1.1. Crisis of a Hierarchical, Individualistic Cultural Model

1.1.1. Circuit of voices about crisis

At first, the ‘crisis’ was just one more news story, one more piece of information, one more topic of conversation in a world of news, information, and topics of conversation. Couched in the language of economists, the crisis appeared in the spring of 2007 as nothing more than an ‘expectation of a slowdown in economic growth.’ It was noted, however, that ‘the level of individual debt was very high due to mortgage rates’ and that ‘the real estate market had cooled.’¹ The following year, surveys and newspapers confirmed the bad news: ‘63% of Spaniards will have to limit their vacations to only one or two weeks, if that,’ ‘Spaniards Will Spend 15% Less on Seasonal Sales Due to the Economic Slowdown,’ ‘The Crisis Is Pushing Users Towards Buying Cheaper Drugs.’² Because, of course, at the beginning the crisis was already a threat to the fulfillment of individual desires in a world of individuals who seek to fulfill their desires.

From that implicit perspective on life, the media created stories that highlighted the crisis, adding information and showing its effects. They offered the life stories of young men and women who were affected by the crisis. The national newspaper El País quoted a number of them in their 2012 report ‘#Nimileuristas’ (‘not 1,000 euros’) on twenty-somethings and

thirty-somethings who earn less than €1,000 a month and are desperate for work: ‘If nobody gives me a chance, how can I get experience?’ ‘I’ve written up a new resume that says I only have a high school diploma.’ ‘I work three hours a day and earn 200 euros.’ ‘I have never turned down any kind of work’ (El País 2012).

In the wake of this growing adjustment to ‘the crisis,’ and thus to an ever more precarious job market, the big media outlets kept repeating, summer after summer, ‘This year there will be less post-vacation depression because of the crisis.’ And the three or four people interviewed on the daily news shows confirmed, ‘Having a job these days is a luxury!’ Through all these years ‘in crisis,’ the social barometer readings of the Center for Sociological Research (CIS in Spanish) have accompanied these sound bites, consistently illustrating ‘Spaniards’ greatest worries’: unemployment, always in first place and apparently insurmountable, followed by the economy, corruption, and politics jockeying fiercely for the succeeding positions. ‘Corruption Unseats the Crisis, Pushing It to Second Place,’ announced public television in 2013, sounding for all the world like an announcer trying to generate excitement at a horse race.

But not everything has been numbers and surveys: from the start, the expert information has been accompanied, as is customary, by the less technical, more ‘human’ commentary of ‘intellectuals’ and ‘opinion-makers’ who dealt in the supposed language of ‘the man on the street.’ Columnists like Javier Marías were warning us as long ago as 2006 that ‘from the perspective of el hombre vulgar,’ with whom Marías claimed to be in agreement, ‘Spain is being destroyed by the deceptions of real estate developers, mayors, sponsors of public works, and independent counselors’ (Marías 2006). From the government, highly placed politicians like the President himself made statements designed to calm these kinds of fears, at the height of a 2007 that now seems so naïve: ‘Since Spanish financial entities are international models of solvency, they are much less exposed to risks like those faced by the mortgage market in the United States.’

In harmony with the government’s reassuring and almost proud response to the threat of the crisis, there were other declarations of the legitimacy of the status quo, occasionally from the ‘cultural world.’ A case in point is an academic book published shortly thereafter with the euphoric title of Más es

5 Zapatero in an appearance with banker Emilio Botín in September 2007.
más: sociedad y cultura en la España democrática, 1986–2008 (Gracia and Ródenas 2009), which was still, in 2009, celebrating the recent transformation of Spain into ‘an ultramodern, post-capitalist society which above all has lost a good part of the collective inferiority complexes that defined part of its image and its very reality.’ Although, to be fair, in weighing the pros and cons, the book simultaneously lamented society’s excessive confidence in ‘a sector like construction, which is so prone to speculation’ (14).

Undoubtedly there were also many other voices that are more difficult to recover now: we well know that at the same time, in private or semi-private circles, infinite daily conversations repeated, translated, countered, and reworked those news stories, pieces of information, and comments. In homes, in workplaces, at cinemas, museums and other entertainments, in cooperatives and activist milieus, and increasingly in the public-private sphere of digital networks, many people (placed by the words of those like Marías in the position of ‘common man’) were anticipating or already suffering difficulties, and blaming culprits. They tried to understand the technical language of economics by referring—often with total incredulity or suspicion—to that new reality of information still in formation: ‘the crisis.’

