CHAPTER 7. MALVARROSA DID IT: A DRAMATIC STORY

The sample stories in the previous chapter were about individual leaders. Let us now step closer to the rank and file through a collective interview. It is quite detailed, in order to illustrate the cultural negotiation that went on in it. Some of the themes I asked about were well known to the women, they had ready opinions on them, but others were more or less new to them, so they had to reflect and probe in order to decide what to think and say. I met this group on several occasions (cf. epilogue), but the main body of the chapter is based on one interview that was taped and transcribed.

The image of Malvarrosa

Malvarrosa is a peripheral barrio of the city of Valencia. It has long been considered one of the most "problematic", "confictive" and "disprivileged" (clumsy but literal translations of common Spanish words used to describe this sort of barrio) areas of Valencia. It is no coincidence that it was the scene, in the early 1990s of violent street battles that made the statewide headlines.

Otherwise Malvarrosa had not been famous for anything since Valencian novelist and politician Vicente Blasco Ibáñez chose it as the site for his summerhouse around the turn of the century. It was not a barrio then, just a fishing village and a beach outside the city, alongside a few other, similar but more urbanized areas north of the port. Blasco Ibáñez’s choice was considered eccentric. But his presence attracted others, and Malvarrosa changed into an area of one- and two-story summerhouses with small gardens in front. In 1897 these seaside areas were incorporated into the city of Valencia (Boira Maiques 1987).

When times changed and summering so close to the city was no longer in fashion, the summer residences decayed, until decades later a few gypsy families settled there.

When Spain embarked on the great economic transformations of the 1950s and 1960s, Valencia was slow to join the new trends, but one early investment was a paper factory that was located in Malvarrosa. Next to the factory, a number of apartment buildings were constructed for the workers. The apartments were small and rudimentary in quality, but for the workers of that time a prize, a step up in the world. As was a steady factory job.

Around those first buildings, more dwellings for workers went up in the 1960s and 1970s. A substantial proportion of the new inhabitants were immigrants from other parts of Spain. For a while it seemed that Malvarrosa would become one more of the kind of working class suburbs that were springing up all around the city and overflowing the fertile agricultural surroundings. But it was still far out from the center of the city (5 kilometers as the crow flies) and public transportation was dirty and irregular. The sewer system was also bad, so whenever it rained, the streets and ground level floors of Malvarrosa flooded. The apartments that were built attracted only the very poorest. When Valencian sociology got off the ground in the 1970s, one study after another showed Malvarrosa, along with the other beach and port areas, to be situated near the bottom of any list of good things (income, education, commercial activities, government services, health...) and near the top of any list of bad things (crime rates, juvenile delinquency, mental problems, prostitution, alcoholism...) (Comissió Municipal 1981).

But the beach itself, the sand, was still reasonably clean, even though the water was dirty. Valencians who could not afford to go away for vacations continued coming there during the sum-

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1 The women of the neighborhood association did not accept this as true. It did not agree with their experiences. "There has never been any prostitution in Malvarrosa... or not much..." As we discussed this, and I referred to the statistics I had seen, they found an explanation: municipal statistics lump together all the barrios along the beach. According to the women of Malvarrosa, their barrio was better than that average. I cannot know if this is true or not.
mer for sun bathing and refreshing evening strolls, and some swimming, too. Pubs, discotheques, cafeterias and a number of beach restaurants grew up.

When I spent ten days in Valencia in the summer of 1981, I stayed in Malvarrosa, in order to combine work with a bit of beach vacation. There were no hotels in Malvarrosa, and the hotel information clerks at the central railway station raised eyebrows at my eccentric petition. But they found me a lodging house. Most of the guests there were permanent residents, and they showed me around in the barrio. My impression was of a friendly place where people greeted each other in the streets, where lots of children played everywhere, a place with an elementary school, a football field, a movie theater (closed now)... Drab-looking modern buildings and ruinous turn-of-the-century villas with weed-filled gardens, plus rows of almost-ruinous fishermen's one-story dwellings. A strange and rather ugly mixture, but livable.

But the taxi driver who drove me to Malvarrosa warned me: Don't walk around at night by yourself, don't carry a lot of money, lock your door, don't talk to strangers... On the beach, being the only person there looking un-Spanish, I was accosted by beggars, fortune tellers and small time vendors, mostly gypsies. I was also approached by children and young men who asked what on earth I was doing reading all the time.

These first experiences made me think that Malvarrosa might be a good place for my first fieldwork. For various reasons I chose another barrio, but I retained a feeling for Malvarrosa. I was sad to hear, each time I visited Valencia through the years that followed, that it deteriorated more and more. True, new and better buildings came up, and more shops opened. But there were still only two bus lines with irregular hours, the dismal statistics on health, education and incomes grew worse in comparison to the rest of the city, and the stories of crime, gypsies and drugs grew in intensity, reaching storm levels.

Then one day, while doing fieldwork in Madrid for another project, I saw Malvarrosa on TV. It looked like any of the scenes of political violence in the world that we are accustomed to see on news programs: police in boots and helmets behind shields, young men throwing stones, aggressive water cannons, tear gas clouds, even something burning in the background. (I write from memory; I have not seen these images again.) Close-ups of enraged middle-aged citizens helping someone who had fallen to the ground, bleeding. Then came interviews with politicians and administrators giving their various interpretations of what had happened, trying to defend their decisions. Some Malvarrosans were also interviewed, to say that they were peaceful citizens and that it was the police who had started the violence. But they did not give a good impression, they spoke with rude words and bad grammar, they blamed gypsies for most of Malvarrosa's ills and their political references were confused. They said the demonstrations were spontaneous, but there was also some mention of a neighborhood association. "We, the neighbors of Malvarrosa," was the ambiguous phrase used.

The story of the four corners

Back in Valencia in 1995, for fieldwork for this study, I decided to include Malvarrosa among the associations to visit. What follows is the story of my visit to the women's committee of the neighborhood association of Malvarrosa, in March 1995.

Again the taxi driver was skeptical, wondering what a person like me would want to do in Malvarrosa, getting nervous as he could not find the street, evidently waging an internal war between his wish to drop me off anywhere and get out quick, and his wish to be a service-minded professional delivering his customer safely to the address given. We finally found the dead-end street, he dropped me at the corner, turned the car around and disappeared with a vroom.

It was 5:30 PM. Few people to be seen, just a group of boys playing football in the street. A pre-school-sized boy asked me what I was looking for. "Here it is, see the sign, it says neighborhood association!" he announced proudly.

As I approached, the committee president, whom I will call Maria², came out, looking for me. The main room, which must have been a garage or a cottage industry, was big and dark, mostly

² All the names in the book are fictitious, unless otherwise specified. But since this chapter contains some sensitive statements, and the name of the barrio is its real one, I have also avoided being systematic in assigning names to the taped voices. That is, not all the quotes assigned to one name were spoken by the same voice. In this way, it will be
unfurnished. In one corner was a small bar counter, behind which an elderly man was wiping glasses, and in another corner was some heavy drapery, behind which there were cupboards for archives. There were also a number of rickety tables and chairs, where middle aged and elderly men were playing cards. Some of the tables had been arranged in a long row; Maria explained that they were used for handicraft courses, such as porcelain painting, woodwork and embroidery. On one wall, a bulletin board.

The meeting room, in the back, had a window looking onto the street behind the building. The furniture consisted of a big table surrounded by white plastic chairs of the cheap variety that furnish so many bars all over Spain.

Seventeen women were seated around the table. Most of them were middle aged, a few were grey haired, two or three looked like young mothers in their 20's or early 30's. (They had to leave soon after I arrived, because they had to pick up children from school.) Many of them were sturdily built, and most of them wore the typical working class clothes you can expect nowadays: not fashionable but not bad quality, just straight dark skirts, light-colored blouses, knit jackets. All of them had short well-tended haircuts; most of them wore earrings and perfume and good shoes. Maria did not look older than forty. She had six children.

