
CHAPTER 9. ELDA: REASONABLE WOMEN IN A REASONABLE TOWN

Since most people in the neighborhood movement know their world from a local horizon, it is necessary to describe that perspective. I also want to illustrate the variations inside the movement as well as the connections between these variations and local social circumstances. In the following four chapters, four towns will be described. The first one, Elda, will be presented in greater detail than the others; it is sufficiently non-specific to serve as a case study.

The post card view

If you drive southeast from Madrid, after some three hundred and fifty kilometers of flat almost featureless land, rather suddenly you come upon a different landscape of brown hills that grow into mountains. This is where the province of Alicante begins. You will then enter the narrow valley of the Vinalopó River. Elda is an industrial town in the middle part of the valley. For the inhabitants, the outstanding characteristics of their town are three: it is a shoe-making town, the workers have always had a political conscience, and the surrounding area is turning into a desert.

In 1994 Elda had around 54,000 inhabitants. Most of them lived in the compact area between the river and the neighboring town of Petrel. Lack of land for expansion was seen as one major problem for the city. A few small residential areas, seen as "poor districts", were found on the other side of the river, along with a development of one-family middle class dwellings. The old town lies where it has been since the Middle Ages, around the old castle on a hill in a river bend.

The "Moors and Christians"-fiesta is a general form for local festivities in the province of Alicante. But Eldenses say that theirs is the most "democratic" version. In other towns and villages, they say, either only men participate, and women can only watch, or else the activity consists of parades, so that only special participants do anything while the rest look on. In Elda, women and men participate in the same way, and everyone participates, the fiesta is really "lived by all" and "in the street" i.e. open, active and non-restrictive. Eldenses think that the form of the fiesta fits their general democratic and anti-hierarchical "mentality".

I think there is some truth to this self-image, and that it has to do with the economic history of the town.

A bit of history and geography

The climate of this corner of Spain is very dry, and conditions are worsening. Most of the landscape is denuded. The only trees are palm trees, and they grow mainly near irrigated fields and the river. Elda is hot in summer, but cold in winter, because it is situated 400 meters above sea level.

The city of Alicante, on the coast, is only 35 kilometers away. It has some 200,000 inhabitants, a big harbor, some industry, lots of commerce, a university, a beach next to the harbor and several surrounding beach areas with tourism. But in spite of this powerful neighbor, Elda is a center in its own right, the social and administrative capital of the "middle Vinalopó area".

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1. Note the use of "street" as a positive symbol. Here as always its meaning is the opposite to "private", but in this case the "private" implicitly referred to is not "home" or anything related to family life. It is private in the sense of fenced off, anti-democratic, non-accessible. The cultural meaning of "street", then, has overtones of democratic, sociable, gregarious, informal. Cf. chapter 14. Cf. also Lefèbvre 1978.

2. The average annual rainfall is around 265 millimeters. Average temperatures are 9° centigrade in January, 27° in July and August (Concejialia de Cultura 1993, unpublished).
The modern history of Elda is the history of its shoe-making industry. Some people say that the origins of this specialty have to do with the fact that one of the traditional agricultural products of the area is a cactus that is grown for its fiber. This fiber is used, among other things, to make the plaited soles for the traditional cloth shoes, alpargatas. But according to local historians, the shoe industry of Elda has "always" been based on leather and on quality shoes for export outside the area. The two explanations need not exclude each other, but the important thing is that shoe manufacture has become part of local identity. Nowhere else in Spain have I heard people refer to a manual profession with such pride as Eldenses do. When for example in a meeting one man felt like underlining that he was from Elda, he exclaimed: "I am a shoe-maker!" Another man, feeling slighted, answered in an equally proud and loud voice: "So am I! What did you think!?" ("¡Yo soy zapatero!" "¡Y yo! ¡Qué te has creído!"

This goes for women, as well. They too have made shoes for generations, and they too are proud of it. The only difference is that they do not usually call themselves shoe-makers (although it does happen, and the word exists in the feminine form, zapatera). They usually refer to themselves as aparadoras, the noun derived from the verb aparar, which means to sew or glue together the pieces of leather. This is the main female sub-profession in the industry. According to all informants, there are four major sub-professions, two of which are male and two female. This division of labor along gender lines is quite general and culturally legitimate but it is not seen as essentially gendered, i.e. there is no strong feeling that the female tasks are "feminine" or the male ones "masculine" in themselves.

The federation of neighborhood associations of Elda had a high-heeled shoe as its emblem. From humble beginnings – local artisans walking to nearby villages to sell their shoes – the shoe making took on industrial characteristics towards the end of the 19th century. Shoes were exported to Madrid and other big cities. By the First World War most of the export went to foreign countries. The population of the surrounding villages stopped growing and then decreased due to the emigration to Elda, where there was work for all comers. There was a process of concentration of capital, so that the period up to the civil war was dominated by a relatively small number of large factories growing fewer and larger.3

The onset of the civil war in 1936 changed everything, in Elda as in the rest of Spain. But after an initial period of confusion, the shoe industry reorganized itself to supply the Republican army with boots and other leather products, and the population was saved from uprooting and joblessness and, largely, from direct war action. The principal suffering it shared with the rest of the population of Spain was hunger.

The post-war period was worse than the war. Hunger continued, of course. And Elda was punished for its adherence, up to the last moment, to the loser. Perhaps it was extra harshly punished because it was a workers' town, and because it had a tradition of working class organizations and rebellions.

So the 1940s were difficult. But like in the rest of Spain the late 1950s brought some economic recovery, and once again Elda reorganized the shoe industry. Government policy changed from economic self-sufficiency and isolation to a plan of capitalist development and industrialization. This meant starting almost from scratch in many parts, but in Elda it meant a return to old ways. The slow recovery of the rest of the country's economy meant that the market for shoes grew. Sales increased, and once again the immigrants started coming, at first from the nearby region of La Mancha, then from the rest of Castile and from Andalusia and Extremadura. The 1960s saw more economic growth and more immigration and the early 1970s more yet. By now most of the sales were to other countries, especially the USA.

The general crisis of the 1970s hit the shoe industry hard. The situation was complicated by the fact that the Eldenses had by now gotten used to quite a good standard of living. They asked for, and got, ever-higher salaries. For a while the town had the highest per capita income of Spain. (Due also, of course, to the fact that the participation of women in salaried work was unusually high.) But

3 The main source used for this section is Valero Escandell et al 1992. (By no chance, this book of local history bears the title (translated): "Elda, 1832–1980. Shoe industry and social transformation.") I was also given much oral information on the history of Elda, especially from union officials, schoolteachers and a couple of amateur historians. I have only used such information when all sources coincided. See also Rosselló i Verger 1984.
shoes require a lot of manual work. They are therefore most profitably made in places with low salaries. Newly industrialized countries are especially appropriate. Spain had been one, but during the 1970s and 1980s competition grew from countries like Portugal, Brazil and India.

A bit of sociology and politics

Municipal registers\(^4\) show the demographic characteristics of an industrial town with recent immigration: a rather young population, lots of children, low levels of schooling. More than half of the population was born outside Elda. Since there was a lack of schools up to the 1980s, there was a noticeable proportion of illiterate persons reaching as low in ages as 40 or 50.

The young people who were coming of age in the early 1990s had a better basic education and many went off to the universities of Madrid, Valencia and Alicante. But they, too, helped making shoes in their homes. When Eldenses, of any age, gender or present profession, tell about their lives, they often begin by saying, "I began gluing at the age of ten or eleven, to help my mother..." Child labor is forbidden in Spain, of course, but the shoes are often made at home, the pay is by piece-rate, families need money, there has been as much work as anyone could want, and the tasks are easy to learn – so of course children "help".

The immigration had caused little social unrest. Since the immigrants were a majority, one could say that the town had been taken over by them, rather than integrating them, but since there was no language problem (Elda spoke Castilian, not Valencian like the surrounding areas, before all the Castilian-speaking immigrants arrived) and little social differentiation (everyone made shoes) this did not seem to have caused any tension. Many I spoke to made it a point to say that they "felt like Eldenses" even though they had been born somewhere else. "You belong to the place you live in, isn't that so, isn't that the most natural thing?" they said. This is not the general Spanish feeling, which tends to attach great importance to the place of birth.

The only ethnic boundary that was recognized as important was that between the gypsies and the rest. Gypsies made up about one tenth of the town population. But even this issue seemed easier to handle in Elda than in other parts of Spain.

The major factor to shape Elda life in the 1980s and 1990s was the crisis of the shoe industry. One factory after another closed down and unemployment soared. Or so the news from Elda were reported in the rest of Spain. In just a few years Elda moved from having the highest per capita income to having the highest unemployment rate in Spain, over 30% of the active population. I expected to find a depressed town with desperate inhabitants.

But I found an unstressed, amiable place. My first reaction was of disbelief. When I asked about unemployment, people laughed and said they all had jobs, unemployment figures are notoriously false, who was I to be so naïve as to believe them, there was no unemployment at all in Elda and "therefore" probably not in the rest of Spain either. "People who want to work can always find work." How can a left-leaning population with long standing working class and industrial traditions say such a thing?!

