



# The Liberal Community as a Concept in Crisis: Contradictions and Opportunities of Community Interventions in Spain

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## Introduction

In the wake of COVID-19, a new interest in the stability of local communities has emerged in many places around the world. Looking at the situation in Spain, the pandemic has been a tipping-point in the productive and accumulative capacity of Spanish capitalism, which has been dependent on German capital flows even since before the 2008 recession (Charnock et al. 2014: 125), having severe financial implications on the country's social structure. The austerity model imposed by the European Union and European Central Bank suggested sharp budgetary cuts – especially for the health system – and has left a precarious welfare state (Rey-Araújo 2020: 211). Under these difficult circumstances, local communities have been a harbour for thousands of people and families that have lost their jobs, houses, or their health.

The concept of community is also crucial in Raymond Williams' work, and we argue that his differentiation made in *Keywords* between (mainly administrative) local politics and (more committed and authentic) community politics provides valuable cues for developing elements of a critical social community work theory, based on what Williams referred to as the idea of “working directly with people” rather than merely providing a “voluntary work supplementary to official provision or paid service” (1976: 66). This idea of service was associated by Williams with the questionable middle-class conceptualization of community as opposed to his preferred idea of community as solidarity, which he connected with the working class (2017: 430).

In this paper, our premise is that community intervention in Spain has been linked mainly to the middle-class definition. Hence, for most public and private institutions, the role of community has been understood as a mere backbone element and containment for social discontent. It is in this sense that institutions such as town and sectoral councils, NGOs as well as charity and philanthropic foundations have been generating communitarian intervention programmes that seem to organize and strengthen the

communities in which they intervene. However, from our perspective, this kind of intervention problematically involves holding capitalism's social order directly or indirectly, through, on the one hand, deviating strategies of confrontation between social classes, or social discontent, towards strategies of collaboration and discipline, and, on the other hand, facilitating the functioning of capital flows. It will be for the following evaluation of a major Spanish community intervention project to demonstrate this tendency in detail.

Following Williams' cue that community can mean different things and is not independent from ideology, we present the upcoming analysis in order to expose the contradictions in the dominant liberal communitarian model and confront it with the possibilities that a Marxian communitarian approach can offer. More specifically, our analysis is backed by ten years of experience as consultants in the Intercultural Community Intervention project, originally initiated by the Banking Foundation "la Caixa" (linked with Caixabank, one of the main European banks). The ICI project was realized in thirty-six Spanish neighbourhoods, as can be seen in the following map (from Rubio et al. 2020). It provided technical coverage and administrative resources (methodological counselling, financing activities, and the salary for three or four community workers, among other things). All in all, the project reached more than 1.1 million people.





The ICI project was developed from 2010 to 2020

in territories with high cultural diversity, proposing a model for social intervention and management of diversity focused on local communities taking centre stage, with an organised, effective, and positive way of tackling the crucial challenge of living together and social cohesion. (Giménez et al. 2015: 5)

We cherish the project's goals but also have come to position ourselves critically regarding some of its basic assumptions, especially pertaining to its implicit understanding of community. In particular, we argue that its intervention model is based on a liberal and middle-class perception that tends to romanticise the community, envisioning it as an ahistorical place, as if it 'had always been'. The actual social complexity, conflicts and contradictions that characterise these places are effectively veiled. To demonstrate this problem, we are going to proceed through a case study methodology in line with the work of Bent Flyvbjerg (2006). The two selected case studies are San Cristóbal de Los Ángeles on the one hand and the two neighbourhoods Madre de Dios and San José on the other. San Cristóbal is in a working-class Madrid suburb, with 16,992 inhabitants in 2019 (Ayuntamiento de Madrid). This part of the Spanish capital has the highest percentage of the city's migrant population (53% as of January 2020). The two other neighbourhoods are in Logroño, in the northern province La Rioja, with a population size of 23,556 in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Madre de Dios and San José can be described in terms similar to San Cristóbal, as predominantly working-class, economically depressed, transforming, in the last decades, into migrant settlement places, and establishing themselves as super-diverse neighbourhoods (Vertovec 2007).