1.1.2. Establishing and consuming reality
This whole cycle (formed by the media, experts, intellectuals, politicians, academics, and ‘the people’) was heavily influenced by the generalized custom in contemporary Western societies of accepting as ‘reality’ whatever is shown, explained, commented, and made visible with facts, images and stories. We could call this the ‘habit of visible reality.’ It is an indirect heir of the great transformation that occurred at the beginning of so-called Western ‘modernity,’ which was the cause, as Michel de Certeau notes, of a progressive change in the way people viewed reality. Little by little, they stopped believing that reality was an invisible nucleus surrounded by deceptive appearances. In its place, they began to accept the opposite perspective that reality was visible, but needed to be studied empirically to discredit unfounded beliefs. A big gap was also opened through which a large part of that reality was illuminated by what would be the great legitimized method of observation: science. The rest was left in the dark, waiting to be studied by means of authorized scientific procedures that would replace traditional knowledge now considered deficient (‘primitive’ or ‘popular’) by the new cultural elites.6

6 Lafuente and Rodríguez, in their book ¡Todos sabios! (2013), propose a lucid historical explanation for the birth of this scientific paradigm, emphasizing its long
In a later (and more extreme) spin on this new paradigm, a new type of belief would spread: simply put, if something could be shown, made visible, it must be considered real. This is what de Certeau calls the ‘creation of reality,’ and this is how the mass media makes it work: representations, or simply visible ‘fictions’ or ‘simulations,’ are constructed which are assumed to be realistic, and which, by their very ability to make something visible, are taken as referents of reality.

Oddly, says de Certeau, this does not necessarily mean we believe that these fictions are reality. We know they are constructions, representations, and simulations. We don’t believe in them ‘directly’—what’s more, we often believe they are pure manipulation—but at the same time, we give them the status of reality, because we think they are ‘what everyone believes.’ It becomes a vicious circle, because ‘everyone’ believes that ‘everyone’ believes the media. Quoting ‘everyone’ thus becomes, according to de Certeau, the most sophisticated weapon for making people believe (or at least to get people to act as if they believe):

since it plays on what others supposedly believe, [the quote] becomes the means through which reality is established ... ‘Opinion surveys’ have become the most basic and passive form of this kind of quote. This perpetual self-citation—the multiplicity of surveys—is the fiction through which the country is led to believe what the country itself is. (189)

‘The Crisis Makes Us More Miserable: Spain Shows Sixth Greatest Decline in Happiness.’ This was the finding of a UN study, later repeated on the journal 20 Minutes in September 2013.7

On the other hand, this establishment of reality by the media takes place, as de Certeau also suggests, within the framework of an organizational system of commercialized, production- and consumer-oriented practices. This means that the media not only ‘establish’ reality, but also organize its reception by giving it the form of a market of products consumed by individuals. This organization thus reinforces another central custom of our contemporary Western societies: relating to reality as if it were a market of diverse possibilities to fulfill individual desires. And that, it seems to me, could be a good extended definition of what we sometimes call ‘consumerism.’

In a documentary entitled ‘¿Generación perdida?’ (Lost Generation?), which garnered a record audience for the public television program Documentos TV (746,000 viewers on October 9, 2011), an analysis of the crisis duration and, thus, the impossibility of establishing clear limits between what is considered science and what is not.

7 See http://www.20minutos.es/noticia/1915941/o/felicidad/espana/crisis/.
was presented that was very much in line with this type of organization of reality. The story revolved around seven young people who were not acquainted, and who represented very different ‘personal’ options in the face of the crisis. Thus, while one young woman left to live in the country, one of the men emigrated, a second woman protested at the university, another man spent his days at home on the sofa, and yet another man exerted himself to become a successful entrepreneur, and so on. The story centered much more on all those apparently individual responses to the crisis than on what the crisis itself might have meant for the family, social, local, or institutional environments in which these young people lived—never mind the possible collective responses generated from within those environments, the existence of which was obscure at best.