As a matter of fact the children playing in the well-equipped playgrounds and nicely tended parks were well nourished and well dressed. I saw no beggars and no drug addicts. People told me there was little criminality; instead, there were plenty of fashion boutiques and travel agencies, the bars and restaurants were varied and good and their rest rooms clean...

After a while, however, I also saw other things. There were closed stores, ruinous unused factory buildings, and plenty of apartments and businesses for sale. Social workers told me that there certainly did exist problems of drug addiction and robberies, "but of course much less than in big cities". And they told of marital tensions, domestic violence, non-payment of child support, etc.

\(^4\) The main sources here are the following: Instituto Municipal de Servicios Sociales de Elda: Concejalía de Participación Ciudadana, Memoria de Trabajo año 1993; Instituto Municipal de Servicios Sociales de Elda: Concejalía de "Participación Ciudadana", Memoria de Trabajo año 1992; Concejalía de Cultura: Elda. Guía para moverse por la ciudad. Ayuntamiento de Elda: Memoria de la Oficina Técnica, 1993. All of these are xerox-copied reports produced by and given to me by the municipal office, Ayuntamiento de Elda. I was also generously given printouts from statistics on demography. The union office of Comisiones Obreras gave me their report: Diagnóstico empleo-formación de Elda-Petrer, marzo 1993. I am most grateful for this Eldense generosity.
Union officials told me about the very low salaries and the total insecurity of the labor market, and about the "models" that Elda entrepreneurs found useful in order to avoid taxes and social responsibilities. Teachers and other local intelligentsia thought that the reason Eldenses were happy and content in spite of everything was that the shoe industry had always had ups and downs, but it had survived through major catastrophes like the civil war, and it was so old and so traditional, that Eldenses believed that this was just another temporary slump. They were convinced that the fat years would soon return. And meanwhile there was work, even though the conditions were bad and a substantial part of the labor market was underground. The true rate of unemployment was low.5

Then what about class conflict? Entrepreneurs had many tricks to circumvent labor legislation, and everyone seemed to be aware of them. Must not such behavior on the part of employers produce strong resentment? The answer was that it did not, because most companies were small, almost all the entrepreneurs were from old Eldense families, "we all know each other", and "no one gets really rich in this town". And since little capital was needed and companies failed regularly, there had been a history of workers-turned-employers and vice versa. So the workers felt that all Eldenses were in the same boat and that the main objective for all was the survival of the shoe industry as a whole.

In a wider perspective, they were right. The differences in income were substantial, but the differences in influence over the situation were not so decisive. The sales organization had been largely lost to Elda. In the world economy, Elda capitalists were in a situation similar to that of the domestic workers in the local economy: they set their own conditions on a day-to-day basis and believed themselves independent, but the shape and size of orders, the raw material, the prices and the amount of work available came to them from outside and were determined above their heads. The large-scale profits, if there were any, did not stay in Elda.

In Elda, then, ruled an atmosphere of social equalization and homogenization, a consistent but non-revolutionary socialist (or social-democratic) ideology, a history of compromises on the labor market, a basic material well-being that was real enough but exaggerated by the people who compared themselves to less fortunate people in other places and so felt richer than they were and therefore hardly critically minded. All of this reminded me of Sweden.

The recent political history of Elda looked a bit Swedish, too. Almost as soon as political parties were allowed, in 1977, Elda turned to the socialist party, PSOE. There was just a short period of generalized unrest and a big general strike in the summer of 1977. This was now known as the "assemblist movement" (movimiento asambleario) and Elda leftists remembered it with some nostalgia. It was big, it was beautifully solidary, and it was a very new kind of experience for present day Eldenses. But it was short-lived. Already in the first democratic local elections, in 1979, Elda elected a PSOE mayor, and PSOE had governed the town uninterrupted and with comfortable majorities ever since.

The urban landscape

The old town looked like most old towns in Spain – narrow winding streets, low buildings, most of them run down. Alongside it was a newer business district with square blocks, wide streets with comfortable sidewalks and quite a few planted (and watered!) trees, where many buildings boasted brave designs and expensive materials, tell tale signs of the good years. There were only two big parks but innumerable miniature ones – a bunch of trees planted and a few benches placed on a lot where a few old houses had been torn down. Very Eldense: unpretentious but making for a comfortable everyday life.

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5 In a thorough study of domestic industrial work in the Valencian region, Sanchis (1984) tells about widespread fraud with unemployment benefits, about how some entrepreneurs included this in their employment plans, and about how even the state employment agency felt this fraud was necessary and pardonable, mainly because the benefits were too small to survive on unless complemented with some other income. He collected his data mainly in 1979 and all over the Valencian region. The situation he described showed signs of developing into what I found fifteen years later. Cf. also Susan Narotksy’s contribution to Procoli 2004 about the social tensions that result from such an organization of work, notably internal family hierarchies, personal tensions around "helping" each other, the gendered division of tasks, etc.
Around the business district lay the workers' areas. Most of them were drab in that the streets were straight, the greenery scarce, the buildings square and the paint peeling. But there were plenty of bars and small stores of all kinds, and there were mini-parks and even small sports fields here and there.

Peeking into stairwells, or visiting people in their homes, I often noticed a strong smell of glue. Mentioning this made me popular: "Of course! That is Elda for you! The smell of glue is our sign of identity!" Uttered as always with pride. I heard no discussions on the possible health problems of the smell, of having pots of glue in the kitchen, of having small children playing in the same room where the mothers work with the glue.

There used to be a lack of state schools, but now, with diminishing birth rates, there were more schools than needed.

Eldenses used to have to go to Alicante for all medical attention beyond the general practitioners. There were now several private and one state medical center in the downtown area and a large state hospital just outside town.

Streets were clean and well lit. The parks were well kept. The river had been channeled in a concrete bed to prevent sudden inundations (frequent and often disastrous in eastern Spain).

There were only two public health hazards in Elda that a temporary visitor like myself could discern: the piped water was of bad quality, and the system of garbage collection left a lot to be desired, so the rat population was large and robust. Plus possibly the glue.

All in all, even if times were now hard and lean, the fact that Elda had recently had good fat years was evident.

**History of the neighborhood movement in Elda**

The neighborhood movement had an early and vigorous start in Elda. Then, like in most places, there was a slump around 1980. Beginning in 1986, it got off to a new start, with new people, new ideas and new associations. It was still growing in 1994. Inside the movement in other parts of Spain Elda was known as a very active federation. It was also known to be under strong influence of the PSOE party. As I saw it, this was true, but it was true in a different way than in other places.

**Nuns in La Tafalera**

In the chapter on the general history of the movement, we saw that one of its roots grew out of oppositional Catholicism, and that this root included a certain number of religious persons who made a commitment similar to that of nuns and monks but who lived on their own, in working class areas, earning their living like their neighbors while also trying to improve living conditions in these areas.

Two such religious women arrived in Elda around 1970, and their significance for the neighborhood movement was underlined by everyone I spoke to. Aurita arrived first, then Pepi. They learned how to make shoes (aparar) and lived in a house in one of the poorest areas of Elda, the barrio of La Tafalera. Living conditions were harsh there, at that time. There was no running water, no bathrooms or toilets of any kind, water had to be fetched from the river, and drinking water from a couple of public fountains. The streets had no asphalt and no lighting. Most of the houses did have electricity, but there were no electric appliances beyond a few light bulbs and perhaps a radio. Much of the cooking took place outdoors, even in winter. The inhabitants were all shoe workers, recent arrivals from even poorer places.

Aurita and Pepi convinced a group of women to get together and see what they could do to facilitate housekeeping tasks. Some collective organization of water fetching and clothes washing resulted. But the major complaint of the women was that they felt "ignorant", so Aurita and Pepi spoke to parish authorities and obtained permission to use a small building. Together with the women of the barrio they cleaned and painted it, "and for the meetings, each person brought his or her own chair." To start with they organized religious activities, such as catechism, which were

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6 They are too well known in the town to be kept anonymous here, but I will leave out their last names.
completely inoffensive in the eyes of the authorities, and in this way they secured money and support from the parish.

Out of these humble activities grew an organization. Aurita and Pepi knew about neighborhood associations from other places in Spain. They knew that they were a legal possibility. They had knowledge and courage enough to dare to try to set one up. They had earned the loyalty of the people of La Tafalera, so they had no difficulty in getting together a group of neighbors willing to participate. They drew up the papers and patiently insisted with the municipal authorities until that first neighborhood association of Elda was legalized in 1973.

They had the support of underground political parties, especially the PCE. For a few years, La Tafalera was the only neighborhood association in Elda, but just like elsewhere, the party saw the movement as a strategic place to become semi-visible, so the Tafalera association invented a way to admit people who did not reside in the barrio as special members. As the opposition against the regime grew stronger, and as underground trade unions were also becoming semi-visible, La Tafalera became a political center for all of Elda. Some of the key participants were women, but the great majority of the participants, especially from outside the barrio, were men.

