "power" among almost all Spanish women (and many men) (Thurén 1988).

The neighborhood movement is a political activity that is construed as non-political. In part and by some, that is. There are ongoing debates and varying degrees of "political consciousness". But as a whole the movement is not politics as usual. This has made it possible for women to join. Many of them redefine and embrace the idea of politics after a while; others continue to deny that they are involved in politics. In either case, the neighborhood movement makes it possible for women to enter a male-defined activity without having first to resolve the contradiction between their ascribed "femininity" and the perceived "masculinity" of what they want to do. Time is on their side; they can allow their practice to slowly undermine the fixed gender markers, without rejecting them openly but also without worrying much about them.

**Building bridges, digging tunnels**

The women in the neighborhood movement stand, albeit often unknowingly, on long traditions when they refuse to accept the home-street division. The orthodox model of politics in the Western world is built on the idea of separate gendered spheres, so it has historically excluded women by definition (Beltrán et al 2001, Juliano 1992, Young 1990b). In theory. In practice the relationship between women and politics has usually been complex.

Temma Kaplan proposed the term female consciousness to point to women's awareness of what they need and their wish to struggle for it, even when circumstances do not permit them to arrive at what present-day feminists would define as a feminist consciousness (Kaplan 1995). According to Victoria Enders and Pamela Radcliff, even in times when women have been marginal or non-existent political actors, gender tensions have permeated public discourse in Spain, and women have found alternative forms of collective action. But those experiences were usually possible only by denying that they were about politics. "In fact, the authorities took them seriously as political actors precisely because they appeared to be nonpolitical representatives of timeless communal interests." (Enders and Radcliff 1999:11)

Mary Nash affirms that in the early 20th century Spanish women, like their Italian and French sisters, focused more on "sociocultural demands" than on political rights, but even so they did contest the public-private divide. Motherhood as the core of female identity remained uncontested. "However, women intentionally developed effective identity politics around the experience of motherhood to achieve female emancipation and to contest discriminatory practices." (Nash 1999:42)

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10 My criticism is not negative; it comes from the perspective of a concerned insider. In the appendix on method I report on my background in the Spanish feminist movement.
Spanish women won the vote in 1931 but lost it again after the civil war.¹¹ During the dictatorship, Pilar Primo de Rivera, sister of the founder of the Falange party, organized the Feminine Section, in which women did things defined as feminine (especially courses in cooking, child care and dress-making), but did so in public contexts (Gallego Méndez 1983). Like in other places and times under similar ideological circumstances (Sanchis and Bianchi 1988), a paradoxical situation was created: women leaders "took on a public role while promoting a submissive female model. They created a space of their own within a public male terrain. The regime regarded them as non-threatening because of their constant rejection of feminism." (Morcillo Gómez 1999:62)

Most women in the neighborhood movement would be horrified to be compared to Falange women, and I am not saying that their work is similar either in purpose or content. But perhaps in the cautious forms and in some of the paradoxical consequences. We must also remember that middle-aged women in the movement were educated in Franco times.

Teresa del Valle has coined the term bridging spaces (espacios puente) for women's old and new efforts to transcend the home-street division that sections their lives and potentials. The bridging spaces are contexts and activities anchored in the domestic and interior, but at the same time in public spaces, and with the purpose of fomenting change. There is a danger that such spaces will not be appreciated for what they can do, says del Valle. "It is a dynamic space which implies marking your steps, planning, trying, creating networks and bases that will permit new steps to be taken in the process." (del Valle 1991, my translation.)

Neighborhood associations can be seen as such bridges. They are halfway between the domestic and the political, halfway between sociability and purposeful action, halfway between adapting to and subverting the genderization of social domains.

Or perhaps they should better be called tunnels, since they are so often semi-hidden, and since what they do is to undermine the division itself, not just crossing it (Thurén 1997a). And while waiting for the separating walls to come tumbling down, some women escape through those tunnels.