This type of reading—facing the crisis by focusing on some supposed individual decisions that led people to suffer through the crisis or face it according to their personal preferences (we could almost call it a kind of ‘crisis consumerism’)—has dominated media representations. Significantly, it is reproduced, for example, in an array of reports about young people in crisis, like the aforementioned report in *El País*, ‘#Nimileuristas.’ This was a sequel to material the newspaper had already published seven years previously about the ‘mileuristas’ (‘1,000 euroists’) (*El País* 2005): earning 1,000 euros a month only lasted a short time as a symbol of financial insecurity. In fact, in the seven years between 2005 and 2012, it became a coveted and unreachable goal for many. In both cases, the individual point of view was always given narrative pre-eminence. Furthermore, it was supported by basic assumptions, such as that society consists of a set of autonomous (in principal) individuals who form instrumental relationships among themselves, basically looking for work to gain access to the money that will allow them to fulfill their desires. The very labels ‘mileuristas’ and ‘nimileuristas,’ like the earlier and sadly famous ‘Ni-Nis’ (young people who ‘neither [ni] studied, nor [ni] worked’), are especially apt for this type of individualist and consumerist interpretation of reality (in the broader sense that I have proposed), since they attempt to name anomalies in a paradigm that views society as a group of autonomous individuals who work for money to be able to satisfy their individual desires.

1.1.3. The individualist fallacy
But as the geographer David Harvey explained in *The Urban Experience* (1989), understanding social reality as though it were essentially a supermarket of goods that individuals can acquire tends to disguise the material constitutive interdependence of human beings, and to exacerbate the competition between them. The philosopher Marina Garcés recently published her reflections
on this constitutive human interdependence in her book *Un mundo común* (2013). She understands all existence as a radically unfinished, vulnerable, and relational process, asserting, ‘To exist is to depend ... Our bodies, as thinking, desiring bodies, are imbricated in a network of interdependences on multiple scales’ (67). This becomes increasingly obvious, in other respects, in our present globalized world: ‘The experience of global union is, in truth, the real but risky interdependence of the fundamental aspects of human life: reproduction, communication, and survival’ (21). Based on this experience, it is becoming increasingly difficult to believe in what Garcés calls the ‘fantasy of individual self-sufficiency,’ a fantasy that has dominated Western experience since liberalism invented the ‘individual owner,’ who would only enter into relations with others of his own free will and to exchange property.8

No one is an island however. The necessary network of resources (cultural and ‘natural’), care, and mutual help that makes human life possible is an essential common heritage. This heritage, however, becomes hidden behind a veil of commercial transactions between individuals when social life is represented in the form of a market. Apart from that, to expect human subsistence to be based solely on these commercial transactions is extremely risky because, as the Spanish philosopher César Rendueles (2013) says, ‘commerce is a type of competitive interaction in which we try to take advantage of our opponent.’ He goes on to say:

Precapitalist societies thought it was crazy to base their material survival on the uncertainty of competition. For the same reason, we think a person who bets his or her only house at poker or plays Russian roulette is doing something not only risky but wrong: the imbalance between the risks and the benefits is too high. People always need food, clothing, care, and a place to lay their heads. Is it reasonable to subject these constant necessities to the whim of the market? (22)

8 With respect to the close connection between the paradigm of liberalism’s legal individualism and commercialism, Garcés asserts, ‘In the modern world, the relation of each individual to the abstract field of law guarantees the articulation of society ... the abstract subjectivity of the juridical, egalitarian, universal order is what allows us to think of society by assuming the premise of the individual freed of all community ties ... It is precisely the abstraction of that subjectivity, as guardian of equality and universality, that allows us to maintain human relations and concrete cooperation in terms of reciprocal indifference. Thus, juridical universalism is governed by the reduction of interpersonal relations to economic relations. “It is the universalism of businessmen,” Barcellona clearly states. It is the form of togetherness that capitalism needs to develop and to function. We might add: together in the abstract, diverse and detached in the concrete’ (26).
The relative commercialization of life that is inevitable in all societies that use some form of money is extended and multiplied in the capitalist West, where money is effectively coming to be used as ‘the measure of all social value.’ Consequently, we also find more prevalent in the West the establishment of what Harvey called ‘the money community,’ a form of social relationship that substitutes ‘objective’ dependency structures for personal ties. Likewise, according to the anthropologist David Graeber (2011), this type of commercialization of social relationships allows us to delude ourselves that we can settle our ethical obligations to others by paying our monetary debts.