A growing movement

The association of La Tafalera was exemplary in its semi-spontaneous origins and its authentic roots among the people of a very poor barrio. It improved the conditions of that barrio. There were pressures and threats against the leaders, but no serious repression. In other words, the gains were big, the risks small, the demonstration effect evident. So soon more neighborhood associations were created.

By 1977 there were some ten or twelve associations in the town and they had created a coordinating committee, a coordinadora. The movement took part, along with the unions, in the movimiento asambleario. More associations were created.

During the paradoxical years of the early transition, when the local governments were still in the hands of persons appointed by Franco, the movement in Elda, again like elsewhere, was at its most glorious. For example, even though Elda had less than 50,000 inhabitants at the time, the movement managed to organize a demonstration with 25,000 participants. It was ostensibly to demand a hospital, but like all demonstrations in those years, it was also a show of strength of the popular demand for democratic local government.

In those years, the movement in Elda obtained many large and small victories: schools, parks, the hospital... Among the success stories from those years, there was one about a school that people especially liked to tell, because it was a good illustration of how the neighborhood movement can use its special resources. There was one barrio that still had no state school and the mayor had promised that it would get one as soon as land could be found to build it on. That barrio had no unused land. After some time, Town Hall employees found a piece of land whose owner was willing to sell. But it was located far away from the barrio and quite expensive. Parents did not want their children to have to walk that far, and everyone thought the price was outrageous, so the barrio association set its own people to work. Asking around, talking to friends and relatives, they found a lot for sale for only a third of the price and much closer to the barrio itself!

Transition and crisis

It was difficult to find out what happened in Elda during the period of party conflicts and uncertain movement identity. Most of the activists from the heroic years had quit and not come back. I spoke to Aurita and Pepi and a few more from the earliest years, but I met none of the protagonists from the crisis period.

From what I could gather, it seems that the Elda experience was similar to the general one. The downturn began around 1980 and culminated around 1985. Many of the material successes took place during those same years, nevertheless. At the time of the crisis inside the movement, the effects of the efficacy of the movement in the earlier phase were just materializing.
whom I managed to talk, it was the pain of the many deceptions and treacheries of the period that made them leave the movement never to return. Ordinary members dropped out little by little as activities dwindled and personal and party conflicts seemed to use up most of the movement energy. Whenever an association could not get anyone to agree to sit on the board, not even to administer its dissolution, it just vanished from real life, without ceasing to exist on paper. This was the usual whimpering end.

The movement came very close to dying out completely in Elda. For a while not a single association was active. Some had been formally closed down; most were just de facto inactive, i.e. still registered, but under "municipal tuition" (the legal phrase) since there were no active members.

New beginnings

Talking about this period, the president of the federation in Elda said, "Most of the associations, or perhaps all, were under municipal tuition. But there were a few of us, very few, perhaps at first only three persons, who felt very strongly that the movement should not be allowed to die like that. So we fought hard to make it come to life again. We started working in our own barrios, and when we had a couple of associations, perhaps only three or four, we decided to make a federation! Yes, to start building the house from the roof! We felt that that was the best way just then. If there was a federation, more people would feel that it was possible and worthwhile to get their own association out of tuition."

An IU politician and movement old-timer told the story in a similar way: "There came a time when there was hardly any activity at all and I don't know how many associations were under tuition. But it never died out completely here in Elda, there were always a few people who had never given up. So then, little by little, it started growing again, and so the idea of having a federation was born. Then we fought for a full year over the federation statutes!"

The story is the same but the emphasis is different. The federation president, a PSOE sympathizer, stressed the individual initiative and the organizing from the top down; the IU member stressed the continued political conflicts. For the president and his friends, it was more of a new beginning, and more of a personal triumph, since the PSOE had never before been important in the movement. For everyone to the left of PSOE, whether independents or party people, the new era had a PSOE seal from the start, and that meant new limitations as well as new opportunities.

In 1987 the new federation began its work, and the plan worked, more old associations came back to life. One woman, who had never been active before, told it like this: "I had heard that there had been an association in our barrio, but I had never stopped to wonder what had become of it. Then there were news that the federation had been organized and that some associations were "taken out of tuition". I did not know what that meant, so I asked my husband, and he said that he thought our association was under tuition, too, which meant that it existed, it was just a question of someone volunteering to get it going again. So I thought, it is a pity. So if no one else will do it, I will! So I talked to some women in my street and we went to the town hall together to ask, and sure enough, there was our association in the register, and they explained to us what we had to do to get it going again. So we did it! Just like that, for the hell of it, because we felt like it!"

That is the authentic grass roots way, and one must not forget that it really exists. In many barrios, however, PSOE members brought the associations back to life as part of their party work. And in others again by people even to the right of the PSOE, because the movement had now lost some of its leftist identity, and to some "apolitical" persons a neighborhood association looked like a nice thing to have to organize festivities and _convivencia._
The movement in 1994

Relations with the PSOE and with Town Hall

In 1994 there were eighteen associations, all quite active. According to activists, most of them had between 200 and 300 members.  

The personal authority of the federation president was evident in the weekly meetings with representatives from the barrio associations. He chaired and directed them with the friendly assurance of a schoolteacher, and the barrio representatives were good pupils, listening attentively, usually speaking only when it was their turn, and mixing obedience with transparent pranks, like smoking behind each other's shielding backs.

The president's home association was one of the most active, and the barrio was the most populous one in Elda. It was a good home turf for the federation president. He insisted that he was not a PSOE member, nor was his wife, who was the president of the women's commission of the federation. But most of the other activists of that barrio were PSOE members.

One of the board members was even a town councilor for the PSOE. Several persons cited this to me as the most evident proof of the PSOE influence over the movement. Most such critics also thought it a scandalous contradiction for a person to sit both on a barrio board and on the town council. It was to confuse the roles of administration and movement, they thought. For the councilor himself, there was evidently no contradiction. Several other town councilors also had their roots in the movement, and if they were no longer active in it, they still felt at home in it.

This became clear to me on my very first day in Elda. Coming into the federation meeting room, I saw the usual kind of people one sees in the movement: middle aged men and women with working class bodies, hands and clothing. So when I was introduced to a couple of persons who said they were town councilors, for a second I suspected it might be a joke! Town councilors I had met in Madrid or Valencia, even leftist ones, usually dressed in suits and were often taller than average, betraying thus their middle class or higher origins. And they did not come to neighborhood movement meetings unless formally invited and then only after much insisting and for specific purposes. A meeting with even one councilor present was a special event, announced as such. But here were several town councilors present, and they were there as friends and neighbors, even as they were also there to explain town hall business.

Naturally it was the small size of Elda that made this possible. And most activists did not seem to think it strange at all, on the contrary, many emphasized the advantages of the friendly relationship between the movement and Town Hall, saying that the fact that many councilors had come from movement ranks made it easy to "talk" with them, i.e. make proposals, negotiate and obtain information. The cozy relationship was proof both of the success of the movement and of the working class roots of the PSOE town hall team.

As the tense times of the transition recede into history, and as the general level of education rises, movement people feel less out of place in the halls of power in any town or city and this certainly increases empowerment. Still, there are important risks with lowering the barriers. Blurred lines between citizens and authorities make co-optation of the movement easy.

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8 Most of these were families; cf. chapter 3 on how members are counted.
9 Smoking was a non-issue until very recently, in the neighborhood movement as in most contexts in Spain. But in the 1990s anti-tobacco campaigns spread. In 1994, it was a recent thing in the movement, controversial because it was emotional for some people, both for and against, but not generally considered important. In some associations, everyone smoked, just like before, and if anyone tried to raise the issue he was laughed out of court. In other associations, smoking had been prohibited by consensus and people tried to comply. In most places, as in Elda, there had been a decision to forbid smoking, because this was felt to be the progressive thing to do, but it was usually not enforced. In the Elda federation, Eldense amiability had prevailed: the ashtrays had not been thrown out, but they had been filled with candy "to show that we are not supposed to use them!" People who smoked were teased but not reprimanded. They used empty cigarette packs for their ashes. To let ashes fall to the floor – as used to be the custom – was wholly unacceptable.
10 This old physical mark of class, difference in height, is a remnant of the hunger years and has practically disappeared among those born in the 1960s or later.
The activists of the Elda movement were, broadly speaking, of the three kinds outlined in chapter 3. According to the revolutionary discourse in Elda the movement was being co-opted, or had been co-opted already; the PSOE had moved in like a bulldozer and taken over, and it would be very difficult for the movement ever to become again what it had been.

The reformist discourse expressed pride in the Elda movement precisely because it had "managed to be so efficient and obtained so many good things for the town" and because it "maintained such a good relationship with Town Hall." One man insisted several times to me that it was ridiculous to dream about reivindicaciones in Elda, nowadays. "There is no need to struggle when you can get everything you want in a friendly way. For example, if there is a problem in my barrio, like last week, when we had some drug addicts who moved into an abandoned house – we just call Town Hall and in two or three days the problem is solved!"