In our analysis, we draw on and critically engage with Marco Marchioni's<sup>2</sup> technical definition of community which has provided the *modus operandi* for the ICI project. In Marchioni's work, community is not the mere population but can be more specifically described in terms of its "three protagonists": a) administration; b) technical resources and c) citizenry (Marchioni 2010). Regarding social and political community-strengthening intervention programmes, which Marchioni is primarily occupied with, the joint and interrelated work of these "protagonists" is structured around a cyclical process that is made up of five phases: 1. establishing relationships; 2. obtaining information about the community in order to produce a publication (called the Community Monograph) which provides the data and analytical highlights; 3. conducting a community diagnosis in which the elements to be addressed as priorities

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the municipal register as listed in an internal ICI document; see Palao 2017 for a summary without data.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Marchioni was an Italian communist and community social worker who developed his theory on how to intervene in the community in his work in Italy and Spain from the 1960s until his death in March 2020. Like Marchioni, we are convinced that work with, from and for the community are not separate tasks. While this paper explores the limitations of Marchioni's understanding of the community, it does so in critical solidarity.



are identified; 4. implementing the intervention programme through community programming; and eventually, 5. evaluating the overall development. At the end of the evaluation, the cycle resumes like a spiral; it comes to begin the process anew from where it ends, incorporating newly detected issues to the previous work in the form of updates.

When we critically question the ICI project's intervention approach, along with Marchioni's concept of community underlying it, our goal is to inspire political commitment. We seek to explain how the community, understood as "body of direct relationships" and "an alternative set of relationships" (Williams 1976: 65-66), is a social construction in contention, and how, from a conscious and planned intervention, we can move forward in the constitution of a collective social subject (Dean 2016) that deepens and radicalizes democracy, very much in the spirit of Jacques Rancière. This may provide an alternative to capitalism, or, at least, avoid the opposite in terms of threatening forms of minority exclusion. The questions we ask ourselves in this approach are the following: What range of possibilities can be generated by influential projects of the ICI type? Is it actually possible to transform communities on the basis of such an approach? What limits does this way of proceeding entail? What elements do we need to introduce to improve our interventions to make them more radically democratic? And last but not least: can we give a more accurate definition of community than those taken for granted by such mainstream projects?

### **Definitional struggles: From a liberal to a Marxist (and Williams-inspired) understanding of community**

For a first (theoretical) insight into the problematic implications of Marchioni's understanding of community, we should take a brief look at the historical emergence of the idea of the liberal community that is also at the heart of Marchioni's conceptualization. This complex development was closely related to the rise of capitalism, which initially needed to dismantle the traditional community in terms of ideology and social organisation. In this sense, from the sixteenth century onwards, with the increasing predominance of the market economy, which would give way to the capitalist mode of production, various authors have emphasised the emerging role of the individual in society as "the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them" (MacPherson 1964: 3). The struggle was then against what we may understand as an organic community, or a rigid social system which forced people into roles determined by divine grace and natural law. There was a need to break away from those collective subjects that were the communities and to interpellate people as individuals so that they could accept responsibility for themselves. This ideological role was played, among others, by the Protestant reform and its break away from the



Catholic community: “Protestant theologies hail believers as singular souls responsible for their own salvation” (Dean 2016: 95).

As Williams noted in *Culture and Society*, individualism was defined as “an idea of society as a neutral area within which each individual is free to pursue his [sic] own development and his own advantage as a natural right” (Williams 2017 [1958]: 426). This was an important ideological triumph, as this historical development also responded to the need to create, in the Marxist sense, workers who were twice as free: freed from their responsibility for the social order that held them down; freed from the possession of the productive means to make their own living (Marx 1990 [1867]: 272). However, as we will see with Williams, although the material processes that occurred during these socio-historical shifts radically transformed the community, it did not disappear as such, although its ideological foundations were different:

[F]rom this liberty of each individual, follows the liberty, within the same limits, of combination among individuals; freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others: the persons combining being supposed to be of full age, and not forced or deceived. (Mill 2003 [1859]: 87)

In this influential definition by John Stuart Mill we see how the constitution of the community is ideologically established for liberalism: instead of preceding individuals, the community is the product of their free association and therefore a common agreement framework, as is also emphasised by Alexis de Tocqueville (2000 [1835]). And it is in this individual-community dialectic that the permanent return of the liberal community is constituted: a way of understanding the romanticised, ahistorical, and nostalgic community (Joseph 2002).