When the crisis hit the Spanish state about 2008, it was inevitably mediated through this paradigm of establishing and organizing reality as a market of products for individuals who relate to one another according to the laws of the ‘money community,’ reproducing a consumerist ‘subjectivity’—a culturally constructed lifestyle.

The crisis erupts, in fact, in a country integrated into a Western capitalism that tends to make money the measure of all social value. Moreover, the country has integrated an evolved, extreme form of capitalism that has been developing since the 1970s: neoliberalism. As Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot have noted, neoliberalism should be understood not only as an ‘ideology’ or an ‘economic policy,’ but as a true ‘way of life’ that would

9  Following Marx, Harvey states, ‘Money arises out of concrete social practices of commodity exchange and the division of labor. The grand diversity of actual labor processes given over to the production of all manner of goods of specific qualities (concrete labor applied to produce use values) gets averaged out and represented in the single abstract magnitude of money (exchange value). Bonds of personal dependency are thereby broken and replaced by “objective dependency relations” between individuals who relate to each other through market prices and money and commodity transactions’ (167). Money becomes the mediator and regulator of all economic relations between individuals; it becomes the abstract and universal measure of social wealth and the concrete means of expression of social power. Money, Marx (1973, 224–25) goes on to observe, dissolves the community and in so doing ‘becomes the real community’ (168).

10  Thus, concludes Rendueles, in our societies, consumerism becomes a way of making sense of all the facets of life in general: ‘[Consumerism] is a type of activity in which the ends are given and there is no room for discussion. It consists simply of choosing the means that I consider to be best suited to satisfying my desires. Adidas or Nike? Windows or Mac? In itself it is not such a bad thing. Our daily life would be impossible if we subjected all our preferences to constant critique. The problem is when this type of activity takes on a heavy symbolic load and becomes a privileged source of meaning, when it becomes how we forge our personal identity. … In the market our interactions are simple, bounded, and easily conceptualized. Why not explain the rest of our life with the same precision and simplicity?’ (185).
carry capitalism’s individualistic logic to extremes: ‘it has as a primary characteristic the generalization of competition as behavioral norm, and of business as a model for subjectivity.’ Or even as a ‘standard of life’ that ‘obligates everyone to live in a universe of generalized competition, commands both the employed and the unemployed, subjects relationships to the ways of the market, impels the justification of ever-greater inequalities, and also transforms the individual, who from then on is called on to perceive himself and conduct himself as a business’ (14).11

1.1.4. Neoliberalism as the new way of the world

‘Germans are all work, they don’t take the time to chat as much as in Spain.’ Javier, a Spaniard who emigrated due to the crisis, offered this opinion in the ‘Expatriate’ section of the Huffington Post (‘Huyo de la realidad española’ 2014). He continues, ‘The important thing is to create a plan that lets you get to where you want to be in the future, and then follow it through.’ Irene, another immigrant to Berlin, is also looking to the future: ‘It hurts to leave my family, my boyfriend, my friends … But I think it’s what’s best for me.’ The vice president of the Youth Council, however, is not so optimistic about emigration. ‘It is obvious that this process will imply, first of all, a substantial loss of human capital for the country,’ he laments.12

The neoliberal conversion of ‘life’ to ‘human capital’ clearly has a counterpart in all the rest of humanity which does not seem so ‘capitalizable,’ and which frequently encounters many more obstacles to emigration. This other mass of humanity is spoken of in other sections of the newspapers, and with very different metaphors—such as the recently much-overused one of ‘attack’: ‘Massive Attack of Immigrants on Spanish Borders’ (Euronews), ‘Around 1,000 Immigrants Attempt Another Unsuccessful Attack on the

11 Laval and Dardot take as their point of departure Michel Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism in his 1979 courses published under the title The Birth of Biopolitics (2010). In these courses, Foucault opens the door to understanding neoliberalism as a compound of technologies of power and technologies of subjectivation. His concept of governmentality is key here, because it expands the analysis of neoliberalism beyond the role (or lack of a role) of states, shifting the focus to a wider spectrum of ways in which people ‘conduct the conduct’ of others. He also clarifies the relations between classic liberalism and neoliberalism, notably revealing, as Laval and Dardot themselves recently underscored (Fernández-Savater, Malo, and Ávila 2014), that the ‘homo economicus’ of neoliberalism is not the same as the ‘entrepreneur of himself’ of neoliberalism, this second becoming not so much someone who seeks a balance between his efforts and his compensation, but, moreover, somewhat constantly looking for more, constantly trying to ‘go beyond himself.’