Large proportions of activists in Elda, and a great majority of non-activist members, were of the sociable kind. This was recognized by revolutionary and reformist activists alike, with the usual regrets. "People sign up just to take part in the festivities. We tell them the barrio fiesta is for everyone, you don't have to be a member to participate in it, but I think they sign up for that reason anyway. Just in case, they probably think!"

Sociable events

The emphasis on sociability in the present day movement in Elda was clearly seen on the Day of the Neighbor, which was held while I was in Elda. This was a new tradition, an annual celebration of the movement in the Comunidad Valenciana (cf. Glossary), held for the sixth time in 1994. Different towns and cities play host to the event; this year it was the capital Valencia itself. In 1995 it was to be Elda.

The Day of the Neighbor was a festive event. It included very little political activity. There were other occasions for that, said the leaders. Instead, members spend a day together, dancing, singing, listening to a few speeches, enjoying a picnic and much entertainment. Between 10,000 and 15,000 persons milled around in a big park in Valencia from eleven in the morning till seven in the afternoon. They arrived in buses from all corners of the Comunidad Valenciana.

From Elda came the largest contingent, eighteen buses! For two weeks prior to the event, the discussions in the federation and in the individual associations centered largely on this event. The aspect of it that got most of the attention was the very sociable one of who was going to travel in which bus with whom. After the event, more meeting time was used up to evaluate it and try to learn from both good and bad things, in view of next year's gathering in Elda.

Another illustrative example of the importance of festivities was May 1st. The major trade unions in Elda went to Alicante to participate in the big demonstration there. In Elda itself, a couple of small leftist and anarchist groups organized a demonstration in which only some 300 persons participated. Meanwhile, there was a big party in a city park. It was organized by Town Hall, but the neighborhood movement participated in the planning and in the work. The town councilor of festivities and sports had come to the federation a couple of times to plan the activities and organize the practical tasks. Each association was to see to it that it had five to ten volunteers in the park by eleven o'clock in the morning, that was an order!

And it was obeyed. For this type of work, it was easy to find eager hands. Some volunteers were in charge of the exposition of children's drawings, others organized games and competitions, some helped with the cooking of the giant paella, others sold soft drinks, and so on. The only thing the volunteers got in exchange for their work was a free meal. Over two thousand Eldenses spent the day in the park.

During the following week, much meeting time was dedicated to evaluations, mostly positive ones: Everyone had had a good time; it was a shame that the gypsy youngsters had won the ham by a dirty trick (instead of trying to climb the greased pole one by one, they reached the ham by climbing onto each other's shoulders!), but it did not matter very much ("It was a smart idea after all! Gypsies are gypsies!") everyone had a laugh, and the organization was good, and there was enough food for everyone... The criticism centered on details, like the long lines for the drinks, the shortage of beer, the slightly undercooked rice. I heard political criticism in only one
association: "I was ashamed of seeing you all there, working your asses off. For Town Hall! If Town Hall organizes a party for the town, let them organize it! Let them pay for the labor needed, for heaven's sake!"

Privately I also heard a few persons say something to the effect that it was a shame that the party gathered so many people, and the demonstration so few, and was this perhaps another PSOE trick to keep the masses happy and uncritical? People who said such things had usually been to the demonstration, but they had been to the party in the park, too. And they did not voice these feelings in the meetings, because that would hurt people's feelings. "Sure everyone likes a party, me too!"

In the federation meeting where the "celebration of May first" was evaluated, not a single word was uttered about the political significance of that date.

Movement structure and material conditions in 1994

In the statewide movement, the Elda federation was considered a successful one. It had managed to establish itself as a forum for discussion, and as a factor to be taken into account in all local political developments. Seventeen of the eighteen associations of Elda were federated, and they were all "real", i.e. they were active, they had boards that met regularly, and they had dues-paying members. All of them sent a representative to the federation meetings, and most of these representatives actually showed up every week. In 1994, all except one were men.

For a federation to hold a general meeting of representatives every week was unusual. The common pattern was that only the federation board met regularly, perhaps every week, perhaps once a month, and meetings with barrio representatives were called when needed, a few times a year. The frequency depended on town size as well as degree of federation activity.

In Elda, barrio representatives had a minimum of two evening meetings each week (in the federation and in their home association) and sometimes more. That could be construed as one reason for women not to be able to be barrio representatives. On the other hand, a women's committee had just been formed, and it planned to meet once a week, too, so those women did not feel that two meetings a week was too much time away from home.

All the Elda associations except one or two had their own premises. The federation premises were a large storefront divided into four areas, plus the toilet. Entrance was directly to the main meeting room which occupied about two thirds of the space. Opposite the door was a slightly raised area with an imposing desk and five or six comfortable chairs. A piano stood to one side. This was where the board members sat during the meetings. On the wall was a large blackboard, used mostly during the language classes that were also held here. (I imagine the room might have been a school earlier.)

Along the walls stood a generous collection of folding wooden chairs. Each participant in a meeting would take one, and then refold and replace it before leaving; this was a common system throughout the movement. The walls were covered with the usual posters and a few newspaper clippings. In one corner stood the Xerox machine and a metal cupboard. On the wall behind the raised area hung a banner with the federation emblem, the high-heeled shoe.

To the left of the entrance was the office. It was crowded with furniture, leaving little standing room. Behind the desk were a fax and a small table with a typewriter and a telephone. A conscientious objector worked here every morning, from nine to two. He was in charge of opening and filing correspondence, sometimes answering it after consultation with board members, he answered the phone and took messages, and he read the newspapers and arranged the clippings in folders. This was what conscientious objectors working in the movement usually did. Unlike most of them, however, the one in Elda also participated in the meetings and took some decisions of his...
own. He had become an enthusiast and planned to become an activist in his barrio after his time of service.

Beyond the big meeting room was a smaller room called the library. It had a couple of bookcases, and perhaps two dozen books, plus the archives of the federation. It also had a big round table with chairs around it. The board usually met there.

The weekly federation meetings began at 10:30 in the evening. When I asked why so late, the answer from the men was unanimous: "Here in Elda we all work! We can't come earlier!" I rebutted that if you get home after one o'clock at night, it is hard to get up at seven. They laughed and said that since you have to get up, that is always easier.

Commenting on this with some women, they were also unanimous: "If they asked their wives, they would get a different answer! They want us to fix dinner and put the kids to bed while they are out." The women definitely felt that such late hours constituted an obstacle for women's participation.

**Issues on the agenda**

There were no burning issues between the movement and the local government when I was in Elda. In each association, there were minor complaints that the association had recently brought or was about to bring to the attention of Town Hall, but they were all of the kind that everyone expected to be easily solved: deficient street lighting, careless garbage handling and consequent increase in the rat population, some closed-down factory building that smelled bad because garbage had accumulated inside and the owners refused to clean, etc.

Town Hall had just proposed a set of regulations for citizens' participation that had been discussed with representatives of the movement before they had been presented to the public, so although they were now being discussed in larger meetings, no difficulties were expected to come up. PSOE people of the movement and of Town Hall alike were convinced that an important step towards participatory democracy had been taken; IU-sympathizers were skeptical but not openly opposed.

There were two substantial political conflicts in Elda at this time. The movement was not directly involved in either one, but the federation was a recognized place to air arguments and look for support. One of these conflicts concerned the bakers, the other a proposed piece of freeway.

**The bakers**

The making of bread in Spain can be said to be in transition from artisan to industrial methods, and the same goes for the selling of it. Bread used to be a staple, and it is still a charged symbol with a strong material grounding. Working-class families still eat more bread than others, for reasons of both economy and tradition.

Elda had too many bakers for its size, so all the bakers had small stores and limited sales volumes. They pointed to this fact to explain why bread in Elda was more expensive than in other towns. The consumers did not accept that as a good reason.

Recently a couple of big supermarket chains had opened stores in Elda, and they sold bread at a lower price. Since most families buy bread everyday, this was a good lure to attract customers. Besides the lower price, they sold the (industry-made) bread wrapped in plastic. The association of housewives of Elda asked the association of (artisan) bakers to wrap their bread, too, and to lower the price, or at the very least one of the two. The bakers went to the press to try to explain their point of view, but this only made matters worse. It looked as if the bakers were prepared to prevent the sale of bread at a lower price by all means. There were reports that they had bought up all the bread at one of the supermarkets. They denied this and accused the neighborhood movement of rumor mongering.

The movement then also went to the press, explaining why "ordinary people" had to think of the difference in price and therefore buy where the bread, their main food, was cheapest, and the issue of wrapping was an issue of public health that Town Hall ought to look into.
The bakers' association responded that the neighborhood movement was only interested in defending the "needy", and they, the bakers, were prepared to cease production for a period of time in order to prove that the supermarkets were unable to provide Elda with enough bread. Now public opinion was incensed. The remark about the "needy" was interpreted as an insult against the working class, and the talk of a "business strike" was interpreted as a dangerous threat against democracy and against the provisioning of basic food.