I explained my project and who I was. They listened politely, eager to start talking to themselves. I asked why they, each one of them, had decided to join the neighborhood movement. The second I ended this introduction, there was an explosion of talk, all the women wanted to tell their story: They were all there because of the drug problems in Malvarrosa. They had been drawn into events more or less by chance and found a place for their struggles in the association.

Trini said she could not really compare with parties or labor unions, because she had never been in any, but her feeling was that the neighborhood association was closer to her problem. And her problem was her barrio. "It had come to a point where our youngsters were being completely destroyed. We had a very bad time. There was so much drug trafficking. People came from downtown to buy here... It came to a point where the children could not go out and play in the street, we could not go out shopping for food... So, since I think we have a right to our barrio, I joined the neighborhood association," she said in a calm but determined manner.

OK, I said, you decide you want to do something for your barrio. But that is only the first decision. The second one is: where do I go in order to do it? Why did you choose precisely the neighborhood association?

The women just repeated their main motive. What happened in their barrio was very special, they said, everyone took to the street, the whole barrio decided to say enough is enough. Luisa: "I was one of the people who came to the four corners from the start. And from then on, I began to realize that with the neighborhood movement you can do a lot more than if you just stay at home."

Apparently, they did not see any alternative political channels. For them, doing something for the barrio was synonymous with the neighborhood movement.

After some discussion, they agreed that the events called "the four corners" had begun in 1990 or 1991, in September in any case. It was hard to follow the chronology of the events; the women were not used to narrating things to people who did not already know the context. They talked of a church and a park, and they explained that the four corners referred to the central area of the barrio where four streets meet in an irregular way. For an exact story of the events, I had to combine what they said with what I gleaned later from other interviews and from newspaper clippings. But the important thing for now is not so much what happened exactly as how they talked about it.

impossible for anyone to blame any of the women in Malvarrosa for any specific statement. The use of names here is just a way of avoiding boring repetition of "one woman said".

What happened was approximately this: There had been campaigns against drug use in the area for quite a while. On September 26, 1991 the shopkeepers of Malvarrosa gathered some 300 persons to discuss what could be done, seeing that normal and legal methods had no effect. And it was the day after that, September 27, 1991, that the first demonstration was held, with some 2000 persons. Thereafter there were daily demonstrations, night patrols, street violence, etc. These events made the provincial governor call a meeting with representatives of the neighbors to tell them that what they were doing was illegal. Since the demonstrations continued, nevertheless, he sent in riot police on October 7. And, just like the women told me, the effect was not the return of order but quite the contrary: the demonstrations were institutionalized. The central streets of Malvarrosa were closed during one hour a day, with no exception for holidays or bad weather, during approximately one year. During 1992 some of the actions the neighbors
They were proud of what they had done. Nati told how she, along with a few other women, had "taken" a bus and forced it to drive into the barrio, after the bus driver had refused. At first she said he refused because he was afraid of violence, but actually the regular route was cut off by a demonstration. "But there was another street, and we forced him to drive that street all the way down to the end of the barrio. Because, you see, people who did not participate in the demonstrations complained," (they said the demonstrations hindered transportation) "and we said it is not all our fault, that there were other solutions, but that the bus company refused."

"It was that same day – no, probably the day after that, when someone came and wanted to drive into the barrio, so we said he could not because we were having a demonstration, and that is when we had the idea to cut off traffic."

"You see, I was so upset, because I live right in the center of the barrio where most of the addicts were, and one day I saw from my window how they threatened my son, he was perhaps fifteen at the time, or sixteen, they held him at knife point and robbed his winter jacket off his back. Every day I saw how they beat kids, how they took their money, and you can't just sit back and watch things like that."

"Right, that is how it was, we could not go anywhere, we were all scared. So there was no previous agreement or organization or anything, one day we just came into the street, all of us, and that is when the whole thing started."

The struggle was successful. It took a year of intense collective commitment, but the results seem durable. "Well, of course there are still drug pushers around, but they don't dare come out in the open. The ones that operated here then, they are not around any more. A few of them are, but most of them have moved to other places. Because drugs are sold, that has not changed. But now they are in other barrios." "And the ones we have here are careful. Earlier, you see, they were not a bit scared. They would stand right under your nose and sell, nothing would happen. Drugs are being sold all over Valencia, now, but before it was all here in Malvarrosa, and that is not so any more."

Nati said that they were pioneers, so they were proud; they had had a very big problem and they had solved it. "And some mass media told it that way, too. But others called us racist. And we are not! For example, in my building, there is a gypsy family, they have raised their children there along with ours, the kids have grown up in the street together – you know how it used to be that kids grew up in the street, more than in the house, I did so myself... and those kids were never discriminated. And the family was part of the building committee and behaved like it, they were people according to God's plan. There were never any problems. So I feel very bad about being called racist, when in actual fact I am not. And like me, lots of people in this barrio. Because, well, we discriminate a lot, but as I say, it is really they who discriminate themselves. Of course there are drug pushers who are not gypsies. But in our barrio, for whatever reason, 90% of them were gypsies."

Now came the tales of bad relationships between payos and gypsies, or between normal residents and people of the drug scene. The two kinds of animosities were consistently confused. The women told how someone threw stones at small children, how someone robbed a child's afternoon snack or threw a cup of yogurt in the face of a woman. There were constant mutual insults.

Now there are few gypsies left in the barrio. They had to leave, when they were no longer able to sell drugs, the women said. One can suspect that the struggle took the shape of low-level ethnic warfare. Perhaps the strength of the commitment had firmer roots in old ethnic animosities than in a commitment to improve barrio social life.

The demonstrations had been peaceful, they insisted. "Keep in mind that most of us were middle aged or older women. Youngsters, too, of course. But mostly women, including young mothers with babies in carriages."

"And then on October 17th the demonstration had been normal. But just imagine our surprise when on the 27th... no on the 7th it must have been, the gentleman who is the representative wanted were taken: some of the so called pink buildings were torn down, a mental health center was built along with a center for dispensation of methadone, and a civic center was opened. Sources: various newspaper clippings and Sanchis Pallarés 1998.

4 Como Dios manda, literally "as God orders", which is a common Spanish phrase for good behavior or correct arrangement of anything.

5 Payo is the word the gypsies use about non-gypsies in Spain, and it has become a word of general use.
of the government sent the riot police on us!" That was the day of the headlines, the water cannons, the rubber bullets, the injured people, and so on.

It seems the barrio people themselves became more violent after this. "And we, the women, became more political!" said Carmen, in a mysterious voice. They explained that the riot police were people from out of town, because a lot of Valencian policemen live precisely in Malvarrosa, "so they figured they could not send them to combat their own people, right?"

Here we see the barrio constructed as one's own people, one's immediate loyalty outside the family. Also, in Spain it is mostly people from lower working class background who join the police forces. We see, too, that the women were proud not just of their initiative and commitment but also of their physical bravery. The drama of the events had given them a tale to tell.

Since they kept insisting that it had all happened spontaneously, I said there must have been some sort of previous agreement or organization. Someone must have decided it was time to do something. "We all did!" they said. It sounded not a little like the classical drama by Lope de Vega, "Fuenteovejuna", in which a whole village takes the collective blame for murdering a government official. "Fuenteovejuna did it," is a Spanish phrase that expresses steadfast collective loyalty in the face of difficult situations. Whatever the facts of the Malvarrosa events, it was clear that these women wanted them to look perfectly collective. Malvarrosa did it. (Their reference was not classical literature, however, since most of them had little schooling.)

Finally, a story of origins was pieced together. It was about Trini and her next-door neighbor and then came Carmen, "and we were standing talking in the doorway, we were with the kids, talking about how we had to do something about the drugs, when my husband came home from work, and he said some people had gathered in the park, it had been about the drug situation, and my husband had gone there, knowing that I was so furious... and some neighbors and shop owners had gone to the four corners, because the people who lived there were especially angry, they had the drug people up their staircases and almost into their apartments. Because that was how it was, they would go into the buildings, up on the roofs, everywhere. See? So my husband said, there will be a demonstration tomorrow, with all the people who had come to the park, and we said, we will go too, with the kids and everything. So that is how it was, we went to the four corners." The news spread in a couple of hours. "And that is how it started, and that is all there is to it."