12 See http://www.huffingtonpost.es/2012/10/13/jovenes-espanoles-emigran_n_1963468.html.
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Neoliberalism permeates everything, from the microbusiness that is me to giant transnational businesses and their flow of cheap labor. Exacerbating these competitive tendencies, which only increase as they move from monetarized societies to capitalist ones, neoliberalism’s success is immense, and it ended up becoming the real ‘reason for the world’ towards the end of the twentieth century, according to Laval and Dardot:

For more than 30 years, this rule of existence has dominated public policies, ruled global economic relations, and remodeled subjectivity. The circumstances of this normative success have been described frequently, be they the political aspect (the conquest of power by neoliberal forces), the economic aspect (the rise of globalized financial capitalism), the social aspect (individualization of social relations at the expense of collective solidarities, with extreme polarization between rich and poor), or the subjective aspect (appearance of a new subject and development of new psychological pathologies). (14)


14 As the Observatorio Metropolitano of Madrid—and in particular its member Emmanuel Rodríguez—notes in Hipótesis democracia (37–45), neoliberalism historically arises in parallel with the progressive financiarization of global capitalism. This financiarization, in turn, was the response to industrial capitalism’s profit crisis, which emerged in the 1970s. Rodríguez asserts, after a quick history that covers the dollar’s abandonment of the gold standard, the creation of big international financial markets, and the massive deregulation in that sector starting in the 1990s, that ‘practically all social production is currently determined and negotiated through some type of financial instrument or value.’ Thus, ‘both the means of social security (such as pensions, access to higher education and, in some ways, to healthcare) and consumption itself (reduced because of salary stagnation) have become increasingly dependent on mechanisms of financiarized provisions’ (41). This dependence has disastrous results, because financiarization in and of itself constitutes an unsustainable economic practice. Financiarization needs constantly to expand, but it always does so unsustainably, in the form of ‘bubbles’: ‘As might be suspected, the increase in financial profit requires and forces financial expansion—in other words, a growing concentration of liquidity in certain financial assets, a noticeable increase in the creation of credit, and a price increase on those very assets. The convergence of this tendency with the basic structure of any financial bubble is total. The problem lies in the fact that these periods of financial expansion are always temporary’ (42). With all regulation suppressed, and in trying
In twenty-first-century Spain, marked by the spread of neoliberal logic into all these areas (political, economic, social, or subjective), the crisis that began in 2008 was constructed as a media referent that filtered through a neoliberal lens the very real, prolonged, and increasing suffering of people who lost their homes, their jobs, and their hopes of finding a job; people impacted by cutbacks in basic public services for healthcare, addiction, or education, forced to emigrate in search of work, and a long and painful etcetera. As this media referent, the crisis was, again, primarily the story of an irritating situation that interrupted the ‘normal’ course of life, an obstacle to the possible satisfaction of individual desires in the reality market. It was constantly kept in the public eye through more surveys, more news stories, more facts and rumors that ‘the public’ could later use as fodder for conversations about ‘the state of the country.’ The crisis, we were told by the huge media corporations, keeps us from realizing our dreams, it makes life harder for us, it even causes ‘human drama’ (such as, notably, the ‘drama of the evictions,’ as the well-known journalistic formula goes).

1.1.5. Crisis of the system as crisis of a way of life

Regarding the causes of the crisis, the media presented two main hegemonic narratives, which were hinted at from the beginning. On one hand, it was suggested that the crisis was a technical problem, and as such, it had to be solved by experts (‘Experts Ask the EU to “Intervene” in the Spanish Economy,’ 2010; ‘An Expert Affirms that the Crisis Will Not End this Legislature,’ 2011; ‘World Bank Expert: Spain Has No Solution without Credit to the SMEs,’ 2013). On the other hand, ethical and political responsibilities were pointed out. For the most part, these were seen as responsibilities of the elites and of professional groups like those construction firms and mayors Marías called ‘the villains of the nation.’ But sometimes, the finger was
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pointed more generally at society as a whole, for ‘living beyond its means’ (‘Fátima Báñez: Spain Has Lived beyond its Means,’ ‘Rajoy: We’ve Bought Trips to the Caribbean on Credit,’ ‘Urkullu Claims the Basques Have Lived beyond their Means’).16

