Luke Fernandez

Cultural Encounters

Memories of Privilege and Deprivation in 1970's Spain

I remember in the late spring of 1971 thinking about our family's upcoming field trip to northern Spain. My father had just earned a year and a half sabbatical from Dartmouth College where he was a professor of anthropology. He, along with my mother, had established a field site in the Asturian village of Felechosa during the mid sixties. We were about to return there so they could continue ethnographic work.

Felechosa, Spain, circa 1966. Boys pretending to herd, the corncobs representing cattle. Photograph by Renate Fernandez.

I could only recall fleeting memories of our previous trip in 1965—an ornery goat pushing my mother and me out of a pasture, and being given a sip of sweet black coffee in a dimly lit village kitchen. My older sister recalled a bit more, and between her recollections and my parents' slides I was able to anticipate a little of what I thought awaited me. When one of my father's students asked me whether I was looking forward to the trip, I said that I wasn't sure. Instead of Hanover's paved streets and the green lawns of New Hampshire, I knew, from looking at the slides, that we were going someplace with cobblestone streets. Not nicely laid cobblestones but un-crafted rock gathered from the local river with plenty of mud and dirt to grout the gaps. Indeed, enough mud and dirt that most of the kids, in the slides anyway, seemed to be walking around in the streets in rubber boots or wooden shoes called madrenyas.

I couldn't articulate all of this to my father's inquiring student, but it was summed up in my pronouncement that we were going someplace "muddy." Left unregistered was the fact that even though my parents were giving up the accoutrements of easy American suburban living, my sacrifice, with respect to the mud anyway, was as big as theirs. After all, being only an average second grader's height, I was a lot closer to the mud than they ever were likely to be, and, knowing my parents as only a child does, I could pretty much count on them prodding me to muck about in it if I ever wanted to make friends with all the other boys.

As it happened, my trepidations were not very misplaced. My father, for some reason unfathomable to me, had chosen to study a village in the rainiest and greenest place in all of sunny yellow Spain. Most people probably think of the color yellow when they think of the Iberian Peninsula. Yellow is the color of the wheat fields on the high arid Spanish meseta. It's the color of Spanish paella, and it colors a large portion of the Spanish flag. If Spain doesn't evoke yellow, it usually evokes the color red, whether one is thinking, again, of the Spanish flag, or chorizo, or the ubiquity of red wine. But our part of Spain was really mostly green or gray—green verdant fields watered by the seemingly endless drizzles from gray skies blowing in from the Cantabrian Sea. These colors, as they were embedded in the rain, the muck and cattle dung, became constant companions.

I remember on our first day in the village I was balancing on a fence and, spying a big mound of dirt, I jumped onto it. But the dirt turned out only to be a large pile of cow dung that had been scraped out of a nearby cattle stall. A few days of rare sun had crusted over the mound, so it looked solid to my inexperienced eyes. But when I leaped onto it, I sank at least up to my knees. My mother took me down to the river where I washed off. I'd learned an important lesson, but it was hardly my only battle to keep the muck at bay. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It must have been right after Dartmouth's second winter quarter when we left because I remember driving south from New Hampshire to New York City and the snow-covered ground gave way in the car ride down. Being in second grade, I didn't need to travel to a foreign country to experience something novel, and I remember noting with some surprise that the climate actually seemed to get warmer as we drove south—apparently winter didn't happen everywhere at the same time, although up to that moment in my life I must have thought that it did.

Although we returned to the United States on a plane, on the voyage out we

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embarked on the Leonardo da Vinci, one of the many ocean liners soon to be displaced by the jet age. The first day on the ship was fun, and I distinctly recall steaming out past the Statue of Liberty and my mother, who'd emigrated to the U.S. from Germany at the inception of WWII, observing how happy and relieved the passengers had been to see the Statue on her voyage in. A lot of people on her ship, including her mother, hadn't been too sure whether they were really going to make it to America from war-torn Europe.

Although I'm sure our transatlantic crossing out was relatively uneventful compared to my mother's passage during the war, from the perspective of a second grader it still wasn't without incident. For one thing, the ship was big and appeared to me rather labyrinthine. More than once I got a lump in my throat while trying to navigate back to our cabin from daily wanderings. I guess my mother figured that on a ship it was ok for a kid of my age to roam freely. While I must have appreciated this freedom when wandering out, I was less happy when it came time to make my way back to the cabin. Its precise location eluded me, and it seemed that more than once it took forever to locate it. The voyage was also my first exposure to the highs and lows that so often accompany leaving home. I'd never experienced lavish food service (although having never seen a waiter or a white tablecloth before, anything would have appeared extraordinary). But with fine food also came seasickness, that culminated, when I was lucky, with throwing up into the sea, or once, when I was unlucky, into the bed sheets.