Not-home, not-street

"If we are to reconstruct the public/private divide so that it no longer silences or marginalizes women, we must first comprehend its recurring power." (Anne Phillips 1998:5)

The general trend of the changes in the Spanish gender order is towards diminished force, diminished scope and decreasing hierarchy.¹² The force is clearly changing from heavy and legitimate sanctions against norm-breaking to near-voluntary compliance in many areas, and there is much rhetoric on individual freedom in some contexts, especially intellectual debates. Gender hierarchy is losing legitimacy fast in almost all circles. As to scope, some areas of life, such as the labor market, are being degendered to some extent, even though more in theory than in practice; others, such as education, have already been largely degendered. Politics is an area that resists; it is still gender-marked in practice, and strongly so in some quarters. But this fits ill with the general tendencies towards degenderization of crucial social domains. Thus a

¹¹ This is a simplification. First, because men, too, lost their democratic rights, obviously. Second, because there were some rituals called elections during the Franco regime and some women could vote in them. But men's and women's rights were not equally limited. One joke from the early 1970s expressed it succinctly: "Women are asking for the same rights as men – they don't want much, poor things."

¹² Elsewhere I have argued the convenience of separating various aspects of gender differentiation (Thurén 1993:102–104, 2000a). I suggest the terms scope, force and hierarchy. In a given society, gender may be a relevant factor in many or few areas of life (scope); where it is relevant, it may be strongly emphasized and sanctioned, or just weakly so (force); and independently of scope and force, the genders can be arranged more or less hierarchically. Spanish feminists have usually directed their criticism against hierarchy and force, while being less concerned with scope.
contradiction is formed, which people usually try to manage by denying the remaining force of the construction of politics as masculine. We could say that the denials fly in the face of reality, but the denials themselves will hasten the degendering of politics.

Let us look again at the key symbol for all of this: "Women are of the home, men are of the street." *(La mujer es de la casa, el hombre es de la calle.)*

The "home" stands for everything connected to the role of homemaker and mother. It is a sphere of activity, a life style and a set of obligations, rather than a location in physical space. A woman stays in the "home" sphere as long as she acts within her role as wife or mother, even if she is literally in a street or some other public space.

Likewise a man is "in the street" whenever he participates in what is considered public life, especially earning money or seeing friends, even if this should happen to take place inside his own home (which it seldom does but it could).

But the metaphor is not completely frozen; it still has physical meanings, too. For instance, to go out on an errand is usually expressed as "going into the street" *(salir a la calle)*, and the normal phrase, for both women and men, for going into one's dwelling is "to go home" *(ir a casa)*. The word *casa* means both home and house.

As usually happens with culturally loaded symbols, the analogy has many layers, far from perfectly parallel. Schematically, the main layers in this one are:

- **home --- street**
- **feminine --- masculine**
- **indoors --- outdoors**
- **private --- public**
- **family --- politics**
- **intimate, secret --- visible**
- **near --- far**
- **known people --- anonymous, or unknown, others**
- **few people --- many people**
- **everyday reproductive tasks --- long-term reproductive tasks**
- **biological reproduction --- social reproduction**

Not included in the emic representation, but a result of it as translated into practice, are contrasting preferences in styles of communication and interaction. Women, being used to family life, and having been educated to see care of individuals as their main task, learn to interact preferentially on the basis of the personal characteristics and circumstances of known others; men, being more used to interacting with less known others, learn to prefer more abstract forms, such as laws, rules, contracts. These styles could be included in the set of contrasts, as "particularism" and "universalism". But that does not form part of the common cultural representations of gender in Spain, and there is a continuum of degrees of particularism that is as much related to class, ideology and level of schooling as to gender, and there is a strong preference for personal relationships in Spanish culture in general.

It must be emphasized here that the home-street dichotomy is a figure of thought, a cultural image. It has some counterpart in reality, because it partially produces reality through practice, and it resists change because it is a flexible idea with long roots in time, widely spread in space and quite well fitted into social circumstances. So it is highly doxic. But there is nothing absolute about it; it is constantly being reproduced and therefore constantly renegotiated and changed. It must adapt to changing circumstances over time, and it always has had to adapt synchronically to varying contexts. And there are always other simultaneous figures of thought producing reality, too, and sometimes contradicting the home-street one. Any figure of thought works in a context, and that context mediates its effects, so that the "same" metaphor or image actually never works in exactly the same way in different times or places.