It is this idealizing view – the return of the liberal community, along with its romanticisation – that we can also trace in Marco Marchioni, which is most obvious in his earlier texts:

The “return” of the community is basically something that is positive because it shows, although sometimes by inappropriate means and in the wrong ways, a willingness to retell, to play a role in social processes, in decision-making, in a word, its willingness to participate. (1994: 25)<sup>3</sup>

In this first approach, Marchioni simply understood the community as the citizenry, excluding the administration and technical resources. However, during the time he started his intervention in the Spanish social reality, his proposal evolved towards the earlier-mentioned theory of the three protagonists. In this light, communities are made of three constituents – the citizenry, the administration, and the technical resources. Insisting on this complex interplay of actors, Marchioni’s approach is aimed at a greater

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<sup>3</sup> All the quotes from Marchioni’s work have been translated from Spanish into English by the authors.



involvement of citizens, involving more and different levels of local administration (beginning by Town Halls), and making equilibrate and coordinate use of existent resources by giving an active role to the various technical workers (2010: 14). With this formulaic schematization, Marchioni gives an operational definition of community which sees the three protagonists working together, respecting each of their roles: “A territory in which a certain population lives, which has certain demands and certain resources” (2010: 69).<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the concept of community remains as an empty signifier, which, on the one hand, seems to have always been there, and on the other, will be constituted from the intervention in it. It is a purely formal definition, with no history or alternative.

Other ways of understanding the community, especially from the communitarian perspective, are more explicit in this ahistoricism and nostalgic romanticism, claiming the recovery of part of the values from the past when faced with neoliberalism and to achieve what the welfare state has not been able to achieve (Arrieta et al. 2018: 10). The oppression or the conflicts that the community and its hierarchies may impose on part of the people living in it is downplayed or ignored (Alderson 2016: 225). At the same time, the community is praised as a supplementary element for the development and correct functioning of the capital valorisation circuits (Joseph 2002: 1-29). What we suggested with Williams remains in limbo: “unlike other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably” (1976: 66), and little or no attention is given to the possibility of social exclusion.

The danger that this ambiguity might shift to the right is clearly there. As Terry Eagleton points out in a defence of the concept of community, there is a possibility of reading the community as “the reverse of the political” (1998: 28). For example, Michel Wieviorka (1992: 183ff.) differentiates between community movements and social movements, and points to the former as the area where racism arises and is propagated. This view also relies on an understanding of the community as ahistorical, but instead of romanticising it, it is demonised as not being egalitarian. At any rate, as Eagleton points out: “community and equality don’t, in other words, go spontaneously together” (1998: 30).

That is not to say that we should completely dismiss the idea of community, but we will have to critically refine our use of the term. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, the community is a “product of history” that is presented to individuals in a transhistorical way (1990: 142). Thus, the community is not static; it is not isolated from time, history and people’s activities. Rather, the idea of what the community is, and what it is for, will vary between different social groups. They will create their communities, their own

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<sup>4</sup> Marchioni took his definition of community from Angela Zucconi, his teacher at the Professional Education Centre for Social Workers and Adult Educators (CEPAS).





common sense (Williams 1976: 65), and their orientations may diverge widely between the extremes of emancipation or reactionism. More specifically, Williams warns us that the community is the place where hegemony materialises as a process (1977: 112). It is not a fixed, rigid concept, but one that is subject to transformation and open to other forms of hegemony that can be created, as Gramsci states, before becoming such a thing. Williams calls these possibilities “alternative hegemony” or “counter-hegemony” (1977: 113). Gramsci’s stance in the *Prison Notebooks* is reflected in Williams’ interpretation of the community as a continuum between traditional and creative forms (1977: 121). Williams applies the concept of community to the location, the place where hegemonic projects are developed, but also from which counter-hegemony can be created. The elaboration of both possibilities leads us to a Marxist or Brechtian interpretation of community; it is a place of oppression and at the same time it can be a place of freedom, but it is definitely a place, which Joseph (2002), Hall (1993) and Harvey (1995) also underwrite.

From this point of view, the community should not be mythicized, although we cannot ignore it either, since it is our field of intervention, where we can create politics from the specific, where we can produce it without knowing the result beforehand (Hall 1990: 167). The community lives in two extremes. With the abstract area on the one hand, from which capital flows, in which case community would be a means for the circulation process: “The indeterminateness of capital, its openness to determination by use value, is an opening to “community”, to determination by social relations and “values” in exchange, production, and consumption” (Joseph 2002: 14). On the other hand, the community is the place of the tangible, since value needs to be embodied in specific things which produce historically created and located relationships. This ambiguity entails a possibility for change, not by means of a romantic or ahistorical reading of the community but by a historically located and evolving one.

It is here that Williams’ idea of culture in common, as something which is “ordinary” (2016), comes to bear, even though it is experienced on different levels. The conceptualisation of community based on this insight entails an enormous complexity, as it would stand as an inclusive concept that includes all kinds of social relations (in a synchronous sense) that nevertheless spring diachronically from a given historical moment. The starting point for transforming the community, then, is the living experience, in a specific context and area (Harvey 1995). In this light, we cannot separate the economic from other – intellectual and moral – factors (Williams 2017 [1989]: 366). The transformation of the community needs us to keep an eye on the whole community structure: it is a change that depends on living experiences, which are capable of generating a new structure of feeling where solidarity-in-creativity is the motor of that common culture instead of seeing the community as a service provider. It is a slow change that operates in the field of community social relations (ibid.: 367).