After six days, the Leonardo anchored off the Rock of Gibraltar and we took a smaller ship to shore. As I learned later from one of my father's graduate students, in the scheme of anthropological arrivals ours was a very soft one. (As this student recounted to me, he'd made his plans to go to his field site in Indonesia with very little money, and when the time came to fly there he was running a fever of 103. He couldn't afford to delay, so he took the flight anyway and landed in Jakarta delirious, with his fever still in tow.) My parents found a hotel in Algeciras with a room that had a balcony overlooking a small orange grove. The bathroom had a bidet, which I'd never seen before, but I didn't have the apocryphal American encounter with this curious device, very likely because of some warnings from my well-traveled mother.

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Probably because I wasn't terribly literate yet, I took special note of the water fixtures which were dotted either blue or red—a much more sensible choice of signs then the "H" and "C" stamped on the faucets that we'd left back in the States. In the coming months I was to experience some serious culture shock and some acute longings for home. But the colored bathroom fixtures and the

Felechosa, Spain, circa 1966. Panorama of village. Photograph by Renate Fernandez.

more intuitively designed road signs made a lot more sense to my simple iconographic mind than the more lettered forms of bath and roadside communication common in America.

I'm not sure whether most anthropologists make a bee line for their field sites once sabbatical begins (I'd guess they might), but this didn't seem to be my parents' plan—we did a good deal of wandering. First we went to Casas Viejas to visit a friend of my father's who was researching a book on the anarchists of the region, whose uprising sparked the Spanish Civil War in 1936. For me, Casas Viejas was more significant in that it marked my first, but hardly my last, encounter with loose bowels in a foreign land. As a second grader I was naturally oblivious to Casas Viejas's historical significance. My field of vision wasn't as confined as it had been a few years earlier, but it was still very narrow. In Casas Viejas my most memorable experience was, like in Algeciras, bathroom related. Unlike American toilet bowls, the toilet bowl I used in Casas Viejas contained very little water, and the water reservoir was mounted high overhead instead of at the accustomed location directly behind the toilet. To flush, instead of pushing a chrome handle on the toilet itself, one pulled on a chain. This action released a deluge into the bowl (and was accompanied by the suction of rushing water) that was much stronger than any flush I'd experienced in the States. This was the predominant toilet design that I encountered in Spain at the time. Occasionally when we were staying at fancier hotels, I'd come across designs that looked like American ones, and sometimes when we were at a bar or cafe I'd wander into the men's room and be confronted with a simple ceramic square with two raised footpads and a hole in the center. But the design I usually encountered had had the big reservoir overhead with a bowl that held very little water except during the actual flush.

I don't think I dwelled on these differences at the time. The toilets were simply one novelty among many others that I tried to adjust to without extended reflection—new stuff was coming at me much faster than it is now and there wasn't time for this kind of thing. But it's still a core memory and a defining experience for me in moving from one culture to another. Now that I'm 47, I tend to look for more edifying details when contrasting European living to American life, but I'm pretty sure that as a second grader, edification wasn't a concern.

From Casas Viejas in the heart of Andalusia, we drove west to Lisbon where my father was picking up a beige colored Land Rover that had been shipped there from Britain and whose purchase, I'm pretty sure, was being defrayed by some grant money. In later years my parents simply leased standard

European cars that they would pick up in Paris and drive down to Spain. I don't think we actually really needed a Land Rover to do fieldwork (I certainly don't remember a lot of off-road driving), but maybe it was just one of those accoutrements of field work, like a portable Olivetti typewriter, that seemed like a need at the time.

Felechosa, Spain, circa 1971. The Fernandez' sporting madrenyas. Photograph by Renate Fernandez.

My parents ended up paying dearly for the Land Rover, if not in price, at least in time and headache, because when we got to Lisbon the Land Rover wasn't ready for delivery, and we ended up spending the next three weeks waiting for it to be processed through customs. I don't have a clue what my father did all day, but to bide the time my mother took me and my brother and sister around to different pastry shops. We hung out at the park, watched countless military parades, and began, probably at my mother's instigation, to keep scrap-books, journals and stamp collections, and to puzzle through comic books that my mother would never have allowed us to peruse when in the States but which we were allowed to read in Iberia as a way of learning the language. However sunny and nice Lisbon appeared to me, my father couldn't have been too pleased in idling away three weeks, and if I wasn't tuned into the problem directly, there were at least signs of tension in the fact that we kept moving to progressively cheaper hotels, and my father kept complaining about the "fat cat" custom agents who were waylaying his carefully laid research plans.