The women seemed to think of the meeting in the park as a gathering of the same kind as their own little group in the doorway. Just normal barrio street life, out of which a spark suddenly flies, when the temperature of wrath reaches a certain point.

Later there was some organization, of course, they admitted. "Like, you had to decide some things, and we bought a megaphone to tell people which street they had to go to and where not to go... and there was the parent-teacher association, and the neighborhood association, of course, but the old one left..." Luisa, "There are always people who seem to have something special about them, and the rest of us look to them as leaders, sort of, so there were some people there who were more visible, but that was only after a couple of days, or weeks, not during the first few days."

During one year hundreds and sometimes thousands of Malvarrosa inhabitants gathered every evening at eight o'clock by the four corners. They rolled out garbage containers to stop the traffic. They had musical instruments with them, for fun and warmth. People who knew many songs became popular. Mothers and children, old and young, women and men. Some brought sandwiches and drinks. There were heated discussions on tactics and strategies, and reasons and unreason, of course, but there was a lot of fun, too. The women told many stories about how people got to know each other, people who had perhaps lived in the same building for years and only said hello to each other, now they became friends. The women told their stories with obvious relish. Sometimes it sounded as if they were talking about something very recent or something that was still going on, at other times it sounded remote, like childhood memories glossed over with a romantic haze.

There was a story, for example, of a truck driver who pleaded to be let through, he said he had arrived a few minutes before eight, he was in a hurry, he had to make his delivery in the barrio. But they stopped him. He pleaded, he was angry, he insulted them, but in the end he sat still in his truck. "And then after one hour, when we opened the street, he got out of the truck and gave us a bottle of wine! Here ladies, to warm yourselves with, he said! He was so impressed with what we were doing!"
There were also stories of cold and rain, of insolidary neighbors, of clothing torn or destroyed by dirt, of stones thrown, of people hurt.

"Do you remember the night before Epiphany?" That was one day when there was a big demonstration, from one sidewalk to the other, and suddenly a car appeared. Usually they would just wait or turn or go back in reverse gear. (...) But this guy said he would not stop. And he did not stop!" Before they said anything about who was hurt, they told me about stopping that car with their bare hands, turning it over, letting the man escape but beating the car until it was irreparable. There had been a court case, but against the driver, not against the Malvarrosa inhabitants. The women saw that as a sign of their strength and the cowardice of the authorities. "We went to court, to give testimony and to show our solidarity, lots of us went every day during the proceedings. No one dared accuse us of anything."

After a while the police started picking up the drug pushers and taking them to the police station. But they would soon be out in the street again. So the women began going to the police station every night, after "opening the street", to see to it that the traffickers were booked and held at least over night. "We would sit there for a few hours, we were never back home before one o' clock."

I asked whether more women or men participated, or if they were about the same number. This started a long heated discussion. Trini said she went every evening. Not her husband. "As I left, at a quarter to eight, he would just be coming home from work, and he always said something, like, are you going again, it's an awfully cold night, and I said I don't care, I am going... but not him... And so, well, whoever got there first would start rolling out the containers..."

Several of the women thought that the men participated as much as the women but only after the women started it. One woman described how a small boy had run to get the men when the violence started. "Because there were just women there then, but he got the men and they came and supported us." The others nodded. "Yes, and it continued like that, as soon as there was something a bit violent, the husbands would come and support us."

The day after the riot police had attacked, "the whole barrio" came into the streets, the women said. "There were seventeen thousand people. You couldn't see the ground!" And according to the women they were prepared for another battle. "Because then we were ready. When they attacked we did not expect it, but the next day we did. We were ready for anything. If the police had come back that day, I don't know what would have happened in Malvarrosa," said one fragile-looking middle-aged woman with an ironic aggressive smile.

The women went on to describe the process that had made Malvarrosa uninhabitable. "You know, Malvarrosa got such a bad name, you couldn't even take a taxi here. You would stop a taxi and when you said, 'to Malvarrosa,' he would stop the car and say, 'I am sorry, I will take you anywhere you say except to Malvarrosa.' And if you went somewhere, talking to people and you said you were from Malvarrosa, aaagh, people would... as if you had a contagious illness!"

There was a story of a wedding to which relatives from another city refused to come. "They were afraid of Malvarrosa! Even though they knew we were living here!"

They felt that this bad name had grown during most of the 1980s, perhaps starting around 1984. They explained it in terms of the size of the gypsy population, which had oscillated, but also, and more so, in terms of which gypsies. The "autochthonous" gypsies were "integrated" and decent people, they said, whereas little by little outsiders had moved in and they were the ones who brought the drug trade.

There might well be some objective truth in this; since the gypsies are a poor and discriminated sector of Spanish society, they often have to find marginal ways of earning their living. But it is more interesting read as a piece of cultural negotiation around the relative importance of two structural factors. Ethnicity is important, was what they said between lines, but territorial belonging overrides it, at least if the other party also accepts territorial belonging as the foremost basis for a moral community.

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6 Epiphany or the Twelfth Night of Christmas, January 6th, is the traditional day for Christmas gift exchange in Spain. It is called the Day of The Magic Kings, so literally Maria said: "Do you remember the night before the Kings’ Day?" That evening, January 5th, there are processions with floats in Spanish cities. The Kings arrive riding on camels (real or not), throwing candy to the children on the sidewalks and promising them they will receive what they wrote to the Kings about. The Malvarrosa demonstrations did not skip even such a special day.
Much of the problem seemed to be connected, they felt, to the question of housing. The early buildings of Malvarrosa, the cheap workers' dwellings of the 1950s, had become too primitive for the stable working class population, which had little by little abandoned them to move into newer commercially built apartments in the area, and the old dwellings had then been taken over by gypsies. One of the *reivindicaciones* of the demonstration period had been to have these old buildings torn down.

Telling stories of the symbolic and practical support they had received from neighborhood associations from other parts of Spain, they mentioned Linares. I told them I had been there and that it was one of the places where very few women participate. The main problem for the Linares women, I said, was that the men there did not approve of their wives' being active outside the home. I asked if there was such a problem in Malvarrosa.

The women hesitated. One said that their husbands had no reason to be obstructive: "We never took any great liberties."

But then Amparo said, "I have something to say about this! Guess what? My husband was more scared than I was!" She lowered her voice for dramatic effect. "For example, if we came to the four corners and there were not a lot of people there, he could not make himself move a container to get it started. So I usually did, together with that old lady, who was always there early, remember? The one we said if they should beat her with a stick she would... (nods and giggles signified they all remembered the frail heroic lady). My husband was always more scared than I was."

Several of the women said that so were their husbands, or so were all men. One laughed, "My husband, when he saw me going out, he used to say, 'Are you going to the guerrillas again?'" Lots of laughter.

Maria turned serious, "It is always that way, if you have a really big problem, you feel no fear." Several voices chimed in with the usual refrain: "Especially when your children have a problem, you do anything for your children, we did what we did mostly for their sake."

And again the horror stories, of drug pushers giving drugs free to children, even injecting them by force to get them hooked. One woman said she had seen a young man inject himself under the tongue. "I saw that from my own window!" The others said they had all seen a lot of things. She insisted, so had she, but this was the worst, she still felt sick remembering it. Young girls, too, became addicts and pushers, they said, not just the boys.

I asked, "Seeing that all of this was happening, what did the neighborhood association do about it?" I knew that the people of the previous board had been very upset about the events. They had been working for many years in the barrio, among other things to create a climate of understanding and joint activities among gypsies and *payos*, and when the drug scene worsened, they had worked hard to make people see that not all pushers were gypsies, that not all gypsies were pushers, and above all that the major source of danger was a structure of big interests outside the barrio, the international drug trade. In general (judging from my other interviews) the neighborhood movement in Valencia had supported this stance, and there had been some controversy over what to do about the understandable but unruly "four corners movement".