The situation was judged serious enough by the bakers themselves for them to ask for a hearing with the movement. The federation agreed. A date was set for an open meeting. Three bakers came, including the president of their association. The usual representatives of barrio associations represented the movement. As far as I could tell no other interested persons had shown up. The meeting was tense and deteriorated for quite a while to mutual insults along clear class lines. But little by little feelings cooled. It was accepted with relief that the bakers actually declared, unambiguously and in public, that they would not deprive Elda of bread. The insult, "the political offense", which had been repeated in a letter to the federation, was to be filed (the bakers seemed to interpret this as a sanction but one they could live with), but no public excuse was to be asked for, since it was evident that the bakers had not understood the feelings the words would awaken. It was made clear that the bakers would make no further remarks or take any steps to stop people from buying bread where they wished. The bakers and the movement people agreed that they were all in favor of "free enterprise."

Behind this apparently rather pointless discussion were some events that were only hinted at during the meeting. Some artisan bakers had apparently lowered their prices in order to compete with the supermarkets. The bakers' association had tried to stop this with threats and even some actual violence, and the bakers in question had relented and gone back to the higher price. What really happened at the meeting was that the movement told the bakers that it would not accept that they act as a price-fixing cartel in Elda, and the bakers promised that they would not. The bakers met the movement, felt the temperature of public opinion and decided not to enter a war that they would probably lose. Having taken the initiative for the meeting, they could retreat with no loss of face, and the movement decided to allow them that.

The bakers were clearly reminded that even in friendly Elda, classes exist, and if entrepreneurs act in their own collective interest, so will the working class. If peace is kept, on the other hand, all will agree to accept "free enterprise."

The freeway access

A similar meeting was arranged around a conflict that had come up around the construction of a new link between the town and the main road from Alicante to Madrid. Inevitably, some private property would have to be expropriated. The people threatened with expropriation quickly formed a coordinadora to defend their interests. It was closely tied to the conservative party, because most of the property threatened were summer houses owned by well-to-do Eldenses and the PP party saw an opportunity to accuse the PSOE Town Hall of ruthlessness and some democratic misses.

Again, the neighborhood movement had nothing to do with the issue directly. It was even less so than in the case of the bakers, where at least some general working class interests were at stake. The federation would probably not have done anything, if the coordinadora had not, just like the bakers, asked for a meeting to explain their point of view. They felt the movement owed them a hearing, since Town Hall had been allowed to send an expert to the Federation to explain the details of the construction of the freeway access.

Again an open meeting was arranged. This time the atmosphere of the meeting was restrained. Most of the arguments were about economic issues. There was some reference to "scenic landscape" but otherwise the ecological angle was absent. The hearing ended with polite

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14 All of this had happened before I arrived in Elda. I was told about it, and I read all the newspaper clippings and letters the federation had filed. At the meeting, I was present.

15 Again, one is reminded of the so-called Swedish model of inter-class peacekeeping through negotiations.
assurances from both sides that it had been a good opportunity to listen to each other. There were smiles and greetings.

Whatever the motivations and true strategies behind the scenes, what this goes to show is that the neighborhood movement was a political factor with which the political parties had to count. We can also see that local characteristics of the movement made it a different kind of political factor in different places. In Elda, the movement was a mediator, a facilitator of dialogues. As the president said, "We talk to everyone, we listen politely, and often, once the parties in whatever conflict have talked to us, presto, there is no more conflict!"

**Women's participation in the Elda movement**

Women had been prominent in the neighborhood movement in Elda from the start, and they still were. However, they had been mostly rank-and-file. Very active, very much present, but leaving the leading positions to the men. This was still so in 1994, with few exceptions. Gender issues were not on the general agenda, and those few who were interested did not seem to have a clear mind about what to do.

**Women in barrio associations**

The situation of women's participation in the associations I visited in Elda was as follows:

Almost all of the associations counted membership by family, not by individual, so it was impossible to ascertain the number of women and men who were members. In Elda as elsewhere, this membership by family was contested by some, but most people did not consider the issue important.

Among the activists, the common proportion seemed to be about one third women. In a couple of associations, there were women presidents.

When visiting an association, I always asked how many of the women present also had their husbands present. The reaction was usually some uncomfortable laughs and jokes. My question was interpreted as some sort of accusation. According to the progressive discourse, women should no longer follow their husbands but construct independent trajectories, in politics as elsewhere. But that was evidently not the common practice. According to a more common discourse, also interpreted as "modern", it is a good thing for a couple to do things together; to do different things is not autonomy but old-fashioned lack of couple togetherness and old-fashioned categorization of life into men's and women's sectors. In other words, the "progressive" discourse compares the present state of affairs with a possible future gender order of greater individual autonomy, while the "modern" discourse compares it with the recent past in which the centrifugal force of gender was stronger than the centripetal force of "the couple". In the case of the most "conservative" associations, it seemed to be more the rule than the exception that the women were present because their husbands were. The reaction to my question would then be to argue that it was only fair to "let" the wife come to the association, too; why shouldn't she, if she enjoyed it as much as the husband? In all associations, some of the activists were married couples; others were married men whose wives were not active. It was much less common, but possible, for a married woman to be active even when her husband was not. There were few single women, because most women in Elda were married.

In one association there was not a single active woman. The male board members shrugged and said they did not know why this was so, they did not discriminate, they thought that perhaps women were just not interested, or perhaps they were just smart, preferring to have the men do all the work! Some non-active women who had come to the meeting in order to hear about my project said they thought the reason was that women have no time and that they are too ignorant and that some husbands do not like them to go to meetings. The men present opposed these reasons, humorously, joking about how much they "helped" at home, and arguing, more seriously, that they too had little schooling, it was more a question of having a little go, daring to do things anyway. By implication: women have less "go".
Women in the federation

At the level of the federation, there was only one woman representative (out of seventeen), and there was no woman on the board. The women's commission was headed by a woman, of course, but this did not earn her a place on the federation board.

However, this was not decisive for her possibilities of action. Actually, her situation was illustrative. Two facts gave her real power in spite of lack of formal power, and perhaps lack of formal power was even the condition for her having real power.

First, the movement was far from formalistic. If she at any moment should decide that she wanted to take part in the federation board meetings I am sure she could, informally, and if a change in statutes were deemed necessary she could probably obtain that too. The weekly federation meetings of representatives were in principle open to everyone, so that was no problem. If she had wanted to (or had had the time!) she could clearly have played a much more visible and energetic role. She was visible and energetic as it was, but she could have been more so without upsetting any patterns.

Second, she was married to the federation president. This fact obviously gave her more possibilities to act, and much more information than she would otherwise have in any formal role of her own. It might also explain her predilection for working behind the scenes. She could be very effective there, and had she acted more openly, it might have been bad for her husband's image. Furthermore, since they had a child, it was difficult for both of them to be equally active. They could not afford a regular baby-sitter, so they could seldom go to meetings at the same time.

Finally, it was of course no coincidence that it was the wife, not the husband, who chose to adjust her public life in order to assure the smooth running of private life. This gender pattern stood out in this case, because it contradicted the individual circumstances: the husband admitted that he had first learned about politics from his wife, who had been much more active in her youth than he had; in spite of this, with time, he took on a more visible political role and she stood back.

Summing up, the presence of women at the level of the federation was minimal, in Elda as elsewhere.

The women's commission

The women's commission had been formed several years earlier. It had not been able to be very effective so far, the leaders said, but now they felt the time had come when it would be possible to do things. For one thing, there was support from above: the CAVE women's structure and the special subsidies for women's associations. Second, they themselves had traveled to women's congresses within the movement, they had learned, they had new ideas. Third, the men in Elda, at least most movement activists, were beginning to understand enough about gender issues to accept them as legitimate; they would not openly place obstacles in their path. Fourth, more women were becoming active in the barrio associations, which meant more women could be reached with messages about gender issues.

What gender issues? The women of the commission were not sure about that. They asked me to give them a lecture on feminist theory. They talked about other lectures they had listened to. They said they did not think Elda women were "prepared" for "advanced feminist work". They always notified all the barrio associations of their meetings, but there were several as-sociations that never sent anyone. "They are just beginning to have women on the board, they are getting used to things, learning about the movement and so on, so this thing then... it's a size or two too big for them... they'll come when they are ready..."

The commission consisted of ten or twelve women who participated more or less regularly. The only formal post was that of president.

They met irregularly for the time being, saying there was a lack of time. But there was also quite obviously a lack of clear objectives. They envisioned as a main objective "to make women understand that it is not enough to work with what the men find important. Women have specific problems. It is not a matter of being against men, we want to be at their side, but women have a harder time in life, and there are things men just cannot see..." This sounded just right, it was the
discourse heard at statewide women's congresses. But the Elda women could give no examples. They thought they might invite a lecturer once in a while, and "we have to talk among ourselves, find out where we are, learn..."