The crisis appeared, then, as a technical matter explained in the language of experts or as a moral question that the voices of authority should denounce, within that constant flow of stories channeled by the media. But the passage of time and the growing brutality of events they hoped to pass off as ‘economic crisis’ inevitably weakened the first narrative (crisis as ‘technical failure’ to be solved by experts). It also clearly showed that the accusation against the common citizens in general was perverse, and strengthened the version that pointed towards the guilty elites. The financial experts who were supposed to have solved the problem were not able to, so the crisis was probably something more than a ‘technical’ problem. For their part, the politicians in power in the halls of government had bet—and ultimately lost—almost all their credibility on those very same experts who supposedly had created a Spain ‘without an inferiority complex’ and with ‘international models of solvency.’ The citizens may have played a role in the disaster, but their actions were guided by the leadership of experts and politicians.

It is difficult to determine at what point the crisis of legitimacy that affected politicians and financial experts alike began to intensify, crossing a point of no return. The repeated corruption scandals in the political sphere were probably the last straw. A new incarnation of the ‘crisis’ phenomenon appeared. It was no longer merely a financial crisis, nor even a crisis caused by the moral irresponsibility of some social actors; now it was a ‘system crisis.’ Or perhaps we should say ‘system error,’ echoing the computer science language sometimes used by the 15M movement, which was one of the main defenders, but by no means the only one, of this ‘systemic’ reading of the crisis.

‘They call it democracy, but it’s not’ and ‘We’re not anti-system, the system is anti-us’ are slogans widely used by the political movement the mass media called Indignados (the outraged ones), but who generally called themselves ‘15M.’ Both slogans refer to an intensification of the crisis of legitimacy of something, generally known as ‘Spanish democracy,’ that is perceived as a

'system.' This 'system' has imprecise contours, but it undoubtedly includes experts and politicians as prominent movers and shakers who make it work. It also has temporal dimensions: it includes all currently existing official institutions, and also reaches into the recent past of its own development (generally back to the 'transition to democracy,' which becomes a polemical process that requires reinterpretation).

There are various assessments that could be made of the 15M movement and its immediate legacy. Nevertheless, its attenuation or transformation into other processes does not seem to have dispelled the narrative that vaguely declares the crisis to be one of 'the system.' This being the case, the 'system' could not be saved simply by replacing the people who fill its structures. Rather, a transformation of the very 'rules of the game' is required.

But the real question is, What game are we talking about? Is it merely a game of institutional powers, or one of the experts themselves? Does it exclude from 'social games,' to continue the metaphor, those players who do not hold institutional or expert positions, but participate actively or passively both in the 'system of reality creation' to which I have referred and in the 'neoliberal reason' that articulates that reality commercially and individually?

I think it is more interesting to question whether the tough economic situation has produced an important erosion in the ways of thinking and living that also facilitate those social games that permeate life beyond institutional power. That is, has the 'crisis of the system' affected the very 'system of reality creation and consumption' that was presented as the hegemonic frame of the crisis? In this sense, I want to explore sociocultural processes in which it seems that what is shaky is not only institutional prestige or the validity of explicit political and social consensus, but rather a kind of life experience (a kind of 'subjectivity') that tacitly accepts the organization of reality as a market by the mass media, experts, politicians, intellectuals, and opinion-makers. At the same time, of course, this 'subjectivity' fiercely demands individual freedom to choose between the competitive options offered in the world created by those external instances.

In other words, I think it is legitimate (and even necessary) to recognize and explore in what sense, since 2008, is not only the Spanish 'economy' that is in crisis, but also a very entrenched way of life, one in which political and economic experts, together with other experts and 'intellectuals' in general, are expected to shoulder the responsibility for guaranteeing the means for each and every person to be able to follow his or her individual desires. That is, we need to acknowledge that what has entered into crisis—up to a point that makes it necessary to investigate—has been a culture that is technocratic and hierarchical, because it understands the establishment
of the social ‘rules of the game’ (politics and the economy) as technical or ‘profound’ matters to be resolved by experts and intellectuals. On the other hand, it is also a consumerist culture because it understands daily life as an individual’s election and attainment of a series of desired objects, in a process that is eerily similar to a business transaction.