I was insulated from these worries, and as a result, I remember these early days in Lisbon fondly, except that it was the place where I first confronted privilege as an experience, if not as a word, with a full panoply of academic resonances. As a seven year old, I was much too young to frame the experience in reference to a word or to the broader interpretive problems which my parents must have struggled with in their ethnography. But that didn't mean that I was oblivious to them, or that my parents allowed me to be oblivious to them, and various incidents served to introduce the problems to me.

On our way to Lisbon we stopped briefly in another big town (probably Seville), where I spied horse-drawn carriages ferrying well-clad people around the city streets. The livery was fairly ornamental and the mode of transportation novel, so naturally I expressed an interest in sampling it. But my parents resoundingly rejected the idea, probably because, as anthropologists, they wanted

to maintain some distance from an experience, which in retrospect, was oriented to tourists. My understanding of the situation was different. The people in the carriages enjoyed a level of refinement and grace, which my parents apparently couldn't or didn't want to afford. As a result I felt a sense of distance between what we were doing in Spain and what these other foreigners were doing. My parents probably felt a sense of satisfaction in maintaining this distance. As anthropologists they probably thought there were certain virtues in avoiding the experiences of tourists and travelers, but from my standpoint it simply felt like deprivation and unattained social status.

I became more aware of the real (or imagined) differences between what my parents were trying to experience (or at least record) and what a tourist was trying to experience the longer we stayed in Spain, but I certainly didn't understand these things at the inception of our trip, and since we were taking luxury ocean liners and staying (at least occasionally) in nice hotels and driving a vehicle (e.g. the Land Rover), which drew more attention than a typical Spanish car, the differences confused me. Much to my parents' embarrassment, I quickly zeroed in on the Spanish hotel rating systems and diligently recorded in my journals the number of stars that were accorded to each hotel we stayed at. It may have been that my father's National Science Foundation grant was particularly well funded, that my parents were profligate, or that Spanish upscale hotels in the early '70s were much more affordable to the American academic class than they are now. But whatever the fiscal reasons, we did manage to stay in at least a few, and I began most of my journal entries with the proper star observations.

When we first arrived at our hotel in Lisbon, a porter no older than myself took our baggage upstairs. While this seemed curious to me, I don't think the import of it was driven home to me until my father commented on it. I don't recall what he said exactly, but I know that a bit of filial security withered in the aftermath. I might be the son of a middle-class American anthropologist who got to experience the luxuries that attend this unique place in the world, but I hadn't done anything to deserve this place. In fact, but for the grace of god or happenstance, I might have been the porter lugging the Fernandez' luggage up to the room. I can't say for sure whether my father's comment was sparked by a perception that a son of his was a little too interested in the finer things in life,

Felechosa, Spain, circa 1966. Children on cart. Photograph by Renate Fernandez.

whether he was trying to show how culture is tied up with fortune, or whether he thought that he could reconcile his own qualms about doing anthropology and having a little luxury by asking me to tackle the problem. If it was the last of these, I probably didn't meet this challenge very well (in his eyes anyway) since I maintained the record of hotel stars more assiduously the longer we traveled.

My parents' desire to restrain the casual embrace of luxury and materialism and to cultivate its opposite was expressed on other occasions as well. For example, my mother counseled me to enjoy our various hotels' amenities while they lasted, because when we reached our field site, things like hot water would be in scant supply. She must have been in close communication with the villagers because her predictions panned out. When we got to Felechosa, the only flat that was available didn't have central heating or hot water. Instead of jumping in the shower, we'd heat water on the stove and mix it with cold water in the bidet. In fact, that's what I thought bidets were for: an appliance for facilitating sponge baths when the faucet with the red mark failed to deliver what it promised. The one time I took a shower as opposed to a sponge bath, my father told me how it was building character and that for sure this was distinguishing me from all of the coddled friends I'd left back in New Hampshire. The character-building must have had a transitory effect, because when I returned I certainly didn't notice that I'd become better or tougher than my peers. Maybe if New Hampshire had suddenly lost all its hot water, I could have shown my friends my steely fortitude, but somehow this opportunity didn't arise.