To begin with they had organized a course in dressmaking. They were proud of that, but they were aware that it might not be an orthodox feminist idea. Other women's groups had criticized them, saying that sewing was part of "the traditional women's role" and should therefore not be encouraged. They defended themselves, saying that they did not think there was anything "natural" in women making clothes, men could do it just as well if they tried – so why shouldn't women also do it, if they want to and if there are good practical reasons?

The idea came up because some women were out of work or getting smaller quotas of shoes. Others were sick and tired of leather. And all were worried about the future. "If there is going to be less and less work with shoes, we have to find something else." They added that what they did was proof of women's pragmatism and the need for a women's commission. "The men would never have thought of organizing a thing like that for women! They don't even organize things for themselves! They complain about unemployment, but they don't do anything practical about it."

They thought that sewing was a good idea, because most of them had some notions from childhood, and it would be easy to learn, "after all, we are all used to sewing machines". Dressmaking could be a marketable skill in Elda because of the great annual fiesta of "Moors and Christians" and some minor fiestas that also required people to wear fancy dress. Nowadays everybody who could afford it bought the outfits, because they were difficult to make. Few people in Elda knew how to make them, so they were ordered from other places. The women who had the idea thought that if they first learnt to make fancy dresses, they could then start a business together, as a cooperative.

To launch a course, they had to find subsidies. They wanted a salary, too; they had heard that some unemployed men were paid for participating in a carpentry course organized by the state employment agency. That had been true, but the men no longer got any money either. It took the group three years to find out where there was money and how to apply and how to adapt their applications so that they would fit the requirements.

Finally they obtained money from the employment agency for rent, material and one teacher's salary for one year. They were required to open up the course for "anyone", not just their own group. Over forty women applied, they accepted thirty, but in the end, because there was no salary, only sixteen participated regularly. The course ran for four hours five mornings a week, "and four hours a day in the course means four hours a day you are not making shoes, and even if things are bad in the shoe industry now, there is always some work, so for some women it was just not possible (to lose that money)."

All those who participated continued making shoes in the afternoon. And doing domestic chores, one must assume. And some of them being very active in the movement.

A specifically feminist approach to movement activism was less evident in Elda than in the other places I visited, since the active women did not see an urgent need. They thought they were already "very liberated", and their historically rooted gender ideas told them that their working for money gave them strong identities and real power over their own lives. When directly asked to compare women's and men's vital possibilities they did complain about gendered injustices, but they mostly trusted time, "evolution", to bring about improvement.

**Elda women and their work**

The best picture of women's situation and discourses in Elda came out of my first meeting with the women's commission. Ten women came and we talked for over two hours.  

The main thing they said I needed to understand was that women in Elda were special. "We have always worked. So when we travel to meetings with women from other parts of Spain, we are amazed at their complaints. Husbands who will not let wives go to meetings, association boards
that will not allow women in... Here in Elda, we have evolved far beyond all that!" The reason they had "evolved", they thought, was their tradition of economic independence. Contributing a substantial portion of family income, Elda women are used to having a say. Sure Elda husbands, too, sometimes disapprove of their wives' staying out late for meetings, having political opinions, being better known in the neighborhood than the husbands... But they cannot do anything about it! Elda women do not let themselves be oppressed!

The phrase that had disturbed the women most at the congresses was the ubiquitous one about how women must be brought out of the home. "What is that? We have always gone out! What is new about that?!"

This said, however, they admitted that there were problems in Elda, too. They complained in the guise of personal anecdotes with lots of detail, laughter and irony, and almost no noticeable bitterness – but they were complaints.

One woman said her husband was very jealous. He would really like to forbid her to participate in the association, but he thought he could not, because he was very active in another kind of association himself and he did not want to be unfair. But he wanted to be sure she really goes to a meeting, when she goes out. "If there is no written notification, he won't believe it! 'How can I know where you are?' he says. So even though there are only four of us on the board of my association, and we all live real close, so we give each other notice (of the meetings) in person, the others still have to make a written notification for me!"

Another woman said her husband was completely against her activities, and he still could not believe she was "qualified" – after seven years as an activist! True, she had never gone to school, but she explained, "If I have to write a letter to the mayor, there are people I can ask for advice!"

Of course, they all had to prepare dinner and put the children to bed before they could go to a meeting. I said it seemed to me as if Elda women were indeed very liberated, but that they got no help with domestic chores, even though they worked for money as much as the men. So, wouldn't that be an obvious theme for the women's commission, to campaign for a more balanced distribution of household tasks? "You must be exhausted!" I said, and they all laughed, sure, we are super-women, that much is clear... Now they told anecdotes about husbands who complain that the wives have not finished the daily quota of shoes, and how men do not realize that there may be waiting time in the stores, the kids break things or fight each other, there are a million things every day... But now the women were not complaining, they were telling heroines' stories. How they coped. How strong they were. How good they were at organizing the household and simplifying tasks. "Buying the bread takes no time, I send the kids, and that is the only thing I shop for every day. We take the car and go to the supermarket on Saturdays, the whole family."

"My mother cooks for us twice a week." "My oldest daughter is studying at university and we pay for that, so she thinks she should help, she does almost all the cleaning and some of the cooking."

Their acceptance and pride must be seen against the broad and deep identification of womanhood with "the home" in Spain. Spanish feminists say that as long as women really feel, deep down, that their identity and personal worth are directly proportional to the shine of their floors, real equality cannot be attained. True, nowadays, women all over the country, of all social classes, excepting only the most conservative-minded, say that they want husbands to "help". A lot of women have experience of work outside the home and the consequent frustration and exhaustion, so they insist strongly on a new distribution of tasks. But at the same time, many tend to feel deeply disturbed if a child turns to its father instead of its mother to ask for a snack, if a man disputes his wife's choice of butcher with expert arguments about freshness of meat, and so on. They do want household tasks to be distributed in new ways, but they are not arguing that no tasks at all should be gender specified. What feminists find dangerous is the strength of women's identification with the "home" because it makes it difficult for them to accept changes that objectively, and even subjectively, mean improvement. In other words, the cultural identification of women with home and family translates into a deep personal identification that makes radical change difficult.

Elda women were right, I believe, in feeling that their economic contribution gave them more power inside the family than the mere traditional prestige of Mother/ Wife/ Housewife. This belief in itself gave them psychological strength, too. But they had not been reached to any great
degree by feminist arguments around the issue of distribution of tasks. They had heard the feminist criticism of "super-woman" (that English word was often used in Spanish debates). But when they applied it to themselves, they could not help but feeling proud. They were Shoemakers, but they were also, and in a much deeper sense, Mothers/ Wives/ Housewives/ Real Women. The word "help" is the key. Earning money is gendered as a male task, doing housework as a female one. If you cross this line, what you do is "help", independently of objective time and effort. This, of course, is what gives husbands the moral authority to criticize wives who make fewer shoes than their quota. The wife is only "helping", so the husband has to make up for whatever she does not do, in a mirror image of domestic duties, where a husband may help but a wife has to do the rest. Each one helps in one area and has the final responsibility for the other area; each one wants more help and each one has authority to ask for it and also authority to complain when not enough help is forthcoming. And each one feels free to cut down on the "help" given to the other, if there is a lot to do in one's own area.

Perhaps the women made fewer shoes than they thought. They said that if household tasks pile up, one way out is always to make fewer shoes that day. "Since they pay by the piece, it makes no difference to the company."

I asked how many of them were now making shoes in their homes. "All of us!" they answered in unison. Then it turned out there were exceptions. In the group of ten, one worked in a shoe factory, two cleaned offices, one was a "baby-sitter in a private home" (probably a euphemism for part-time maid). But all of these four, too, had made shoes at home at one time or another of their lives.

One thing they did complain bitterly about was isolation. They felt lonely. Most of them had worked in a factory before getting married. But with the home and the husband and above all the children, it was not feasible, so they switched to working at home. But that was much more difficult and tedious. It was not just all the interruptions, they confessed, it also happened sometimes that they did not feel like working. "When you work in a factory, you have work-mates, you talk, you take a break to smoke... At home there is no one to talk to while you work, and I have to get up at six in the morning to finish my day's quota, sometimes I am so sleepy I just cannot keep up the pace..."

They all agreed, too, that work in a factory is less tiresome physically, maybe because of the machinery, maybe because of the company, maybe because you can concentrate... "At the end of the day you are not anywhere near as tired!!"