This one is, however, one figure of thought that must be especially questioned in theory and counteracted in social life for traditional gender organization to be challenged more than superficially. It is too stable to be shrugged off as old-fashioned, no longer valid (as current
modernizing Spanish discourses tend to do). If it is not carefully disassembled but only pushed out of sight, it will return in new disguises. It is resilient, having been adapted through centuries to various sets of economic, political, social and cultural circumstances. It interlocks with many other deep-seated ideas, that further stabilize each other, doxifying each other; it has found expressions in literature of all kinds, from high drama to popular songs and proverbs; and it has been built into city environments in myriad ways, from monuments and street plans to time schedules and the layout of dwellings. It shapes everyone's habitus, not alone but in a field of other ideas where some contradict it but many support it.  

For working class women in urban areas the gendered separation of public and private spheres has meant restrictions on their knowledge of society and their capacity for political action. Therefore the division of spheres must be transcended in order for women to become active citizens. Since the relative isolation in the private sphere has also limited women's indirect influence through cultural negotiations, the division must be transcended for women's perspectives and experiences to enter general processes of cultural change.

And this is where the ideas around the barrio come in. As we have seen, the barrio can be analyzed as a mediator between "home" and "street". It is outdoors and public, so it is masculine, and women symbolically mark their stepping over the threshold of their apartments by dressing up. But in practice and during the daytime, streets and most other public spaces in a barrio are peopled mainly by women.

A barrio breaks up the dichotomy private-public in the following ways:

– It is not-home, it is street – but it is everyday life;
– it is not-home – but one feels at home there;
– it is outdoors – but it is nearby, well-known, safe;
– it is gender marked in practice as feminine space during the day – while masculine in the evening and during the night;
– in the barrio one encounters many known others – but also, and probably mostly, unknown ones.

It is logical then for women who want to do something outside their own home and family to start precisely with barrio activities. They know them, they understand them, and their participation in them is reasonably legitimate. The barrio is not very much not-home. But it is not not-street either. Crossing her threshold, a woman takes a step away from "home", even if it is not a big one. And it is a step in a direction that begins to unlock the layers of the key metaphor from each other, so that they no longer support each other in quite so doxic a way.

The politics of a neighborhood association are public because they are about something beyond the family and the dwelling, but they concern everyday life, a nearby world, things women know and are concerned about.

The women use the barrio to enter politics without having to challenge the traditional gender ideas head on. They do obtain some power and influence beyond the confines of the "home". They may not "conquer the street", as the feminist slogan proposes, but they undermine the dichotomy home-street, and that may have deeper consequences in the long run. They use the barrio as an intermediate space and a switch for transcending opposites. And the barrio is well suited to this, because it has long been something special, charged with meaning, and an essential scene for everyday life for a majority of both women and men in Spain. People care about their barrio, so what is done in it, with it, to it, or by means of it, becomes inevitably noticed; one must react to it; it cannot be ignored.

In this light, the neighborhood movement can be seen as a useful instrument for redefining politics in the direction of issues that are closer to women's experiences and worries than politics in the conventional sense. It might also be a useful instrument for reshaping democratic procedures in the direction of more popular participation, adapting them to the

\[13\] In these ways, it is similar to another dichotomous figure of thought that is now the object of many intelligent efforts to deconstruct it but that keeps adapting and surviving because it is basic to Western thinking: nature-culture.
concerns and habits and styles of "ordinary people" (both men and women). That is, it is an instrument for making political action more effective for subverting both gender and class hierarchies. But it is a rather specific instrument, dependent for its efficacy and appropriateness on certain figures of thought, key symbols.

And these figures of thought are changing, along with the social and material circumstances that used to underpin them.

Paradoxically, then, the reasons women can and want to participate in the neighborhood movement are diluted by this very participation. The process is akin to a race between the growing liberating effects and the diminishing cultural efficacy of the ideas that make this type of participation look like a good choice. Let us take a closer look at this.