These are the cultural dimensions of the ‘economic crisis’ that I want to explore. I should clarify that they are frequently isolated and considered contradictory: some people believe the cultural authority or hierarchy of experts, intellectuals, and the media clashes with consumerist individualism, which no longer believes in any authority. Those commentators say the great modern paradigms of the former have lost power in the face of the selfish postmodern nihilism of the latter.

There seems to be a certain truth to these proposals, and no doubt the technocracy or the prestige of the intellectuals are very different phenomena from individualist consumerism. Nevertheless, I note a certain convergence between these cultural models in neoliberal Spain, as well as a common genealogy, and later a crisis that is equally shared by both. The apparent centrality of the consumerist individual, as Laval and Dardot indicate, goes hand in hand with a ‘reason for the world’ that imposes competitive means of existence. I would add that it is also supported by forms of authority, hierarchy, and cultural inequality—especially those established by the modern technoscientific divide, including its heirs in the media world. Therefore, I do not think that the desire to understand together these diverse ways of organizing the meaning of life should be understood a priori as reductionism. That is, I would hope that we could at least concede the possibility of asking whether it is relevant to do so to understand a series of concrete historical moments.

1.1.6. The cultural dimension of the economy and its technification

To begin this broad genealogical contextualization, I first turn to a central tenet of the feminist economics tradition regarding the technification of the field—one that has had so many consequences for neoliberalism and its glorification of ‘financial experts’ and ‘markets.’ This central tenet will also allow me to clarify what I mean by ‘cultural impact of the economic crisis,’ since it articulates precisely the necessary interdependence of the economic and the cultural.

The feminist Italian economist Antonella Picchio reminds us that the so-called classical political economics of Smith, Ricardo, and Marx always kept very clearly in mind the cultural—ethical and political—dimension of economics, beyond its technical, quantitative, or specialized aspects. And that the field was originally presented as being in the service of the
common good or happiness, with the understanding that such happiness
did not mean mere physical subsistence, but the possibility of a life worth
living, a life that has value and meaning; in short, a ‘decent life,’ which
included culture and sociability. Picchio shows that classicalists like Adam
Smith never understood the ‘wealth of nations’ as something separate
from happiness, customs, or social tastes, and definitely not separate from
how those nations wanted to live. Smith says, in Lectures on Jurisprudence
and Wealth (1776), ‘The whole industry of human life is employed not in
procuring the supply of our three humble necessities, food, clothes, and
lodging, but in procuring the conveniences of it according to the nicety and
delicacy of our taste’ (2013, 160).

Thus, classical political economics proposed as necessary the pursuit of
a life with dignity, firmly melding culture and economics as two sides of
the same coin. There can be no material sustainability without a cultural
understanding and elucidation of what we consider to be worth keeping in
each case. (Of course, classical economics continued to reserve for itself the
authority to answer from a privileged place the question of what is a life with
dignity, since it was a field of knowledge authorized by its ‘modern’—read
‘scientific’—genealogy.) Only later, in a transformational process studied
by Picchio, did the heirs of this field, specifically those who belonged to the
so-called ‘neoclassical’ school, try to erase from economics that pursuit of
a life with dignity. They argued the existence of purely economic matters
that needed to be separated from cultural ones, adding that each individual
should decide for him or herself how they wanted to be happy.

Picchio notes a key moment in this transformation: the appearance of
the famous Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science, written in
1932 by the British economist Lionel Robbins (1935). In it, asserts Picchio,
‘with the purpose of reaching his goal of redefining economics, he trades the
analytical object of wellbeing—understood as effective living conditions—
for the more general, abstract idea of utility as optimization of individual
choices, under the bonds of scarcity’ (35). Robbins offers, in this sense, a
definition of economics that has become famous: ‘Economics is the science
of analyzing human behavior as the relationship between some specific ends
and some scarce means that have a range of possible uses’ (16).

In proposing this definition, the British economist strengthened the
belief—still hegemonic in the field today—that economics is a technical
matter that supposedly asks about the means and not the ends. His proposal
actually gave, implicitly, the following response to the great ethical and
political question about a life with dignity: a life with dignity is whatever
each individual wants to pursue within the rules given by the economic
experts. What Robbins and the heirs of his definition of economics intended,
therefore, was twofold: that all collective cultural work necessary to constantly respond to the question about what is worth sustaining socially be broken down to individual desires; and furthermore, that it be subject to their decisions as supposed economic experts.