One woman had refused to switch when she got married. "I told my husband, OK, I'll help, I'll earn money, too, but on one condition: it must be in a factory. The same conditions as he has! If I have to sit alone in my home, then I want to be a real housewife; in that case I refuse to work! He had to choose!" 17 He chose the factory, and he did help "some" with housework. Luckily, her mother helped with the kids during the day, she said. 18

In view of the statistics on earnings in Elda, one would think that the women worked because the household economy required it. But they all said that Elda women work mainly in order to have "a ship-shape home". (I heard lawyers, teachers and social workers say the same thing.) That means a lot in Elda, they said. Women compete with each other for having the latest in furni-

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17 It is possible that this woman was really a rebel, that she saw her relationship to her husband as one of a measuring of strength, and that her strong personality made her husband accept her conditions. But it must be taken into account that such an image is culturally prescribed in Spain. One's self is supposed to be strong, independent, rebellious, and one should present oneself as victorious in everyday encounters. I have called this self-affirmation (Thurén 1988). It is an ideal, an image of the desired personality, a disposition. As such it has consequences for real behavior, but self-descriptions usually come closer to the ideal image than to reality. It is quite possible that her husband, talking to his friends, told the story in terms of his forcing his wife to go to work, even though she had wanted him to maintain her as a lazy housewife. And it is probable that in fact neither of them tried to bully the other one at all. What is important here is that she used this self-description (so "normal" that none of the others reacted) in order to emphasize the main point she and the others wanted to stress: that factory work is preferable to home work.

18 It must be remembered that there are few daycare facilities in Spain, and almost all are private. In Elda, there was nothing that these women could afford. In other words, a grandmother who baby-sits is the sine qua non for factory work for a mother of small children.
ture, the most in kitchen equipment... And they said that what the men earn is considered the sus-
stenance of the family, so whatever the women earn is for extras. Above all for the home.

One can read these statements as strategies for legitimating women's working for money in
terms of the "traditional" gender order, which requires differentiation and hierarchy. The legitimat-
ing argument would be: yes, undeniably some women do not dedicate themselves exclusively to "the home", as they should, but they are still "of the home", because they comply with their duties in the home, and the money they earn is for the home; men continue to be "of the street" much more than women, because their money is of a different and more important kind, it represents survival, security and future. Women's earnings constitute only "help".

This wording is mine; I heard nobody express it in such a way. The women of the commission did not explicitly make the traditional home-street interpretation of the division of responsibilities. Neither did they criticize it, however. They felt that it was "true" that women's earnings were spent on extras, and that this was because "most women" were "too" interested in competing among themselves. They said this with slight disdain. Presumably they did not include themselves among "most women". Yet, they were adamant that "all women in Elda" are independent-minded because of their earning capacity.

Coming back to the common idea (in the rest of Spain) that women have to get out of the home, they said that it could not be a goal in itself. You have to get out, sure, but for something. To do or to learn something. They described the process of becoming active not so much as one of "leaving the home" but as a process of individual learning in which gender did not make much of a difference.

My conclusion was that the women in the Elda movement had learnt a discourse of emanci-
pation, and they were truly proud of their earning capacity and the clout it gave them in family life. But they did not have a clear idea of their structural place in society, and they had few cultural tools for analyzing it. Should they manage with time to produce such an analysis, they would have little cultural or political strength to place it on the movement agenda.

And this was not because gender justice was already at hand. Women had little political power (although some), and little economic power (they earned less than the men and were more affected by the present crisis since they were more concentrated than the men in the one-crop industry, and much more concentrated than the men in the most vulnerable part of that, the domestic piece-rate work), and in spite of their incomes they did not seem to have the negotiating strength inside their families to obtain an equitable distribution of tasks between husband and wife.

Yet they subscribed firmly to the "progressive" discourse that has been dominant in non-
conservative circles in Spain at least since the Transition (cf. Thurén 1988). They believed in " jus-
tice" and "equality" and "democracy", and they were convinced that such words had concrete corre-
spondences in reality. They also believed firmly in the good effects of education. An educated per-
son will automatically see the light, sooner or later, they thought, and time works in favor of "pro-
gressive" standpoints. Change, progress, evolution and improvement are near-synonymous terms in this discourse. For example, when they compared themselves to women of other parts, they ex-
pressed their superiority in terms of evolution. "Here in Elda, we have evolved far beyond that!"

According to this discourse, then, things will improve with time unless something hinders evolution. Since justice and equality will evolve, and since the women did consider the burden of work unfair, one must conclude that they thought their husbands would soon start doing a fair share of domestic tasks. But they avoided talking about that. It was painful. Reality did not confirm their faith in progress on this point. In individual interviews, there were hints about how some women tried and had to give up or risk their marriages.19

19 This is a general phenomenon; it coincides with my observations in previous studies. (Thurén 1987, 1988 and forthcoming) "Progressive" women in Spain are forced into a dilemma. The hegemonic discourse of family life as basic to happiness, makes them relinquish some of their own aspirations rather than risk their marriage. And this same discourse places their aspirations on a collision course with what husbands, kin, neighbors and other important others expect from a "normal" woman and a good life. On the other hand, the discourse of "progressivity" is also very strong. So the women are truly frustrated. Rates of divorce and domestic violence are escalating. I predicted this in 1988, based on fieldwork in 1982 and 1983. I am sad to say that the tensions in the urban Spanish gender order have not abated. The fact that most people think that "women are now equal " makes a critical understanding all the more difficult.
There was some talk of "young families" in which the men "help a lot", but I wonder how important this new trend was, since I was given no concrete example. Young age in itself was no solution. Many of the women in the movement who complained about their having to be superwomen and some of those who complained that their husbands even opposed their activism were only around 30 years old.

A wide conceptualization of "home"

In the early days of the movement, Elda women were probably more identified with "the home" than they were in 1994, even though they may have worked in factories much more then than they did when I met them. But even in 1994 they were in charge of "private" life in a way men were not. If we forget for a moment about the most active women (the ones in the women's commission) and focus on the average Elda women active in barrio associations, their discourse was very much about working for the good of the family and the good of the barrio, without really distinguishing between the two.

As such women saw it, the issues of the neighborhood movement were "private" issues, and to fight for them ought not to be exceptionable or objectionable since it was related to women's usual activities. Not all non-active women in their barrios agreed, however. The active women knew that a lot of people, men and women neighbors, relatives and friends, criticized them, seeing them as indecent or untrustworthy women, because they broke central norms of the gender order. It looked as if the activist women invalidated the home : street dichotomy. But they usually answered the criticism more in terms of the home : street analogy than in terms of the progressive discourse. They might say that a woman has a right to be more than a mother, a right to think of herself, a right to "learn", "develop" and "realize herself." But they would stress that that does not mean you cannot be a good mother too.

According to them, to be a good mother includes giving a good education to your children, and that includes not just what you do at home but also sending them to school and helping them with schoolwork. And if there is no school for them to go to, it includes doing whatever you can in order to procure a school. To be a good mother similarly includes worrying about heavy traffic on the streets your children have to cross, about places for them to play outdoors, about clean water for them to drink, about access to health care, and so on. To be a good housewife includes caring about the prices of food and therefore, by extension, about how food is handled and sold and how much time you have to spend to obtain food and other necessities at the lowest possible price.

People opposed to women's activism usually said that a woman who spends too much time in meetings cannot take sufficiently good care of her home and children. Such criticism could come up within the neighborhood movement itself, too. But it could easily be countered with arguments about necessity and the good of the children, and it could be delegitimized as envy, rigidity, stupidity, and reactionary traditionalism.

The issue of women's autonomy, power and freedom of movement was more difficult. To be a good wife included not doing things that might make your husband look ridiculous, such as having more visibility or even power in the public sphere than he did, or opposing his expressed wishes.

It was generally accepted that women had more power than their husbands in family matters, and that was logical according to the home : street metaphor, as well as according to the "lioness" image of the good mother. But since the hierarchy between the genders had to be upheld, according to the traditional gender order, women's de facto power introduced a contradiction and must always be handled with care (jokes, exaggerations, denials and practical rebellions). Thus, a woman who does not conceal her de facto "home" power is not quite playing by the rules, and a woman who occupies a formal post of power in the "street" is overturning the whole game. Which may be fine and great, just what both she and her husband want, since the game is so widely and deeply questioned today, but it may also be utterly uncomfortable for her husband, affecting his standing among his peers, and therefore also negative for the wife.

This description might be labeled "traditional" or "old-fashioned" and therefore "unacceptable" and even "untrue" by most Eldenses who considered themselves progressives. But in my dis-
cussions with Eldense women about the possible reasons and obstacles for their participation, these "old" ideas were the ones that came up, again and again. The ideas and the feelings were still there, even though they had been delegitimized in public discourse and in the private world-views of many, perhaps a majority. In Bourdieuan terminology, they constituted a case of hysteresis, of basic patterns in the habitus that had not (yet) adapted to new circumstances and new discourses.

Eight years later

My return visit to Elda in 2002 was both happy and sad. On a personal level it was beautiful, I was received as an old friend, and I enjoyed experiencing once again the easygoing atmosphere of this town. From the perspective of the study, the visit was useful in that it confirmed most of my earlier observations. The movement still had political clout in town life, and most of the activists I had met in 1994 were still around. There were now 19 federated associations.