**Current social processes that affect the relationship between the movement and the gender order**

There are some current changes that would invalidate the appropriateness of barrio politics for breaking up the key gender analogy.14

In the first place, more and more women have jobs, so there are ever fewer housewives left. They still dominate daytime barrio streets, but the time may be approaching when women on the average do not know their barrio better than men on the average. They will then lose the relative advantage they now have over men in the neighborhood association, so men might stop listening to them – unless gender ideas change in other ways first. The women may also cease to identify barrio issues as the closest thing to their heart, next to the family. Jobs and careers might become more salient; this is not very probable, however, since it is hardly so for working class men now.

The foremost consequence, in all probability, will rather be that the barrio will lose its mediating characteristics; it may become less home-like, as fewer people who know each other frequent its streets and parks, bars and shops, and as fewer people base most of their personal networks in the barrio. Most women will, just like most men, spend a lot of time outside their barrio.

A second current trend is that supermarkets are becoming a common fact of life in many barrios. Housewives still shop for fresh food almost every day, but they do not spend the time waiting for their turn chatting with each other as they used to do in the small shops. At most one stands in line for a short while by the cash register, or one may run into a friend in the aisles. If you stand in line by the manual fish counter, there may be some talk, but the surroundings are much less conducive to gossip and reflection than in a small shop. The supermarkets are also less of a female turf, since an increasing number of men are seen in them. And some families do their grocery shopping in big discount stores, going as a family and by car. The supermarkets cannot become fora for women's sociability, the nearest equivalent to men's bar life, as traditional food stores have been and continue to be to a large but diminishing degree. This, too, will affect women's expertise on barrio matters negatively, and it will affect women's social networks.

Third, more and more women enter conventional politics. Some political parties have quotas for women. Increasingly, women are appointed to visible, influential administrative posts. The effects are geometrical. Spain is no longer in the bottom league in Europe when it comes to women's participation in politics.15 Since this is a recent fact of life, politics are still gender marked as masculine, not quite neutral, and women in politics still have some cultural

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14 The present tense in this section refers to approximately 2002-2003.

15 Some illustrative figures: In 1984 women made up 20% of the members of the three largest political parties, whereas in 2002 they had jumped to 32%. In the Spanish parliament the proportion of women increased from below 6% in the period 1982–1986 to almost 30% in 2000–2004. Of all mayors in Spain 2% were women in 1983; twenty years later they were 12%. Of all civil servants, 34.5% were women in 1990, in 2002 they were 52%. (Las Mujeres en Cifras 2003)

When the new PSOE government was formed in April 2004, for the first time in the history of Spain there were equal numbers of women and men ministers. Mass media were full of comments about Spain becoming "like Sweden."
maneuvering to do, but the process of degenderization seems well established and accelerating. This may make more women consider politics in the narrow sense as a possible and perhaps more attractive arena for their struggles. Fewer politically inclined women may choose the neighborhood movement, leaving it in the hands of the sociables.

The dramatic times of the great migration from the villages to the cities are receding into history. This is a fourth main fact that is already changing the nature of barrio life. The outskirts of the largest, most industrialized cities used to be inhabited by people who had left their village two, five or ten years ago, i.e. people whose basic habitus had been shaped by rural life. Now, they are inhabited mostly by people whose parents left the village, people who therefore certainly have a connection to some village but who have grown up in the city. The tight social networks of village life thus become less of a wished-for structure. The younger generation has not had to "make barrio"; they take their barrios for granted, and they inhabit them in urban ways.

Modern urban life means, among other things, more differentiation than village life. People go to school for more years and study different things, they earn their living in more varied ways, their life styles vary according to age and ideology as well as class and income. Logically, then, they find their friends and their interests and activities along these varied lines of connection. Just living in the same neighborhood is no longer a strong reason for feeling close to and solidary with another person. A football fan club, a political party, a professional association, a dispersed network of friends who used to go to the same school, and so on, may be experienced as more natural contexts for relating to others. Territory becomes a less vital reason for solidarity as networks become less concentrated in space, less densely knit and less multithreaded.