The women pooh-poohed and snickered. Yes, there had been a neighborhood association, but it never did anything, "it fell asleep, so when people went into the streets, the old board had to..."

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7 But I was not able to contrast the two versions in Malvarrosa itself, because the one representative of the former board that I managed to locate did not want to be interviewed. She declined with grace and courtesy, but firmly, saying that they were all very hurt and did not want to re-open old wounds. In fact, one of the leaders had died of a heart attack soon after the events. I hereby apologize to his widow and his friends for giving only one version. I understand their feelings, so I did not want to insist on interviewing them, and I still wanted to present the material I am now presenting because of its general interest. I am doing it as respectfully as I can. I insist: it is the way the women *talked* about it that is of interest, not the exact actual course of events. I am absolutely not taking a stand in the conflict inside the Malvarrosa neighborhood association. In 1996, I visited the association again, and again talked to more or less the same women. They said then that the conflict had abided, that people from "the old association" had taken part in some recent demonstrations, that they had new activities, "and they come to ours and we go to theirs" and so on. Three of the leaders also spoke to me separately to explain that they realized "a lot of people" had said "a lot of things that were not well thought over" in the period of the four corners movement, because "we were all so inexperienced then, we did not always realize what it meant, everything we said." They also said that they had learnt to relativize and criticize a lot more, and to "dare say that things are not black and white, so if you think they look grey, now we say so." I suppose these comments can be interpreted as a sort of indirect apology. (But cf. the epilogue of this chapter.) It was also probably a sincere picture of the process of personal growth the women experienced in the association.
leave because they did not support us." "That association did nothing. It was nothing." I insisted: What did they do? The women, self-righteously and accusingly, "Support the gypsies!" "They just tried to help the gypsies. That is, they never told them off for anything they did." "People were just fed up with them. They did not even receive us when we went to talk with them. So we made another movement and asked them for support, but they would not give it, so then..." "And that is when we came in. A new group."

Legally speaking, it was the same association with a new board. But the women spoke in terms of the old and the new association. They did not think of abstract structural continuity. To them "association" meant approximately a group of people working together. So if there were new individuals, it was a new association.

Maria said that the whole four corners movement would have had even greater strength if the old neighborhood association had initiated it. The others did not want to concede that. Only Trini said she could not criticize, really, because she had not participated in those early years. "I knew nothing about the neighborhood movement then."

**Malvarrosa now. The "new" neighborhood association**

What about Malvarrosa now? What problems are there, what is the barrio like, what are the issues for the neighborhood association?

They all said Malvarrosa is a wonderful place now. "You can go out at night or in the afternoon, it is all peaceful." One woman said she would still not go up on the roof of her building, because there was a drug pushing family living on the uppermost floor. "A gypsy family," specified another woman. "Yes, but it is nothing like it used to be, people vomiting in the stairs..." They gave examples of new buildings under construction and plans for some new urbanization projects in the area. One said the new beach promenade was very important. Maria said that that was not something the neighborhood association had worked for, the beach promenade was an initiative from the city council, but of course it was a great thing for Malvarrosa.

Maria listed a few more urban problems they had been working with and which seemed to be finding solutions. Things like the opening of new streets, the solution to a traffic problem created by a railway line, the old factory building, the irrigation canal that had become an open sewer... There were plans for a new football field. The Health Center had high ambitions for modernized attention and preventive medicine.

Then they explained how the association functioned now. This was the women's committee, consisting of 23 women, many of whom sat on the general board, too. They joked about this, saying that the women had taken over, that they were doing their duty for the barrio while the men were chickening out. Many of the women participated in other association committees, too: urban planning, health, barrio festivities, culture... In fact, they said, there were only three men on the board, now. The president and two others. No, corrected Maria, "we have a joint presidency, there is one man president and one woman president. And the treasurer is a woman, so is the secretary..."

Seeing them so knowledgeable about associational terminology, I asked again where they had been before joining the neighborhood association. Nowhere! At home! they exclaimed in chorus. They had never belonged to any labor union or any political party, nor were most of them interested in politics. They had little schooling, not one of them beyond eight years. Some of them had had a job before getting married, others had not, but in any case none of them had worked outside the home after having children. "No, we are just ordinary housewives who got into this because we saw that our barrio was being destroyed."

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8 By 1997 the promenade had become the most popular place for summer evening strolls in Valencia. People from all over the city came there to escape the heat. The old restaurant shacks had been torn down and replaced with permanent buildings with restaurants, bars and pubs. The beach was meticulously cleaned every day and even the water had become clean enough to warrant Malvarrosa, along with the other city beaches, a blue flag from the European Union. The barrio of Malvarrosa still had a tarnished reputation and many of the old ruins and some new ones were festering with garbage, but middle class housing had actually been built and seemed to be selling well. In a few more years, the area may have changed completely. But whether that will be to the advantage of the present barrio population is of course an open question.
About "politics"

They were emphatic that what they were doing was not politics: "We know nothing about politics!" "We don't want to have anything to do with politics!" "If you come into this association talking politics, we will throw you out." One said she had heard that all neighborhood associations that had come under political influence had gone to pieces.

I explained that as I saw it, any activity with the intention to influence decisions that concern more people than your own family can be called political. But I understand, I said, why you say no, no, no! (They laughed.) "Usually the word makes us think of manipulation and intrigue in the world of party politics." Yes, that was what they meant. Trini: "Exactly. What we are doing is a kind of politics, but without political parties. So I mean that this is like doing politics without having to join a party. Because we have the same opinions, most of us..."

"A lot of people in the barrio have party sympathies," said one woman tentatively, whereupon the others declared her naïve, saying of course, but that is different, we all vote, we all have opinions, but not here. "None of us have party sympathies!" exclaimed another woman, thinking she summed up a consensus. But not quite. Maria and some of the others felt obliged to be pedagogical, "Yes, some of us, most of us do, but that does not mean we cannot agree on a lot of things... And in here, we don't do what any party tells us to do." Trini again: "This association never belonged to any party." Not during the reign of the former board either, they agreed. The final consensus was established as: "In this association, each one can have whatever opinions she has and we all tolerate each other's thinking."

This little discussion is again very representative of a major issue. It is not just that politics has a bad name in Spain generally, and especially among people with low levels of formal schooling. It is not just a question of misunderstandings, different definitions of words or ideological remnants of a tragic national history of class wars and political intolerance. It is a big issue that has to do with how a whole country learns to solve problems by parliamentary procedure, defining differences of opinion as acceptable and normal, thus laying the groundwork for what is usually meant by "democracy" in Europe. Spaniards have had few chances ever to experiment with more or less democratic decision-making in larger contexts. "Politics" has been something beyond the reach of all but an infinitesimally small elite, and what that elite has done has hardly ever been for the good of the rest.9

One key phrase one used to hear a lot in association contexts in the 1970s but which is – significantly, I believe – hardly ever heard anymore, is this answer when someone is asked to vote on some decision, "My opinion is so-and-so – but I will accept whatever the majority decides." To accept a majority decision, i.e. not to insist on one's own point of view, was not taken for granted but had to be stated in so many words for good feelings and relationships to survive in spite of the fearsome and divisive (so people felt) procedure of declaring one's standpoint. The traditional feeling was that to declare a standpoint which you knew was not shared by everyone (in a serious context, that is; this was not at all so in everyday discussions) was an act of enmity or at least willful obstruction. To say "I do not agree" meant "I will not abide." This synonymy is weakening, and that is no mean cultural change.