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Our suburban life in New Hampshire was very middle class compared to what I was experiencing abroad, and this befuddled me. Up until our voyage, I hadn't experienced (or at least couldn't recall experiencing) a hotel, let alone a luxury hotel, or a fully liveried horse drawn carriage, or an ocean liner that was designed to lavish passengers with the accoutrements of the good life. On the other hand, I hadn't experienced the harrows of diarrhea and seasickness or the muck and dung that confronted me once we arrived at our field site. I realized that, compared to the villagers, it sure looked like we were well off. Once I appalled my mother by uttering "we're rich" in a way that only a second grader can, before one has adopted more adult sensibilities about how exactly to speak about wealth. But if we were relatively rich in local terms, it wasn't without a set of deprivations that wore greatly on the mind of a second grader. I'd had to leave all my toys at home, including my bike. Our apartment in the village didn't have a phone or hot water, and our furnishings were very bare. Instead of a proper closet, I lived out of a steamer trunk. Once, when I grabbed some loose pesetas and attempted to go down to the corner store to buy an ice cream, I was stopped by my parents who said we could no longer afford these trivial expenses—

according to them "the dollar had dropped," and things that had once been affordable suddenly were not. Other deprivations also were hard to endure. The lack of corn flakes and rice krispies, peanut butter, ketchup and frozen concentrated orange juice were staples of a civilized life, and I think I missed them more than I would miss a cup of coffee now that I'm an adult.

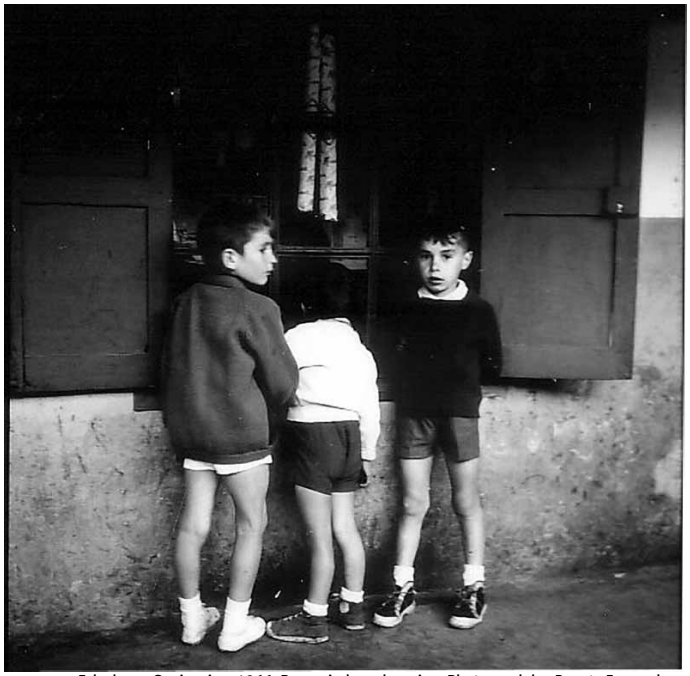
My parents themselves were used to the hardships of the field. In the '50s they did field work in western and southern Africa and lived in pretty trying circumstances. One photo of my father in equatorial Africa portrays an uncharacteristically gaunt man poling a dug-out through a swamp. He looked this way, according to my mother, because he was afflicted by malaria and intestinal parasites that, again according to my mother, were particularly hard for a man to endure because the afflicted would occasionally "give birth" to a long worm while on the toilet.

Felechosa, Spain, circa 1966/1972. Harvesting 'escanda.' Escanda, the only wheat that can be grown in Northern Spain, is hard to harvest. Its yields are low compared to wheat that is grown on the Spanish plain. Photograph by Renate Fernandez.

So my parents were no strangers to hardship or to primitive field sites. In Spain, my father was primarily interested in a group of people who made modest livings through agriculture or through mining, and in the differences between these two lifeways. This interest, together with left-of-center political inclinations, made him skeptical of anthropologists who made a profession of studying (and being around) the wealthy. For a time I think he was even more comfortable around farmers and miners than around the Spanish middle class that was emerging in the wake of the Franco years. Their sensibilities were more in keeping with his than the growing number of metropolitan Spaniards who today consume Pedro Almodóvar's racier films. All of these things (along with the vocation of anthropology itself) predisposed my parents to regard luxury and easy living with some ambivalence.