Thus, there are strong reasons to predict that the neighborhood movement can hardly remain the same or return to what it was in the 1970s. The present tendencies to pessimism among activists, especially among the "revolutionaries", and the current processes of transformation towards something less political, more social and charitable, all make sense in light of what I have just pointed out.

This would mean the loss of an instrument for combating traditional gender ideas, but at the same time the loss would be due to things that in themselves undermine those ideas and practices.

However, there are some factors that point in the opposite direction. First of all, the word barrio continues to be socially and emotionally meaningful. It continues to connote social and spatial periphery as well as poverty and social problems. It is far from uncommon in the younger generation to refer to "barrio people", "barrio life" and so on in ways similar to their parents'. In middle class ears such phrases sound mostly negative, connoting misery, threat and social disorder, but to barrio people themselves, they continue to refer to a place close to home, a place of shared conditions and therefore, in some (changing) sense, solidarity.

Second, most barrios continue to have clear spatial borders and many have "signs of identity" (as they are usually referred to) in the form of some significant old building, a place where something memorable happened, a beautiful view, or similar. Many cities have institutionalized the barrios, for instance printing maps where barrios appear in different colors, making administrative districts coincide with "natural" barrios, publishing books about barrio history, etc. Many of the activities invented by the neighborhood movement have become traditions, especially so the yearly barrio fiestas and in some places sports weeks, cultural weeks, and so on. In other words, barrio identities are not weakening; they may even be growing stronger in some (changing) sense.

Third, the generation that migrated into the cities had to make barrios; their urban barrios were in some sense artificial. The younger generation has grown up in the barrios, they have not met as adults, they know each other from school and playgrounds; they also sometimes know
each others' parents, cousins, etc. That means that social networks are tightening in some respects, even as they grow looser in others.  

Politics have a bad reputation in Spain. The Franco regime propaganda machine spent forty years tirelessly insisting on how dangerous and unnatural political parties are, and some of that may have stuck in some people's minds. Ever since democratization, there have been many corruption scandals; not one of the leading political parties has remained spotless, morally. The biggest party, PSOE, has suffered the most. There is a widespread feeling that there is an urgent need for creativity in the political field, a need for new ways of doing politics, and this is a fourth factor that continues to make the neighborhood movement look like an interesting alternative, at least to some citizens. The wish for experimentation is further fueled by the growing strength of the world social forum movement, with which most neighborhood movement activists feel affinity. Participatory budgets are being tried out in some Spanish cities, and the neighborhood movement is the main channel.

A fifth factor is that women continue to have a need for social fora. It is becoming ever more legitimate for them to do something outside the "home", but there is not all that much to choose from. The neighborhood movement offers many options: women's committees, handicraft courses, social activities, charitable activities and volunteer work, and of course the associational work proper. There is something for sociables and revolutionaries, for illiterates and intellectuals, for young and old.

Men also have a need for social fora. They still have their bars, but bar life is becoming less attractive than it used to be. Urban life in Spain, as in other European countries, is turning stressful, people have more organized activities and it is becoming less legitimate to simply sit in the bar. Mobile phones have diminished the need for the information exchange function that bars used to have (Thurén 1998, 2002). The bars are differentiating, along with other aspects of urban life, so that now some are very much male and working class, where men play domino and watch the football game on TV, while others are called pubs and cater to young men and women, who listen to music or play chess, mainly in the evening, and other places again are more like cafeterias where middle aged women have coffee with their women friends, mainly during the day time, and groups of students meet to discuss an exam. Some men just do not fit well into any of the existing types of places, so they may prefer to stay at home. There, things are much more comfortable than they used to be: better furniture, some heating in winter, perhaps a separate TV set for the kids in another room, so that Father can choose his program on the living room set, and so on. So it may look like a good alternative. Still, most men feel that their place is not in the home. They want a place to go to, where they can meet people. Just like the women, they nowadays have to find ways of moving into the midst of things, because due to the way modern life is organized, one is not automatically there, even if one is a man. And since being in the midst of things is still rather clearly gender marked as masculine, at least as men themselves see it, and since sociability continues to be a strongly felt cultural value, there is a psychological urgency, connected to gender identity, in the search for social fora. So for some men the neighborhood association looks like a good choice. It is more "serious", more legitimate, more dignified in "modern" thinking than bar life.