The women in Malvarrosa were not ignorant about the political situation in Valencia. Luisa explained, "You have to understand that we have a city council dominated by one party and a regional government dominated by another." The others laughed and filled in: "Yes, and you have to be careful all the time. Because one day you go to one of them, and you can't just say, here we are, see? (Meaning: declaring political sympathy in order to obtain favors.) Because the next day you have to go to the others and you have to tell them, too, how wonderful they are." Carmen said that their solution had been a division of labor: "We send one of us, always the same one, to the mayor, and another one to the regional government!" The others laughed, both ashamed and proud of their smartness. "Yes, we have to, because otherwise they don't give you anything!"

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9 Except during tragic short periods when no one could escape "politics" and it was literally a lethal activity. The civil war recedes into history now, as the generation that participated in it as adults disappears from the scene, but it has left deep scars that endure. This too may contribute to the bad name of "politics". Cf. also chapter 2 on movement history.
Gender and activism

I asked again why they were in the neighborhood association. To do something for the barrio, OK, but there had been thousands of women in the street during the four corners movement, and most of them were now back in their homes. Those of you who are still here, what has made you continue?

They thought they had already answered that question. "To do things for our barrio!" they repeated. But then Nati defiantly hit a new note: "And as for me also because I don't feel like staying home! That is the first thing! So if there are classes or lectures or something, if it's something I think is interesting, then that is fine, too. And now people know me, my neighbors come to me if something happens. I like that. So now I have joined another group working with the Health Center, too. And I... so... well, simply that, I enjoy it, and if we have to help, those of us who are here, on the board of the neighborhood association, if there are some papers we can arrange or..." "That's what I like, too," said another woman. A third said that if we keep on struggling for the barrio, it is good, because knowing we are here, it seems as if they respect us a little bit more. She referred to politicians and administrators, who do not pay much attention to petitions from the poor.

These explanations could be interpreted as being about "being a person": not just being a housewife confined to your home, but out in the open, in public, learning, deciding for yourself what you might be interested in learning and which public events appeal to you, being known, being visible, being someone others can turn to, and having the resources to respond to them, widening your horizons and helping others to widen theirs, accumulating social capital... and peppering it all with a sense of doing the Right and the Good.

We can also see that the women interpreted the classic metaphor about home and street in a wide sense. They knew they were going into the public domain, and that meant much more than just association work.

At the same time, the parallels to the traditional feminine role are evident. The women felt good because they snugly fitted into an institution (family or association) that defined the good life, and they felt powerful because they were aware of not just serving but culturally shaping that institution and thus making history. Dedication to one's children is replaced with dedication to one's neighbors, and consciousness of clan, family, genealogy, is exchanged for consciousness of barrio, association, history, and that is a momentous change on one level, because it undermines the analogy men : public :: women : private. But at the same time there is continuity in dispositions (cf. chapter 5).

We can see, for example, how these women were learning about party politics. Against their will, perhaps, but learning to do some political manipulation of their own, orienting themselves in the world of party politics and local administrative levels and procedures. Their habitus probably made it more difficult for them to be as forceful and imaginative in a formal meeting in Town Hall as they had learned to be in the street. But they were learning that, too.

I asked what they imagined their neighbors thought about them. General laughter. "Fine, just fine." "But then if you talk to your neighbors (feminine form) and comment about how they could join, too, not all of them agree! (Imitating screechy voices) 'Oh no, I am fine where I am, in my home!' Or, (imitating again) 'Are you going there again?" And then, more seriously, there were tales of how some people will never understand, while there are others who just need to visit the premises once to get a feeling for the association. Many women come only for the handicraft classes, they said, but they did not think that was a bad idea. One of them said she had signed up all the women of her building! More laughter. "Sure, because once you peep into the association and see the atmosphere, that's when you feel like joining." "Yes, because otherwise people may fear that when you come, right away, the first day they will make you read something..."

They laughed about it, but what they felt was very serious. Not to have clear bearings in a new situation is as scary for unschooled people as being asked "to read something", so the two things became metaphors for each other. The deep disposition for acting only through known social channels was also confused with the other two: if you do not know people, you do not belong, and you cannot just drop in and start acting, since belonging requires a long social process of mutual acquaintance and learning. That is how it looks, that is, to the "traditional mentality" that these

10 Cf. note 13 in chapter 1 and further discussion on the concept of persona in chapter 14.
women were now denouncing as old-fashioned and limiting, because they themselves had discovered another way of relating to public urban life. But they remembered what the former disposition felt like. The idea of reading was used metaphorically to stand for the whole prestigious world beyond everyday life, a world barrio women know is there, and powerful, but a world in which they used to think they would not be able to or allowed to act.

Amparo came back to the gender issue and said that the husbands of the women on the board were not active. "If they have to help, they help, but... yes, they are members, of course, and if they have to help with Culture Week, or Barrio Week, if they have to build a stage or something, they will. But to join the board, to have regular duties, no, they won't, they don't like that." I asked why. Again many thought it was a question of feeling ignorant, not thinking you could "contribute" anything.

I pointed out that they themselves did not have much schooling, and that they had said their husbands in general had a bit more. They laughed, caught in contradiction. A couple of them told stories of how they had felt at first they were not "worthy," not "valuable". But then they had learned, was the moral of their stories. "Some people in here know more than others. I am one of those who know least. But I can go along with someone else who knows! In good company, I will go anywhere! And the fact is that when it comes to (she mentioned her specialty in the association work), I don't need anyone to come with me any more!" The others cheered her.

Another story: "I remember when I came to the barrio, I had three small children, I could not go out, I could not go anywhere." She spent many years at home, having more children. "And now that they are all older, I feel like going out, getting to know people! My neighbors tell me, why do you get into all these troubles now, when you could finally begin to take it easy?" Laughter; all the women understood both the reactions of those neighbor women, and the narrator's preferences. She continued, "You see, this week, I had to spend the whole weekend sewing things for this women's day demonstration. And my neighbors, they said, really, we do hope someone realizes what a lot of work you are putting in, what a week... you see, they had also seen me coming home after eleven every single night that week. (She was obviously putting some moral pressure, here, on other committee members who may not have worked as hard.) But you know what? I am happy!!!" She went on to tell how much it meant to her to go to lectures, to organize committee outings, to persuade her husband to participate in the Friday potluck dinners that the women's committee had instituted. "I like these things, so let nobody tell me I can't do it!"

Luisa said that after she had been going to the four corners for a while, her oldest son had objected that she was turning "very feminist." All the women laughed in recognition again. "And I told him, listen, I am no more of a feminist now than before. The ideas I have now, I have had since I got married to your father! And the fact is I have never gone to buy bread in the morning for his lunch, because already before we got married I told him I would never get up at six in the morning to buy fresh bread. I would prepare his lunch with old bread. And I do, I prepare it the night before with that day's bread. And for you, for taking to school, the same thing, all these years. The difference is just that you were small so I could not go out. And now that I can... And what's more, if your father wants to, he can come along, he can come right behind me and check, I'd be very happy, no problem! Or else, if he does not want to, he can just stay at home with all of you, because I am going to go out anyway!"

Here we can read a lot about taken for granted ideas, duties and expectations. As Luisa saw it, a strong woman is a woman who does not stay at home with her children but goes out, whether the rest of the family approves or not. She is also a person who does not inconvenience herself too much in the service of her family. But Luisa did not doubt that a normal woman, even if she is a feminist, gets married, has children and takes care of them, and that that entails limited freedom of movement for many years and continued service, for example preparing everyone's lunches even

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11 Which was also statistically probable. Cf. García de León et al (1996) for general figures for Spain, and Teixidor (1982) for Valencia. In the nearby barrio of Nazaret, in 1992, only about 10% of the population over 17 years of age had completed primary education or more (Colectivo IOE 1997:10). According to the municipal statistics of Valencia for 2001 the numbers were evening out by then, but there were still more than twice as many women as men that had no schooling at all.

after they are old enough to do it themselves. She did not really question her husband's right to control her morals; she felt she had a right to do what she wanted to do because it was right and good, nothing that could threaten her husband's dignity. And she did. She did not overstep the limits of what her husband considered right and good. And she conceded to him the right to make sure this was so. I do not think she would have thought it correct for her to similarly control her husband's virtue.