But unfortunately some of the reasonability and accomplished negotiating skills of the movement activists had been sorely stretched and partly broken. A serious conflict had broken out. It followed party lines, but perhaps it was mostly personal, perhaps economic, perhaps it grew out of different interpretations of complex legal and bureaucratic matters. It also seemed to have something to do with different visions of what the neighborhood movement should become in the long run, but this was far from the main point. I do not want to try to describe this conflict, since I do not have enough information. I heard long narratives from both sides, but I did not have the time to check facts. The federation in Elda had apparently participated in bringing about a vote of censure against the municipal government, when it was in conservative hands for a while, and that may have precipitated disruptive efforts. But there may also have been mistakes committed by the federation, e.g. lax handling of money matters. Which is a long-standing characteristic of the movement, largely brought about by the forms in which subsidies are granted, and of course such circumstances make the movement vulnerable if someone wants to hurt it. So there may have been some truth in the arguments of both sides. In politics one must protect one's flanks, and the grass roots of the neighborhood movement are not always adept at that.

The majority side in the Elda movement expressed certainty that the whole thing was a concerted effort by conservatives to destroy the movement, but what really hurt was that some leftists and movement activists had joined them. Whatever the reasons, and whatever the exact events, what was evident was that a lot of people had suffered on a personal level. Activists on both sides in the conflict were feeling hurt, misunderstood, insulted. Some of the leaders had been reviled in local media. There had even been criminal charges and economic consequences for some individuals.

To make an effort to be optimistic in spite of everything, one could say that it was quite a feat that the movement was still functioning, in the midst of the violent confrontations and plentiful personal disappointments. One could also say that a pitched battle for power over a neighborhood federation proves that the movement is still an important actor in the political field.

But mostly the whole thing made me sad, and all the local activists I talked to, on both sides, were also sad.

The federation premises were the same ones, with some improved furnishings. The wooden chairs had been replaced with plastic ones that were more comfortable and less noisy. The main improvement was an air-conditioning-and-heating unit. A part-time secretary had just been employed.

Economically, the town seemed to be trudging along much like before. Shoes can be made cheaper in other countries, but Elda shoe manufacturing was surviving thanks to quality, I was told with the same old Elda pride. However, some companies now placed part of the production abroad, in Morocco for example. Conditions were bad, most people did not have social security, and there was work but not enough. The workers were afraid to complain, and the unions could do little to avoid abuses. "There is a line in the street, as it were, of people who want to work, so if someone complains, good-bye to him, next please!" One woman told her own story as an example: She was lucky to have been employed in a factory; she no longer had to work at home as she used to do. She even had some social security, but she was on paper as working half time, even though she actually worked full time. "It used to be that some had social security and others had none, so then the com-
pany proposed this solution, that we would all get some, but only half of what we actually should have."

The women in the dressmaking course had managed to start the cooperative business they had envisioned, but it had not been economically viable. They had then tried to convert it into a cooperative for shoe making, but that had not worked out either.

The women's commission had become an association of neighborhood women, only one for all of Elda. There were only a few women active in it, so they had not been able to do very much, they said, but they did obtain some state grants. They had celebrated the 8th of March and they had participated in the municipal women's council, which they had also worked to bring about. The most important activity was courses. "We work for getting women out of the home, but through education. So that is the main objective, education. We have done courses in computer use, how to organize an association, consumers' issues, films..." Men could participate in the courses, too, if they wanted to. But many courses were about "things that men usually know more about than women, such as urban planning, and we want women to be able to work with such issues, too."

The leading women felt that there was not much of a difference between the women's association and the federation. One said that it was more effective to work with women's issues through the municipal women's council than through the women's association. Another said that the women's association and the federation continually lent each other money. There was no sign of the tensions between federation and women's association that were so very much present in some of the other places. The leading women in the women's association were federation leaders, too.

My question about relations with feminist groups got no answer; perhaps there were no feminist groups in Elda.

I asked a group of women, assembled ad hoc to talk to me, if they agreed with my interpretation that one reason women are respected in the neighborhood associations is that they know their barrios better than the men. I said that perhaps that was not true in Elda, where almost all women work. Oh yes, they said, "that is so in Elda, too, because the men go to the bar, they don't worry as much about the barrio. Women care more about the barrio. We don't value the same things. Men go more for politics."

There was a discussion about the backgrounds of the most active women. A couple of them had been union representatives at their work places, but that was just because Elda was Elda, they argued, that is not common in the movement as a whole. A couple of younger women also mentioned that they had been class representatives in school and felt that that was what had given them their first taste of political activity, but the older ones reminded them that that could only be true of certain age groups, since there was no school democracy during Franco times.

Unlike most of the other places, Elda women pronounced the word politics without shyness and many of the most active ones were also members of some political party (usually the PSOE). Others said the usual things about enjoying the convivencia and about women not going into politics not because they are shy or lazy but because they are more responsible than the men, they want to learn first, to be sure to do everything just right.

When I asked about the most important changes in women's participation since 1994, they said that there were now more women at all levels, that women in general were more integrated in the movement now and men listened to their opinions.

One elderly woman said she had begun to participate recently and she was happy she had, her life had changed for the better. But she also felt bad because she neglected her family. The younger women laughed: "What family!? You are a widow and your children are all adult!" The woman said that her brother was ill, and she had too little time to be with him, and she had grandchildren... The others said that time is a matter of organization, there is time for everything if you just make up your mind. There was tension in the air, as if the very idea that there might not be time for everything was a threat.

After the meeting one woman volunteered to describe her daily rhythm: She worked eleven hours a day, except on Friday, when she worked only five hours. She would have liked to work less, but she did not protest, because she had been lucky to get a job in a factory, she did not want to lose that and have to go back to working in her home. She would get up at six in the morning, get dressed and set a pot of vegetables to cook. At eight she had to be in the factory, she would get out
at one, go home, heat the vegetables and fry some slices of meat, something quick. Her two children were of school age, they bought the bread. The family had lunch together, and then she would go back to the factory and work from 3 to 9. After that she usually had some meeting; she tried to grab a bite before going out again. She would get home around midnight or at one or two... Her children made their own beds, that was all. Her husband did not help much, she said, but he had been improving lately. Friday afternoon, when she did not work in the factory, was the time for all the shopping for food, clothes and so on. (And cleaning house and washing clothes, I suppose, but she did not mention that.) On Saturdays she had some time to be with the family, if there was no movement meeting in Valencia or Madrid that she was supposed to travel to. Her husband complained that she was never at home, but on Sundays they often had a family picnic or visited his or her parents. She told me all of this with pride and a sense of humor, saying she had no need to sleep more, she felt in good health, just a bit tired sometimes, but who isn't, and in general she felt stimulated, very energetic. "That is my life." And indeed she looked like a happy woman, full of laughs, and proud of her "career" in the movement.

In the federation meetings I went to, there were now four women and between twelve and fourteen men, i.e. a slightly better gender balance than eight years earlier. To judge from what the barrio representatives reported about their associations, much the same thing had happened at that level: in some barrios there were now almost equal numbers of women and men activists, in almost all there were at least a few women, but in most only men held elected positions, and some of the representatives argued – just like eight years earlier – that the reason for this was that women did not want to take on responsibility. The president of the women's commission agreed that this was true. But she stressed that it was due to education, not innate laziness.

The former federation president (who was no longer president but still a key figure) felt that the gender composition had hardly changed at all. "You can update your study very easily, everything is practically the same as eight years ago. There has always been about 25–30% women in the movement in Elda, and that is still so. There have always been about four associations with women presidents, and that is what we have now, too. And those are women who take their commitment seriously. At the latest general assembly there were about 100 persons present, because each association could send five delegates, and there were over forty women." (The quote is approximate, from notes.)

He said this in a federation meeting that was dedicated to my study. One woman protested that women still suffered from a lack of time due to their double working day. This caused lots of jokes the butt of which was her husband, who was present. He and two or three other men admitted that they did not "help" as much as they should at home. Other men said that women have to convince themselves that they can do things, it is a matter of trying and learning, you cannot know if you do not try, "nobody is born with knowledge." Others countered that many women come and work for a while but then they quit. Again the message "women have less go" vibrated between the lines. The men were visibly uncomfortable with the topic, and when one woman shouted angrily that no man wakes up in the morning wondering what to cook for the midday meal, another shouted back that no woman woke up in the morning wondering how to pay all the bills before the end of the month, whereupon another woman accused him of being stuck in the stone age. But most of the men made efforts to give me examples of committed and courageous women they knew. That was clearly the acceptable thing to say now, even if there was some slippage and uncertainty.

In the end the discussion veered toward one problem on which women and men could easily agree: there is too much individualism, too much political apathy or resignation, too little solidarity, most movement activists have been around for many years, that is fine, but there ought to be more new ones, younger ones...

When I said, as I always did during the revisits in 2002, that perhaps the movement had had its moment, perhaps it was now dying, there were strong and firm protests: No! The movement cannot die! It is stronger than ever! The movement will not disappear, because it is necessary!

The pessimism that dominated in many other places was not evident in Elda – in spite of the terrible ongoing conflict.