16 North American sociologist James Petras found in 1995 that at least in working class areas of Barcelona, the barrio was still the main source for friendship relations among young people, to the detriment, however, and increasingly so, of formal organizations. The people he interviewed were unanimous in saying that there was much less solidarity than there used to be, and those who mentioned neighborhood associations did so to say that they were no longer as active as they had been (the older generation) or were not relevant to modern life styles (the younger generation) (Petras 1996).

17 This stood out on March 14, 2004, when election results had confirmed that PSOE was returning to power and the prime-minister-to-be, José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, came out into the street in front of the party headquarters to greet his supporters. They chanted, "Don't fail us!" (¡No nos falles!)

18 E.g. in Cordova (Villasante and Garrido 2002). Some analysts (e.g. Gauza 2002) have found that entrenched neighborhood movement leaders sometimes insist so much on neighborhood movement centrality in these new processes, that they become obstacles for what they have always promoted, participatory democracy. This may seem paradoxical, but it is logical in the light of the institutionalization of the movement.
The conclusion must be open-ended. The neighborhood movement has been many things to many people; it is now changing to be other things, in part to the same people, in part to others. The relationship between the movement and the wider gender order changes accordingly. Its usefulness as a strategic instrument for gender change is probably decreasing. It is still tremendously important in a personal way for many individual women and for some women's collective agency in some places. Whatever happens in the future, there is no denying that the neighborhood movement has been one important factor, among others, in the degendering of urban life in Spain. Women may have had an impact on the movement, but the movement has had an even greater impact on barrio women's lives.

A feminist conclusion

The neighborhood movement has many drawbacks and problems. I hope I have not idealized it. In any case, its influence on the gender order has been made possible by and happened in parallel with many other processes. The fact that most people think that equality has now been achieved makes it increasingly difficult to argue for feminist causes. Eight years of conservative government (1996–2004) changed the political climate, so that politically committed people on the left felt a strong need to concentrate on national struggles, while undecided people were less likely to feel attracted to discourses of protest. As a result the neighborhood movement lost visibility. On the other hand, tensions crisscross throughout the urban Spanish gender order, so things are not likely to settle down quietly, and the neighborhood movement adds to the complexity of the field of forces for change.

In this book, I have chosen to tell the stories of a number of real women, representative of many others, and what their participation in the movement had meant to them. And that, as far as it goes, was very positive. Carmen, Mary Luz, Nuria, Laura, Mati, Encarna, the housewives of Malvarrosa, Amparo and the women of Benimaclet, Aurita and Pepi and the shoemakers in Elda, Francisca, Maite and Loli in Linares and the women in La Esperanza, Inés, Marina and all the women in the handicraft courses in Vigo, Rocio and the others I met in Cordova, Pilar Navarro, and literally thousands of other women all over Spain have had their lives profoundly changed by participation in the neighborhood movement.

And we have seen that a crucial reason for this was that there were central contradictions around politics and gender in Spanish barrios. According to hegemonic discourses (e.g. in the media) there should be equality among all citizens; society is moving in that direction and has come quite far. Working class people generally subscribed to equality as a goal in the sense of wishing for "more justice" and "more democracy", and most women thought it wonderful if the idea of equality should leave some mark on women's lives, too, even while they also, just like the men, tended to interpret (some) gender differences as naturally given and immovable. They hardly ever consciously questioned the home-street dichotomy as such. At the same time the barrios they lived in constituted mediators, so that both their own everyday representations and the hegemonic discourses were blurred. In neighborhood movement activities these contradictions could not be evaded. In some places they were handled in such a way that new patterns emerged in which women's agency was facilitated; in other places the contradictions created frustration and confusion. This study gives examples of both. But as a whole the effects were of a general loosening of hitherto firm social and cultural structures.