She finished proudly, pounding the table with her fist, "So now he does not say anything to me anymore!"

Another woman said she had told her children, too, that they had no right to ask her to quit her activities just because she could not always be back home in time to prepare dinner. "I told them, you are big enough to make it for yourselves! Or else you just wait until I get back, that won't hurt you!" Again we see that even though she sets limits to her children's claims on her, she accepts other limits a bit further on, much short of what would be possible to ask with some more daring (for instance to ask the adult or near adult children, or the husband, to take over dinner-making duties on certain nights as a matter of course).

The women went on to comment on the sociable aspects of association life. How they had made friends. How even some of their husbands who had not known each other before now had become friends. "We started coming to the Friday dinners, even though my husband did not want to at first, but then he started talking, he is a tremendous talker, he talks even more than I do (laughter), and now he feels just great there, lots of friends, and some of the men have started playing cards together on other nights, too..."

The committee women paid 300 pesetas extra every month — "it is voluntary of course, but we all do" — in order to splurge on a festive dinner in June. Those who could also put 500 pesetas every week into another fund for a trip. "But the trip is together with the husbands. And I think that is good for us. I don't know, but it works. We can say that we alternate work with leisure. This way we do something else, get out of the house..."

The women felt sure that this was a good thing but unsure of how to justify it. As the traditional woman's role used to be construed, there was no room for leisure in it. In real life, women have always taken time off and found space for fun, certainly, but the image of the Good Woman has been of one who did not, one who was always at the beck and call of others, one who never rested her hands, never allowed herself to be ill, and so on. Motherhood, too, was and largely is construed as something that is not good enough if it does not take up all available time and energy (Oeveraas 2003, Thurén 1988).

I said that it was typical throughout the neighborhood movement to mix work with pleasure. To get to know each other is good for the movement, and to have a good time is also a legitimate purpose in itself of the movement. The women were happy with this comment.

But there was still a problem of image. Some non-member neighbors make comments, they said. "There you go again; where are you going now? And by taxi, eh! To have dinner, eh! You people in the association certainly know how to spend the money you collect..." The women tried not to feel bad about it. "I don't care what they say. But you have to explain, all the time, that we are not paid, that it even costs money to be a member. It is not important, really, but you do hear some comments..."

I said that one problem is that some associations turn into closed groups of friends over time. It is good to have friends, but if a group becomes too chummy, others will not feel free to join. I dared suggest that perhaps that was what had happened to the former board. This touchy theme was passed over in silence.

I asked, "And what about those neighbors (feminine form) who think you are a bit strange for doing what you are doing? Are there perhaps some among them who think that it is not right for women to do association work? Some who think that you should be at home taking care of your home and family?"

"Definitely!" they said, and gave juicy examples of what some neighbors might be thinking. They laughed heartily about jealousy and about over-night trips out of town without their husbands. It was obvious that I had offered them a stereotype image of the "reactionary barrio woman" against whom they wanted to contrast themselves, and that the best discourse domain to do it with was the traditional one of sex.
Another good domain for that purpose was the one of cleanliness.\textsuperscript{12} "Some of those women who spend all day dusting are sure to say that there is a lot of dust in my house, but since dust means nothing to me..." shrugged Carmen. Merche seconded: "That's true for all of us!" Lots of laughter, jokes about dishes piling up. Nati said it was a question of education, implying for one thing, that the more you know about the world, the less interesting is the issue of dust and dishes, but also, for another, that a civic-minded person has higher moral worth than an ever so cleanliness-minded housewife.

I insisted, "But are there really people who think like that?" Oh yes, they all said, offering more jokes and examples.

Meanwhile Maria had got out a couple of big boxes to show me things they had made in some of the handicraft classes. These objects had been chosen to go to a statewide exposition in Madrid of objects made by women in the neighborhood movement.

Like other associations, the one in Malvarrosa obtained subsidies for the handicraft courses, but the women said the participants paid fees, too. "And sometimes teachers work for free, for instance a girl who came last year and said she wanted to do something for the barrio, so she taught us for nothing."

\section*{Women's issues}

At this point, I felt I had obtained a good idea of what the women were doing and why. But they had not said a single word about specific women's issues. I asked if they worked with such issues in Malvarrosa at all. At first they did not understand the question. However, three or four of the women had attended statewide movement conferences on women's issues, and had talked about the adventure it meant to go to them, so I specified: "What I mean is, the kind of things they talk about at those conferences." Finally Maria caught my point. "Ah yes, at the conference in Toledo I remember there was a lot of talk about physical abuse of women." I asked if they had done anything about that in Malvarrosa. They looked shamefully blank, as if they had not done their homework.

One said, with an important face to show that she was in the know, that it had been decided in Toledo that if anyone heard of a case, they would let all the other women's committees know about it, and they would all send telegrams to authorities, "for solidarity and to force them to... to give more help to those people."

For a while it seemed as if they felt that this issue had nothing at all to do with Malvarrosa. Amparo even said that there were not many cases, anywhere. But then one of the women spoke up knowledgeably: "Actually, there are many more cases than what is reported. There are a lot of women who are totally dependent on their husband, so they can't take him to court, so that is why there is no way of knowing how many cases there really are. They don't want any help, because helping them would mean taking it to court, and for them to leave their home, and they can't..."

Perhaps there is also a problem of shame, I suggested. No, absolutely not, they said. "You can't be ashamed in front of your neighbors for a thing like that, because in most cases the neighbors already know about it. Because we live in houses that... I mean, we know everything that happens next door!" "Even if they don't fight physically," added Carmen, "you know when a couple doesn't get along. It shows." The others agreed, and little by little it became clear that the problem was not unknown at all. It was rather that they felt it quite a normal thing, so it was strange to formulate it in terms of a problem to work with in an association, and thereby to transfer it from the private to the public domain.

After a while one of them ventured that many women have to take a lot, because you cannot do anything about it... It is very difficult, agreed the others, and there are actually heaps of women in that situation... Oh yes, sighed several, many more than you would think. And Maria finally summed up the new consensus, "I think that perhaps more than half of all women, really, believe me, more than half of all women have this problem, and it is so hard, you have to take it, because there is nothing you can do about it..."

\textsuperscript{12} This is a topic that has been closely related to that of sexual morals, traditionally, in Spain and in Mediterranean gender thinking generally.
And this started María down a new track. "This makes me think of what you asked before, Marie, about women and labor unions. I think that those of us who are sitting here around this table, we are here because of the drug problem. If these women had been working in a company, we would probably have joined a union. But of course we can't, we are marginalized as they say, we have not been able to work because we have had children. So not being in a factory or a big company, how can you join a union? Why should you? For example, in my case, if I would go to a union and struggle for women having, as we should have, because we have earned it, a wage of our own, that would be no problem for me, I would like to do that. But they would laugh at me. There has to be a problem, a cause, like the drug thing. In other words, I think women don't join unions because there is no cause to justify it for them."

Another woman took up the idea: "If there were a small opportunity now, just a small one, mind you, in a political party, that they would listen to us, for women to have a wage, I think the men would end up being a minority (in that party)! A minority!"

The other women said nothing about this idea of a wage, and I am sure they thought it was far out. (Who would pay for it? asked other women in similar discussions in other contexts.) But they clearly saw the connection between domestic violence and economic dependence. And at least a few of them seemed to be able to imagine political action to obtain economic independence for women. They were actually envisioning political action on a much wider scale than case-by-case alleviation of individual suffering, even if they could not see any realistic hope for it.

In other words, in their own way, these women were moving towards new forms of political and feminist consciousness. They did not quite understand the programs or campaigns designed on higher levels within the movement, and I am sure they did very little about any of them. But through discussions on their home turf, in their own terms, they were redefining their world, arriving at new priorities for their struggles, and new conclusions about social causes and effects.