This move towards the community, which aims to go one step beyond a merely economic reading (ibid.: 366), needs to understand the community as a project under construction. To pave the way for this development we need an anthropological analysis that changes the focus towards the possibility of community transformation, towards the possibility of generating a more diverse and inclusive culture. In turn, this project calls for a Gramscian grassroots network – including alternative groups, initiatives, and media – that seeks the democratization of civil society (Hall 1990: 229-32). The social actors will be the ones who can become generators of certain changes and not just passive recipients of them.

Shifting now from the theoretical to the concrete level, our two case studies will demonstrate that the approach taken by the Intercultural Community Intervention (ICI) project problematically clings to the liberal understanding of the community which is a far cry from seeing community in the Marxist way as described above, and in effect does little to allow the development of democratic community transformation.

### **The Intercultural Community Intervention (ICI) project and its commitment to community construction: Two case studies**

Learning from our ten years of experience scientifically managing the ICI project, we would like to analyse two specific areas that will help us to draw practical conclusions regarding community processes: the neighbourhoods of San Cristóbal de los Ángeles in Madrid, and Madre de Dios and San José in Logroño (in La Rioja). These two territories share a number of characteristics: both have a high rate of immigration, extraordinarily high in the case of San Cristóbal (53.37%), compared to that of Madre de Dios and San José (19.18%); however, they are highly diverse territories in which we find more than 80 nationalities and more than 70 respectively; incomes in both neighbourhoods are relatively low; they are located in degraded areas in their cities and are stigmatised within their environment, creating a breeding ground for the extreme right, who describe them as “multicultural dunghills”.<sup>5</sup>

Our relationship with these territories allowed us to: a) maintain periodic visits to advise the teams on their intervention; b) have a daily relationship with these teams that ranged from ongoing communication by telephone and monitoring platforms; c) analyse the data collected by the teams; d) read reports and return this information for work to be carried out in a better way in each area. In December 2020 the project came to an end, and after seeing 10 years of daily intervention, 10,654 activities and 547,727

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<sup>5</sup> Rocío de Meer, one of the deputies for Almería belonging to the far-right VOX party, tweeted on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2020 using this description for neighbourhoods with these characteristics.





participants, of which 4,500 were collaborators and people who were actively involved,<sup>6</sup> we are able to consider its successes and limitations.

We have selected these two territories by applying a strategic case selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006), with the aim of drawing conclusions that may be valid for the rest of the 34 intervention territories. Following the typology proposed by Flyvbjerg (2006: 221) we have called both cases critical cases because: a) they are territories that have obtained local funding, which will allow them to continue implementing their respective processes; b) in both cases, the project methodology has been able to be executed in an optimal way; c) they are intervention territories with small populations, which helps us to find relevant examples; d) they are areas where access to information, thanks to the predisposition of their area teams and the geographical proximity or greater frequency of travel, has made it easier for us to compare our thoughts. We will now deal with them separately to facilitate the analysis of the specific reality.

### *San Cristóbal de los Ángeles: The challenge of turning the project into a process*

San Cristóbal is a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Madrid, which is well connected to the city centre, from where it can be reached in less than half an hour. As already indicated, it is an area with a high unemployment rate, with little commerce and a 53.37% immigrant population rate, which is above the state average. Above all, it is this last characteristic which has made the evaluation positive for being included in the project.

Despite being a neighbourhood with 16,992 inhabitants (Ayuntamiento de Madrid), there is a lot of life in the area and many associations that work in it, with up to 60 resources, from public administration to private organizations and civil society, composed of, among others: municipal resources, schools, NGOs, neighbourhood associations etc). The aforesaid features also have attracted much public attention to this small neighbourhood, being classified by some media as “The worst neighbourhood in Madrid” (Navarro 2019) from time to time becoming the main focus of the rhetoric of xenophobic political parties at a state level such as PP and VOX (both right-wing parties,

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<sup>6</sup> The data will be available from 2021 in the publication that has just been closed regarding the 10 years of the project. A previous publication from 2015 is available in English under the title *Joining Forces to Live Together* on the “la Caixa” Foundation website:

<https://fundacionlacaixa.org/en/programas-sociales/interculturalidad-y-cohesion-social/proyecto-de-intervencion-comunitaria-intercultural/claves-del-proyecto> [accessed 15 Nov. 2021]

There are also three surveys (only available in Spanish) on coexistence in highly diverse territories, published between 2010 and 2015, and a fourth survey carried out in 2017, which is to be published in 2021:

<https://fundacionlacaixa.org/es/programas-sociales/interculturalidad-y-cohesion-social/proyecto-de-intervencion-comunitaria-intercultural/encuesta-sobre-convivencia> [accessed 15 Nov. 2021]



historically affiliated to the dictatorship of General Franco), which vilify these neighbourhoods due to their large immigrant population and poverty.