The analyses of this book are relevant for several long-standing feminist debates; especially for the ones about the public-private distinction, about agency, and about the possibilities for accomplishing changes in the gender order; they are also relevant for discussions on the nature of power, and they touch on the debates on "women" as a category and on the strategic advantages or drawbacks of that categorization, and how to avoid the risk of conserving what most feminists want to abolish, the importance of gender. I especially hope that the experiences of women in the neighborhood movement in Spain will serve to illustrate the complexities of the concepts "oppression" and "dignity". Feminist debates on women as victims versus women as agents have been going on for quite some time. They sometimes turn on an assumption that to my thinking is false: that if you describe women as victims of oppression, you
deprive them of dignity, or, if you describe women as creative, resourceful, active human beings, you forget about social structures that limit their possibilities. Careful ethnography will usually show that women are both victims and agents. The neighborhood movement is one clear example.

The analyses of this book are also relevant for debates around the concepts of public and private in general. This conceptual duality has been challenged in many ways throughout history, but in one way or another it has survived, demonstrating thus that it corresponds to other deep-seated cultural distinctions, and not just in Spain but throughout Europe and the so-called Western world, although with many local variations. The neighborhood movement blurs the distinction and thus opens up for creativity in the conceptualization and practical use of public deliberations. The movement redefines the public sphere in more ways than one; therefore it should be analyzed for other issues, too, not just feminist ones, but that is beyond what this book has room for.¹⁹

The Spanish neighborhood movement creates new arenas, new styles and new issues for cultural and political negotiations. This is not something most of its members see as a purpose. But it happens and it has evident practical effects, especially on women's possibilities. It is a process that foments women's freedom of movement and women's recognition as citizens. This is most apparent when it comes to the women who become active in the movement, but indirectly it affects all women, and through them also all men, because it alters and redefines crucial aspects of the gender order as a whole.

Theoretical debates cannot be clarified through theory only. Local contexts must be taken into consideration. And as practice will create new practice, the processes set in motion must be continuously analyzed. Practice theory tells us that there is no perfect reproduction of social life ever, but seldom total upheaval either. So strategic reasoning must be about finding the contradictions, the leaks, the nooks and crannies, the places where the river of social reproduction is diverted into crooked streams whose complex energies play against each other in a lively dance, the result of which is hard to gauge, and risky to try to influence, but inevitably and excitingly the essential object of social science. A major purpose of feminist anthropology must be to make careful, thick descriptions of practice and analyze them to find those contradictions – so that practical people can then use them for their purposes. I hope this book has accomplished some humble contribution to that end. I, too, want to contribute a grain of sand to my home turf.

To most of the women in the neighborhood movement, the word feminism sounds as bad as the word politics. But in cautious and practical ways, they do question the gender order they live with. They negotiate for entrance into new spaces and for more space in them once there. They learn new things and enjoy that. They work close to home, with things they master, and they are discovering that what they do makes a difference on a larger scale. They become aware of themselves as agents of change. Since this clashes with traditional ideas on gender, they are forced to confront traditions, and their associational experience gives them good tools for doing that.

So what they are doing is really what the white middle class feminists of the rich countries did around 1970: starting with their own situation, refusing to accept other people's interpretations, but not accepting things as they are either, they expand their spaces and reflect on the process along the way. Women are leaving "home", moving in such a way that the whole traditional division of private-public is undermined. They are opening up spaces, redefining political activities and showing the way for other women. Their manner of doing it is unpretentious, but therefore possible, constant, viable.

The steps they take may look small, and they themselves think they are. To see the importance of what happens, one must look to the aggregate consequences. The breadth and depth of the changes these women create come from the fact that they are not a Vanguard minority in the usual sense. They are a minority in their barrios, certainly, but they represent a

¹⁹ It is relevant especially for philosophical questions related to the public sphere, such as those raised by Jürgen Habermas or Hannah Arendt. See e.g. Calhoun 1995, pp 240 ff and his general approach to the possibilities for democratic and critical collective decision-making.
majority when it comes to experiences and life styles. What they do is visible and understandable (even when not always acceptable) for many more. They push at the naturalized definitions of women and men, private and public, possible and impossible, individual and collective, and pushing they demonstrate that what seemed solid actually yields. To people not accustomed to see themselves as agents of social change, this is important news.