They realized that because the issues usually addressed by political parties and labor unions were different from the ones that most affected them, party politics were more abstract and ideological and could therefore be divisive in a committee like theirs. They themselves were largely in agreement about their own situation as concerned working class barrio housewives – in contrast, that is, with barrio men, middle class women or unconcerned barrio housewives.

Through their struggles they had acquired a certain habit of redefining problems. My questions about the issue of domestic violence made them realize that this was something one could think about. A new piece of consensus was needed. Their comments were improvised, provoked by my interest, and this can be interpreted as proof that the issue was not interesting to the women, or that they construed domestic violence as inescapable and therefore not worth thinking about. This was probably what they had been thinking, but they did not reject my interest. They took it up and tried to establish an opinion. It was too hasty, too improvised to be a commitment. But it was clear that their experiences so far in the movement had taught them that it was interesting to accept suggestions about new issues to think about, and they had also learnt from experience that they were capable of arriving at standpoints of their own. María's comment about unions could even be read as a search for ways of adapting ordinary politics better to women's needs.

A livable barrio

On our way out, we stopped to talk to the man behind the bar counter. He was in charge of membership. He told us the association had some 1,500 members. "Some leave, but others sign up, it stays around that number..." He and María were apologetic, it seemed to them it was a low number for a big barrio (Malvarrosa had about 17,000 inhabitants), but I said it was quite a good number in comparison to many other barrios. The monthly fee was 100 pesetas (about 75 US cents), except for a small number of members who paid only 50 because they had been members for many years.

Eleven of the women offered to accompany me to the bus stop. But as we walked along Malvarrosa's main street, Malvarrosa Avenue, admiring the colored lights that had just been put up for the big Valencian March festivities, *Fallas*, the women decided to have an afternoon snack be-

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13 Actually few barrio associations have that many members. During the year of the anti-drug demonstrations, the one in Malvarrosa grew from 496 to 1200, according to a local historian (Sanchis Pallarés 1998:208).
fore going home. We found a place where we could all fit in, in a circle around two tables, and ordered coffee, most of us, and different kinds of sweets. They would not let me pay; they shared the bill equally among themselves. After the snack a few more had to go home, but seven women ended up taking me all the way to the bus stop. On the way, the up-coming festivities could be felt in the air: youngsters were throwing firecrackers, a rehearsing band marched by, a group of girls practiced a dance in the park. The women met people they knew, shouting greetings and joking insults: "Where are you going, we saw your wife over there, you'd better find out where she was going!" "Where have you been, coffee and sweets to grow even fatter, eh?" One man said he was on his way home to prepare dinner. The women snickered and asked about his wife. The man laughed and shrugged and said he was about to ask for a divorce.

Malvarrosa is a barrio. People know each other, for good and for bad. They greet each other in the streets. They know more or less who is where at what time of the day. And there are shared opinions and knowledge and connotations that can be counted on as the basis for jokes. Or for insults, for that matter. This is what "barrio" means. Like a village, people say, and mean these good things as well as bad things like social control, long-lasting enmity, lack of perspective. But a barrio is not a village; it is a part of a city. The village-like atmosphere is superficial, changing and not shared by all inhabitants. People arrive or move away. No one knows everyone. There is a background of anonymity.

The neighborhood movement builds on the barrio as context, the barrio as meaning, the barrio as a special kind of utopia even. In Malvarrosa, the barrio had been threatened, then defended and now returned to more or less normal. To the women of the neighborhood association the normality was no longer taken for granted, however. It was as concretely pleasurable as the sweet snacks. And they felt they had earned it.

Points to ponder

The story of the women in Malvarrosa raises a host of moral, political, philosophical and epistemological issues. The anger of the people versus the lack of perspectives. The deep and dense knowledge of the problems at grass roots levels versus the lack of concepts to shape that knowledge and translate it into desired change. The political desirability of emancipation of the directly affected versus the political danger of each one protecting their own back yard. The power of mass media versus the local resistance. The interlocking of stereotypes of gender and ethnicity producing ruptures of both because of violent contradictions between both and material interests beyond the horizons of both. The obscure but materially evident alliance of city, state and international financial strategies foundering on the reefs of popular resistance. The impotence of human beings in the face of structural, human-made but larger-than-human forces of money. The construction of the political subject, in general, and especially from a barrio horizon, and from women's perspective when the world of politics has been shaped by patterns considered masculine.

It also raises specific feminist questions. The beauty of women feeling strong and confident and actually accomplishing something and going on from there to learn more. And enjoying the whole process! The danger of such women being caught in contradictions, having to pay a high price (broken marriages, social ostracism, lack of time for themselves) and burning themselves out. The ambivalent effects of traditional gender roles, on the one hand as something the women have to overcome in order to do anything at all and on the other as something they build on and from which they obtain legitimacy, social support and intimate satisfaction and psychological strength. The long term consequences of the image they give of themselves and the images given of them in mass media – and in reports such as this one.

In this chapter, the task is not to tackle such a large complex of issues. I have offered a thick description of the discourses of the people involved, to show what those big issues look like from eye-level in a barrio, and to endeavor some interpretations of the discourses as such, more than of

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14 Malvarrosa is next to the beach. I have no proof, but it is not very far-fetched to assume that there might be some connection between the ease with which criminals could operate in Malvarrosa around 1990 and the fact that the area, previously seen as just poor and uncomfortably far from the city center, was just then being developed. A beach promenade was projected, and later built, restaurants and other businesses appeared, and middle class housing began to be built. If the working class population could be persuaded to leave, there were profits to be made.
the circumstances that produced them. The purpose of that, in turn, is of course to provide ethnography that is relevant for those big issues.

But above all this is the narrative of the participating women themselves. They told a story with dramatic structure. There were the accumulating sentiments of frustration. The illustrative anecdotes about how life in the barrio grew more and more unacceptable. The dramatic curve of growing tension. The decisive moment of the spark that flew spontaneously from those hot frustrations, igniting the dormant strengths of the population. The tale took on the shape of heroic legend: people were resourceful, imaginative, physically brave. There was real danger, moments of fear, towering enemies, but the collective commitment did not waver. Malvarrosa did it, all together, united like Fuenteovejuna.

As the women told it, they were the protagonists. But they relied on the solidarity of the men, who supported them indirectly by allowing them sufficient freedom to carry on the struggle, and at critical moments supported them directly, doing what men are after all better at than women, they implied, i.e. contesting violence with violence. Men and women have different capacities, because they are different kinds of persons, that was taken for granted, but the women did not subscribe to the common idea that women are less physically brave than men. On the contrary, women can be more brave, not less, because if there is a really serious problem they will confront it at whatever cost, just like men do, and on top of that women have the specific extra strength that comes from motherhood. That was what they said.

The struggle erupted suddenly but it was also long lasting. It was heroic both because of the resistance from drug dealers and authorities and because of the durable commitment required. So they told it.

For a nucleus of women, the commitment to work for the common good became permanent. They had stayed in the struggle, reconverting it to something constant, work in the neighborhood association. They had little schooling, and they knew this to be an obstacle, but they knew they were learning about new needs, new perspectives and new methods of struggle. The happy end of the tale has two parts: the struggle in itself was successful because the goals they had set up were (partially) reached; at the same time new horizons with new goals opened up, life became larger and richer. Malvarrosa became not just inhabitable but a wonderful barrio to identify with. The tale became a moral legend about how the bad luck of having to live in a barrio that threatened to collapse in social chaos was turned into the good luck of finding a solution and then using that solution as a stepping stone to a new style of life.

Left to themselves, the women of Malvarrosa may evolve towards feminism. They no longer accepted the traditional role of housewife at the service of the rest of the family, at least not as the exclusive meaning of life. They were beginning to construct discourses around social marginalization, larger economic and political structures and about connections that make it possible and necessary for people like themselves to try to modify their living conditions. They were savoring their newfound strengths, and reinterpreting their view of themselves and others in the light of these experiences.