This point of view is also evident in the strategy that has been applied within the community, based on a key idea that unites all other actions, which is called the “care neighbourhood”. This is the name given to this specific community program, which is the framework of actions aimed at improving the neighbourhood. These actions include community dynamization activities such as radio or forum theatre,<sup>7</sup> or activities for the prevention of conflicts such as creating napkins that are put in the neighbourhood bars in which stereotypes are challenged regarding the migrant population in the area (Travieso 2018). This work has been carried out by means of a community structure, coordination spaces for the cited “three protagonists” for decision-making and communication between them, which has considerable technical relevance. These were the meeting places for the territory’s technical body, which decided on the actions to be implemented and the way it was to be done. Certain significant neighbourhood associations in the territory also had a role to play in these areas, but it was essentially a decision-making process ratified by the local government and reliant on the passive participation of citizens.

This does not mean that citizens did not participate in the process – in fact, they did so from the beginning, but they were restricted by a series of factors: a) passive participation, which is to say that citizens generally collaborated with the technical bodies when asked for their opinion, but they could only comment on tasks that were already on the agenda; b) demands for assistance, which encouraged citizens to take part in pre-set actions, which was considered successful if many people became involved, and especially so if they were also varied in terms of ethnic origin.

This eminently technical way of operating was criticised by Marchioni within the project, calling it a “technocratic cave” when referring to a way of working where the technical body has the sole capacity to design and elaborate the actions, in accordance with public policies. This has been the general *modus operandi* in this territory, something that has been detected by different agents like neighbourhood associations, local NGOs and informal groups of citizens assessing the different areas of participation, the evaluation of the project and the training plan of the team.

The work with citizens has been developed in two ways: on the one hand, the construction of a sense of belonging; and on the other hand, mediating in conflicts. In the

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<sup>7</sup> Forum theatre is a seminal method introduced by Brazilian theatre practitioner and activist Augusto Boal in his key work *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where it is described as an interactive kind of theatre in which members of the audience are asked to replace or join some of the actors to change the problematic outcome of a given scene. This staged intervention thus comes to serve as a “rehearsal” of acting in reality (Boal 2008: 117-20).



first case, work has been done to de-stigmatise the image of the neighbourhood. Proposals have been made that have crossed over the borders of the territory, such as the aforesaid campaign of putting napkins in the bars that dismantle false assumptions about life in the neighbourhood. The action is simple: it consists of putting messages promoting the cultural diversity of the suburb in meeting places where xenophobic views are often expressed. This work has been accompanied by other actions such as the production of the short film [\*En San Cristóbal no nos comemos a nadie\*](#) (*In San Cristóbal we do not eat anyone*), or by carrying out activities like community revitalization, conflict mediation or leisure activities with young people, aimed at bringing together groups that have had no previous relationship with each other. Many of these actions have been organised under the slogan “Yo soy SanCris” (I am SanCris), appealing to a feeling of belonging and also to the spirit of the community. In the second case, work has been carried out under two central aspects, one of conflict prevention, where, by means of cultural undertakings, such as, among others, a radio programme and forum theatre, the project team has tried to include positive messages in ongoing activities. The other central aspect has been of a mediating nature, aimed at creating a protocol for conflicts in a specific square in the area, to avoid neighbourhood problems due to careless behaviour in public, in this case, making noise in the early hours of the morning.

After six years of intervention, the local community team still has two challenges which have made us consider the limits of the project. The first of these is to convert the community project into a community process based on what Gramsci would have called an “organic” perspective of the territory, which takes into account feelings or kinds of experience that have been excluded by hegemony. The second challenge is for the citizens to be able to play a more important role in their community construction process. Based on the results, and also taking into consideration that improving the citizens’ situation of coexistence ranks high on the municipal public agenda, these issues could be dealt with in the future.