This refusal by the field of economics to consider the goals of a life with dignity has spread throughout the entire capitalist world. Determining a ‘decent life’ has become a simple mathematical calculation that attempts—unsuccessfully, as César Rendueles graphically demonstrates—to explain all human activity as instrumental behavior (98). But, as I will shortly try to show in greater detail, that same technoscientific aura had already involved, for some considerable time, a key element to bring the field of economics to the highest circles of power in capitalist societies. In Spain’s case, two historical moments to which I will return in this chapter are essential in this regard.

I refer, in the first place, to the famous rise of the Opus Dei technocrats to power during Francoism, who configured a first ‘liberalization’ of the Spanish economy; in other words, an opening for the entry of foreign capital following Franco’s autarchy. This opening was essentially a bet on tourism as a privileged sector. Sánchez León notes that it was during this time that an important perception of Spanish society as ‘middle class’ became established. This included the acritical acceptance of the power of ‘experts’ as part of a great process of civic depoliticization, perhaps uninterrupted on a large scale until the current crisis.

Second, hidden within that depoliticization and inheriting a primacy from the tourism/real estate economic sector they will never really be able to change—as López and the collective known as the Observatorio Metropolitano de Madrid explain—in the 1980s, the protagonists of that other great moment of legitimacy and the triumph of the economic technocracy appear. The Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)—which was called upon to complete the long-awaited ‘modernization’ and ‘standardization’ of the country after the dictatorship—institutes the Spanish version of neoliberalism (industrial reconversion, job insecurity, privatization, etc.), always with the leitmotif of being necessary adjustments for Spain to enter the European Economic Community (EEC 1986).

1.1.7. Collective elucidation of ‘a life with dignity’

If there was ever a society inclined not only to accept but to enshrine the technocratic power of ‘economics’ and its experts, it was Spain’s neoliberal society of the last three decades. In that time, according to Harvey, the transition from industrial to financial capitalism has occurred on a global scale. In the name of those famous ‘markets’ to which the financing of global
capitalism has given an almost limitless power, Spanish neoliberalism has built huge speculative bubbles like the one that initiated the economic crisis that recently left the country with almost 6 million people unemployed (some 26.7% of the active population), 8 million in poverty, and a loss of 700,000 to emigration since the crisis began. The cultural impact of the economic crisis in Spain has been so profound that it has affected this great assumption, the touchstone of neoliberalism: this confidence in the experts as organizers of the economy, and in essence, as authorities who decide what a life with dignity should be.

To give a well-known example, recently Spain’s austerity policies, justified with technocratic plans, have recommended taking away a threshold of dignity considered necessary by many: free health care for everyone. Javier Fernández-Lasquetty, the Health Minister for Madrid, had to step down in 2014 in the face of massive protests because of his attempt to privatize the city’s hospitals. He always tried to justify his policies with an economist discourse, appealing to ‘sustainability,’ ‘cost-cutting,’ etc. That technical language, however, has not prevented the legitimacy of politicians like Fernández-Lasquetty from plummeting just like house prices in Spain (something experts always said would never happen). Politicians had relied on the expert words of economists to decide what has value, what Spanish society ought to take care of, support, and reproduce. With the crisis of confidence in experts, inevitably, collective processes of creating social value that are not based on technocratic estimates become visible or gain importance.

The feminist tradition, with thinkers like Picchio and another Italian, Silvia Federici, has also shown how domestic work and physical and emotional caregiving, despite being central to and indispensable for the social reproduction of a life with dignity, are made invisible and undervalued in neoliberal technocracies. Something similar happens with the cultural work performed daily by multitudes of nonexperts to collectively elucidate and propose the values and meanings of a life worth living. Collective cultural processes like the recent protests in defense of Internet freedom, the 15M movement and its subsequent mutations, have perhaps been, among other things, attempts to give value to all that unrecognized daily work and to intensify its democratic potential in the face of what the movements sometimes call ‘the dictatorship of the markets.’ In this sense, I will propose that they can be understood as processes of opening and support of spaces where people can meet as a community to pose anew the question about a life with dignity that classical political economics put on the table.

But before that, in this first part I want to study precisely that hierarchical, technocratic, consumerist culture characterized by presupposing the impossibility of collectively defining, with input from all walks of life, what