In later interviews they also insisted that they had learned a lot since the first interview. They realized that they had used black-and-white language in the early days, whereas now they were able to see many shades in any arguments and express their opinions in more subtle ways. They were learning about party politics, although they still did not like it. They understood better what an association is, and as their own experience of the difficulties of daily nitty-gritty of association work grew, they understood better what the previous board had been trying to do in the days before the violent demonstrations (cf. note 7).

They were vulnerable, because their horizons were still largely limited to their own barrio, and their access to mass media and other sources of information was rather narrow, but their belief in their own strength gave them real strength.

They could fall prey to reactionary populist campaigns. But they were committed to collective action for a good collective life, and as their experiences had taught them what the minimum conditions for a good life were, they were not likely to be seduced by abstract visions of the world. Their refusal to accept the world of "politics" as they understood it defended them – up to a point – against manipulation.
Their concentration on their own barrio can be interpreted as narrow-minded selfishness; this viewpoint was seen in press comments on the Malvarrosa events and it is sometimes expressed in general discussions on the neighborhood movement in Spain. But it can also be interpreted as a very strong link to direct material experience. To follow political leaders or ideologies is foolishness to women like these. They work with what they know. They are selfish in the sense that they are not very interested in people they do not know personally, but they are not individually selfish; on the contrary they have clear ideas of sacrificing immediate comfort for the common good, i.e. the common good of people around them. They are careful not to introduce divisiveness in those immediate surroundings. They try to be tolerant of differences among themselves, and they state their good intentions and willingness to compromise whenever they affirm something they feel not everyone might agree to. To this same end, they hide their most idiosyncratic opinions, and they constantly probe the collective opinions and work toward consensus, but they will not adopt any strong self-repressive measures. Having taken a big step out of their traditional role, they have learned that it is sometimes good and necessary to risk criticism. They are willing to make sacrifices for the common good, but they set a limit to sacrifices, having realized the drawbacks of the ideology of the totally self-sacrificing housewife.

Epilogue

I made several visits to the Malvarrosa association, most recently in October 2003. They were always enjoyable occasions, and the tales told were similar. The women were more or less the same ones. They updated me on the continued struggle against drugs, underlining that the barrio was more united than ever. When there was a demonstration now, for example, all the stores closed, even the big supermarket. They showed me new handicraft products and talked about new issues like bad garbage collection and heavy truck traffic along the beach promenade at night. For a while the association had a conscientious objector who organized a nice archive of newspaper clippings.15

Unfortunately, the optimism about the "cleaning" of the barrio decreased with time. There were still drugs and still gypsies. And the women still talked of "them" as if gypsies and pushers were the same thing. They were worried about my interpretation of this, they did not want me to think them racists, "but it is not our fault if the pushers are gypsies."

They told some interesting examples of how they had made the police do a better job. But they had given up watching the police station to make sure the pushers caught were booked. "It's no use." "We understand now that the police also work under legal limitations, they can't keep a person if the crime he is suspected of is a minor one."

I asked if the women were not scared. Didn't the pushers know who they were? Yes, of course. Little things had happened through the years, for example they were robbed once in a while.

15 Conscientious objectors were numerous in Spain from the Transition until the elimination of obligatory military service in 2001. They had to do an alternative service, longer than the military service. In 1999 there were 140,000, while those doing the supposedly obligatory military service were only a third of that number (El País 991111). In 2001, the obligatory service was discontinued. The unpopularity of the service had much to do with the dictatorship. The army was widely regarded as an institution in which attitudes from the Franco regime were still alive and well: hierarchy, conservatism, arbitrary discipline, religious imposition, and so on. The stereotype image was of an institution in which democratic attitudes had not made any noticeable inroads. The image included anti-feminism, too (Lorenzo Arribas 1999). So many young men refused to do military service on a variety of personal or political grounds. This had become a problem for the state. The law stipulated that the objectors must do an alternative service to society, but there was a lack of places to send them to. They were not supposed to take the place of any paid worker, i.e. they could only be assigned to work that would not otherwise get done at all. Non-governmental organizations of all kinds were staffed with conscientious objectors. In the neighborhood movement, however, there were different opinions on the ethics and politics of using them. For some, it was a good way to staff an office that would otherwise be unattended, since the movement could not afford to pay any salaries, and it was possible that these young men might learn something important. Others thought the movement should be solidary with the objectors' movement, which criticized the law on many points and many of its members refused to do the alternative service, risking prison in order to campaign against the law. According to this view, the neighborhood movement should take a stand against the right of a state to conscript people's labor, especially conscription on the discriminatory grounds of gender. For others again, this might be too radical a standpoint, but the neighborhood movement should not make itself dependent on this sort of unwilling, uncompromising labor. My impression was that in spite of widespread unease, more and more federations and also many barrio associations were accepting conscientious objectors. In several places the debate was turning pragmatic, focusing on how the objectors were to be used, supervised and otherwise treated.
But so was everyone, so that did not frighten them. There had been some threats and some open violence against a couple of the women. And little help was to be expected from the police. "To the police, the bad guy is the neighborhood association!" Are the drug dealers out to take revenge on you? "No, not revenge. Mostly they just want to show off. But I am aware that anything can happen to me, so I am careful in some places." Still, there was no talk of giving up, on the contrary, as things worsened once again, they were thinking of organizing a new major protest action.

They discussed the issue of police presence. They had fought to have more of it, and they had obtained some. But now they had doubts. "At least as for me, I don't want to be in the middle of a crowd of patrol cars each time I come out of my house."

But their strongest feeling was now that the only solution was to legalize the drugs. "If you could buy it in any store, like alcohol, then it would not be so expensive and 'they' would not be able to get rich selling." "Yes, and to buy something legally, you don't have to use guns."

Even though a lot of people were leaving the barrio, and in spite of all the old problems and some new ones, the women still thought Malvarrosa was a wonderful barrio. They were as emotional as ever about the barrio feeling. "You have to know your neighbors! How can people live without knowing their neighbors?"

When in 2003 I showed them a translation of this chapter (an earlier longer version, without this epilogue) and asked for their permission to publish it, they were a bit upset about my descriptions of the problems. Yes, there were problems, and they recognized that I had only written what they had told me, and there had been even worse problems in the past – but if Malvarrosa was to be described in a book, they wanted it to be described as a nice place. They loved it, it was their home, they wanted to be proud of it. I understand their feelings. Malvarrosa was physically run down, it was far from well off – but there were lots of commercial activities, lots of people talking to each other in the streets, there was a feeling of a socialized place that had meaning to its residents as a place, as a home.

They did want me to publish their story, however. So we reached a compromise. I have taken out a few details on some problems. I have underlined that they did not consider themselves racist. And I agree that they were not racists in a biologist sense, there was just a very distinct ethnic dividing line which caused much discomfort in the barrio, for people on both sides of the line, I am sure. "After everything that has happened, you must understand that we are angry. Anger yes, but not racism."

They also wanted me to make it very clear that they did not "do politics". They wanted it said that the public transportation had improved very much, as had a lot of other things, and that they all loved their barrio very much. It had never been a bad barrio; it had just suffered from many carencias. The apartments built in the 1950s were not very bad, and most people had made improvements, so now they were comfortable and dignified dwellings.

I hope I have managed to get all of this across. The last thing I want is to offend these friendly, intelligent and energetic women. But I explained to them that I also have a duty to my profession to describe what I see, and they accepted that. Amparo said that it is good for people to know, too, about the problems of the past.

We discussed anew what they had learned. They recognized, for example, that they had said that the "former" association had been ineffective. But now they would not say such things. "I have been in this for many years now," said Merche, "now I am where they were then, so I understand that probably what happened then was that they could not get people interested in what they were trying to do." And she told anecdotes about how difficult it was to get the people of the barrio to do things. We agreed that I would mention this in the epilogue to the chapter, as an example of how they continued learning.