#### *Logroño: Everything for the community, but without the citizens*

San José and Madre de Dios are two neighbourhoods in Logroño that have grown under the influence of different migratory cycles. Their current structure has resulted from internal migration in the 1950s and 60s, when Logroño required labour for construction or small industry, coming from the rural environment of La Rioja and other neighbouring provinces. The working-class population of the neighbourhood organised itself in the last years of Franco’s dictatorship around trade unions such as Comisiones Obreras (The Workers’ Commissions), and spaces linked to the church such as the Juventud Obrera Cristiana (Young Christian Workers). Its main actions were aimed against the repression of Franco’s regime from public memory, struggling for a democratic society and better working and living conditions. In this context, in the



1970s, the Neighbourhood Association was born. During the so-called democratic transition and until the 1990s, the demands of the neighbourhood movement vis-à-vis the administration focused on improving infrastructure such as the asphaltting of streets. There was also an active mobilisation to demand social improvements beyond the local context, such as those related to the anti-nuclear movement campaigning for the closure of the Garoña nuclear power plant, or in support of the state movement demanding that the Spanish government allocate 0.7% of gross domestic product to international cooperation in terms of official development assistance (ODA). The 2000s, marked by the incipient arrival of people from other countries as a result of international migratory movements, saw continued demand for the improvement of school and health infrastructures. Since then and until today, the culture of protest has been maintained, adapting to the needs and demands arising in the neighbourhood in a context of socio-demographic change (ageing of the indigenous population and multiculturalism), as well as new forms of community organisation, partly driven by the ICI project.

When the ICI project started in Logroño in 2010, the people living and working in the neighbourhoods of San José and Madre de Dios did not share a common understanding of community. The technical resources (social workers, educators, health workers, NGO staff, etc.) came to use it in the sense advocated by Marchioni, with “the community” existing to intervene with, or rather for citizenship. These technical resources had no experience in working according to a defined approach, so Marchioni’s proposal was accepted without any discussion. As we said before, Marchioni provides an operational definition of community, understanding it as the interaction between four elements: a defined territory, its population, the demands of the population – understood as problems and needs as well as aspirations and potentialities, and finally the existing resources, highlighting the people themselves as the most important one. The public institutions did not have a previous approach either, making them enthusiastically welcome the project proposal, which establishes the institutions as active and key participants in community intervention processes. This central role of the administration put it in a position where it had even more control over the social relations in the community. Marchioni’s descriptive approach to the concept of community initially made it possible to bring all social actors together to promote a community process characterised by relations of collaboration and cooperation. However, community thus conceptualized does not provide insights in terms of the existing unequal power relations, which did not make it easier for everyone to participate on equal terms – an ideal held high, after all, by Marchioni. Without a clear commitment on the part of all local actors, and especially the public authorities, to address the root causes of the neighbourhood’s malaise, the intervention approach loses its transformative potential.



Over time, different social actors have come to question the dominant construction of the community, understanding it from a polysemic perspective, which leads to debates in which consensus must be reached. The organised citizenry specifically experienced an awareness process, coming to the conclusion that the community process can be improved if the correlation of powers between the different social actors is modified. “Expert” citizens<sup>8</sup> decode the approach of the ICI project, seeing the possibility of influencing its methodological approach. They are committed to greater independence for citizens, and their full capacity to actively participate in the different steps of the process. Therefore, they do not only present strategies to pressure the institutions, but they also focus on empowering citizens through their participation. In this way, “expert” citizens seek to ensure that the needs expressed by the citizens are heard. They insist that community organisation does not depend on the abilities and interests of technical and institutional resources. And they exert pressure that the simple coordination of resources is overcome in order to move towards an efficient exercise of citizenship by the neighbourhood inhabitants.

Paradoxically, the fact that the community process did not address structural factors such as, among others, job insecurity, the difficulty of access to housing and school segregation, did much to raise citizens’ awareness of their subordinate position in the process. This awareness is achieved by questioning a key argument, mainly put forward by technical resources, that it is allegedly impossible to address the structural dimension of the needs felt by citizens, as these situations are said to be beyond the community’s direct sphere of control. Although it is true that an organised community cannot change the dynamics of property speculation or the labour market by itself, it can nevertheless develop actions of political advocacy, mutual support, promotion of associations, trade unionism, to just name a few, aimed at improving its own situation. Therefore, what really underlies the technocratic key argument is the deliberate exercise of the position of power claimed by certain technical and institutional resources, aimed at maintaining social control without favouring real processes of social transformation.

### **Discussion: How to achieve real change?**

Based on the above, several questions arise regarding the idea of community construction, which has been included in the ICI project. The first question relates to the technocratic cave which Marchioni warned about. For him, the technocratic cave was the

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<sup>8</sup> Expert citizens are those who due to their training, participation in the neighbourhood movement, social movements, trade unions, etc. have a background of participation in the community. They are recognised by the community and have the power to influence the decisions that are taken in the different spaces of relationship and participation.



risk that technical resources could become excessively important to such an extent that they would be able to take steps without the citizens' participation, merely demanding their assistance. Thus, one of the unsought effects is that the construction of the community has been removed from social participation under the supervision of the institutions involved in the project. It can be assumed that there is preventive control over any social activity that may have an impact on the community's status quo. This way of governing the social factor, either directly or indirectly, prevents the development of citizens' initiatives and is an explicit manifestation of the function of social control. At the same time, it shows the inability of the social agents who should be exercising social transformation functions to understand the complexity and scope of the community in its actual processes.

We can classify this as a passive revolution, recovering the Gramscian concept that refers to the possibility of creating changes in society without involving the people in that decision-making:

The concept of passive revolution must be rigorously deduced from the two fundamental principles of political science: 1) that no social formation disappears while the productive forces that have been created in it still find room for their further progressive movement; 2) that society does not impose tasks on itself for the solution of which the necessary conditions have not been incubated. (Gramsci 1971: 106-107)

In this case, there is a risk of just generating "aesthetic" changes that prevent the citizens from making real changes (Hall 1990: 114), which in the long term leads to a series of problems of a more general nature. Glossing over complex issues of true general interest for the sake of administrative and technocratic effectivity is likely to result in an erosion of the bourgeois democratic model in favour of populist discourses.

This is the same thing that is denounced by both Rancière (2004) and Martinsen (2017): the community has to be capable of creating dissent – if not, it is doomed to a kind of passive participation, without really taking into account the criteria of the citizens. The strategy for stimulating this passive kind of participation is that what is created is not based on political problems but on abstract constructions (Rancière 2004; Joseph 2002). We must opt for a specific policy that is capable of creating political subjects from dissent, something that the political elite in Spain is not generally willing to accept. From our point of view, under the umbrella of Rancière, politics should therefore be understood as a process and not as the separation of one party from the rest.

This view of politics as a process can be interpreted as one of the achievements of the ICI project in the way that Pittel (2018) proposes the idea of feelings without structures. Following Williams, we understand culture as a process that is actively lived





and experienced, and the structure of feeling as the core of culture and its transformation, which allows cultural change. The elements of cultural pre-emergence are located in the structure of feeling, what is currently lived, and not only thought to be lived (Williams 1977: 131). The existence of racist, xenophobic, or exclusionary sentiments occurs in the vulnerable territories, but focused community action prevents them from coming to fruition in structures that change lifestyles in these neighbourhoods.

In this sense, the community in the intervention neighbourhoods has found itself in ambivalence. On the one hand, emphasis has been placed on their active and participatory construction, despite the technical burden already explained. On the other hand, work with already existing communities was undertaken, which had been romanticised from a reinforcing identity process with the “Yo soy” (I am) strategy, as explained in the case of San Cristóbal. This “I am” is based on Marchioni’s operative definition, which can be understood to have an empty signifier, an element whose meaning is taken for granted while it is really in political dispute. Thus, the strategy can be dangerously reversed, and tap on the neighbourhood’s nostalgic past and accept xenophobic discourses that raise the issue of the diversification of the neighbourhood as being the main problem. The figure of the migrant or other groups that do not operate in the logic of capitalist valorisation (Joseph 2002: 28) are sought as the scapegoat for the structural problems produced by the capitalist mode of production, so as to promote their exclusion. Like Hall, we believe that “the capacity to *live with difference* is [...] the coming question of the twenty-first century” (1993: 361, emphasis in original). Therefore, our definition always starts with the diversity of subjects and the heterogeneity of processes found in practice. It is through the joint action of these, without giving in to the abstract idealism of thinking, that when everyone participates, a common, historical and contingent collective position may be created that can transform what we will routinely call community.

Therefore, although the community is a discursive product, it is part of the fabric of diverse subjects that are interdependent, with diverse and common interests that are in constant relationship. Community is a field of constant exploration that allows for inclusion and exclusion, oppression and emancipation. As we have seen, this is the crucial supplementary element for capitalism. But we must avoid functionalism here: the community, as a collective subject, may be transformed and become open to the possibility of emancipation (Joseph 2002: 29). The weakness lies in the precariousness of material life on which conflicts may be constructed (Borgstede 2018) in neighbourhoods like San Cristóbal, Madre de Dios and San José, and the question arises: how do we accompany communities in this war of positions to work towards a shift in common sense – in terms of an authentically diverse and democratic “culture in common” rather than a mere reflection of liberal and capitalist hegemony?



We do not have a definite answer to this question. Based on a reading of Williams' novels, David Harvey (1995) suggests a dialectic between the local and particular on the one hand, and the abstract and general on the other. Problems are particular in affecting the community locally and calling for local responses. But for problem-solving, higher and more general levels of analysis are often seen as indispensable, which runs the risk of abstracting too much from the particularities of a place. Thus, when community problems in the project territories are tackled by organised groups and technical resources with a social awareness grounded in abstract analysis and authoritative discourses, their work is likely to fall into substitutionism and perpetuate the technocratic cave, which is linked to the idea of community as service as defined by Williams (2017: 430). He explained that those public servants – which we can identify as technical resources and administration – tried to introduce their ethics in the working class and they did not respond, because they did not feel this form of community as their own (2017: 432).

Breaking the consensus and fighting for “the hearts and minds of the people” (Borgstede 2018: 123) cannot remain on the merely discursive level, which results in favouring a community identity policy through devices such as the “I am” that problematically allow a reversal of exclusion.

### **Conclusion: Going beyond the liberal community**

The ten years of development of the ICI project have occurred during the greatest crisis in the history of the capitalist mode of production. Ten years during which there has been a rise in social protest, inclusive and exclusive populist movements (Lobera and Parejo 2019), and the restructuring of communities themselves. It was in this context that the “la Caixa” Banking Foundation made a firm commitment to carry out a project in economically depressed and super-diverse communities. We believe that, in addition to the foundation's philanthropic outlook, this has been due to the fact that the communities are articulated as a complementary element, which permits the flow of capital for its valorisation, thus simultaneously creating a network of interdependencies that guarantees the livelihood of those who are part of them.

But is there a commitment to changing reality? Although the project has achieved some tangible political results, such as introducing, among others, the coexistence discourse into the local public agenda, the big question would be whether we have generated a breeding ground to create political subjects or only passive subjects.

We have also come up against the short-term policies of the liberal bourgeois democracies, such as town councils that have blocked designed proposals when they



have realised that those involve greater participation of social sectors that have traditionally been excluded in the elaboration and decision making of public policies. From the perspective of Marco Marchioni, the ICI project has demanded that democracy be “taken seriously”. However, at the moment of truth, the liberal framework, with its limitations, has revealed the inability to think about the community over and above its own ideological coordinates. The community is problematically taken for granted, seen as something static and sacred, allegedly made up of individuals living in a certain place. While nostalgically elevated at times, the liberal community remains inherently ahistorical and pre-political.

Taking democracy seriously means transcending the liberal framework; it means making conflicts visible and restoring class struggle as the driving force of social change. It implies understanding communities in terms of their material processes, which transform and characterise them, without glossing over contradictions. Constructing the community as based on the logic of opposition and dissent allows us to think collectively, allows us to revert the terms and create the subject as a collective subject instead of an individual subject.

The community is constructed. And in that construction our job is to put all our effort into creating inclusive communities, fighting against normalised hierarchies, and providing areas for relationships where people can meet and work together with a clear methodology but willing to face and analyse conflict. This requires a perspective for transcending capitalism, the ability to manage not only the decision of where such and such a budget item goes, but what policy will be established, for whose benefit, how it is going to be created and enforced. Here we cannot see the community from a nostalgic point of view.

We believe, like Williams, that we must remain faithful to the idea of community as solidarity and assume a working-class perspective, which allows us to put the stress on community politics, “working directly with people”. At the same time, we must extend the borders of inclusion: the LGBTIQ community, migrants, and other minority groups. Solidarity, like community, is constituted relationally. Critical community intervention should propose “an alternative set of relationships” (1976: 66), creating new spaces for those connections. A structure of feeling entails social experience that is lived but not closed and objectified, a structure of feeling does not end or set the social forms (1977: 128-31). It is in the community, understood as a “community of [...] feelings” (1976: 65), where we can work out our conflicts.

Creating inclusive communities implies knowing the social dynamics that are reproduced in them as well as the relationships of power between those who make up the community. Institutions can be oppressive agents. So can citizens, but if they take a leading role, they might assume the role of “community agents”, which would be one



that seeks to transform relationships of power by being aware of the causes and consequences of existing oppressive relationships, and then decide at each moment what strategy to use to change reality: either conflict or cooperation. Renouncing conflict, assuming that the rules of the liberal democracy game are a sufficient framework to change reality, means to renounce the objective of creating emancipated communities.

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