Given these commitments, I was allowed to experience and appreciate some luxuries, but not in the full and guilt-free way that might have had more appeal to a seven-year-old. If I'd been wiser I might have been able to anticipate these ascetic challenges based on the fact that during our previous trip to Spain, when I was three, my parents had celebrated Christmas by giving me a picture of a tricycle rather than an actual tricycle. This made sense to them since we were abroad at the time and couldn't be burdened by a lot of material possessions. The picture was supposed to stand in for the actual material item until we got back to the States. As a three-year-old I was being given a nice material good—but not before learning about delayed gratification and the difference between virtual and real possessions. During our 1971 trip I was offered similar lessons as well. Toward the latter half of our first

summer, my parents felt that I wasn't picking up Spanish as quickly as they would have liked. So to force an immersion experience, they let the local priest, Don Francisco, drive me up to a high mountain summer pasture where he left me for a week with a family that was harvesting hay and taking care of their cows. We lived in a summer stable which we shared with the cows and some goats. It didn't have any plumbing, and at night we burned oil lamps for light. I don't think my parents researched the situation too closely beforehand because, for the first week, I found myself sharing one bed with the father and his son. I imagine that this arrangement would have been easier for a seven-year-old to adjust to than someone who was older, but I still don't remember the sleeping arrangements as very comfortable. After the first week, my mother came up to check on how things were working out and I told her about the crowded sleeping. Taking sympathy, she brought a mattress up the following day for me to sleep on, which definitely seemed like a privilege since everyone else in the household was sharing a bed. But somehow the father took the mattress over as his own, and I was still left sleeping with the son – as he explained it to me, he was working hard in the fields and needed it more than I did.



Felechosa, Spain, circa 1966. Boys window-shopping. Photograph by Renate Fernandez.

Privilege and hardship weren't always doled out by my parents through design. Sometimes they were experienced through happenstance. For example, when school started in the fall (a one-room affair with one "maestro" teaching first through fourth grade), beatings regularly were meted out for disciplinary infractions or whenever a teacher thought the student was exhibiting sheer idiocy. These involved slaps on the head, kicks on the butt, and general admonishments about how stupid someone was. From my perspective, they were quite dramatic affairs to watch – I certainly hadn't seen anything like this in the States. It definitely made me watch my step. Still, one day I did commit a small infraction which my deskmate dutifully reported to the teacher, and I steeled myself for a beating. It never came, though. As the maestro explained to my deskmate, I was special and needed to be treated differently. I can't recollect exactly what made me special – maybe he said I was especially stupid —but it probably had something to do with my father's lofty educational attainments (as seen from the perspective of the maestro) and probably because my own stumbling Spanish didn't qualify as the same sort of idiocy which the maestro was interested in punishing.

In the winter we moved to the city—the lack of heating and hot water was simply too much to endure over the winter months in the mountains – and there I enrolled in a much larger school where the teacher didn't care a wit who my family was. Because I was placed in second grade rather than third as a result of my still faltering Spanish, I tended to act out around my classmates, who were a little younger than I, and this provoked the ire of the professor. Unlike the village maestro, the city maestro seemed to single me out, and I received some memorable slaps across the face for various infractions. This, over the course of an entire life, has been my only experience with corporal punishment, and I think it actually did build character—for a while, anyway, I was much less afraid of physical punishment.

When we returned to the States in the fall of 1972, other things eventually subsumed the experience of privilege and deprivation. But there were two events that made me revisit it before life went on to other things. The first happened directly when coming back to our house. We'd stored all of our possessions in a locked closet so that we could rent the house out. Now that we'd returned, I eagerly asked to have it unlocked, envisioning the treasure trove of toys that I imagined I'd left behind for the last year and a half. But when we actually opened the closet, the experience was very anti-climactic. There weren't any toys – or if there were some, they no longer interested me. For a year and a half, I had looked forward to a redemptive return that would be repopulated with all of these missing material goods. But if these material goods actually ever existed, they were much larger in my imagination than in actual fact. For a child of seven, a year and half abroad is a very long time—at that age it's more than 20% of one's life—and during the harder moments it felt like exile. I invented or exaggerated the value of these toys (and my return to them) as a way of sustaining me through this exile.

After a few months back in the U.S., I wrote letters to my friends back in Spain. If writing letters on one's own initiative seems a little precocious at the age of eight, don't get the idea that I cooked the idea up on my own. Surely my parents were interested in sustaining friendships (for one thing, future field work depended on maintaining these relationships), and I wouldn't put it past them to have attempted to do some of this networking through me. I remember that one letter was particularly painful to write, because my parents required me to write multiple drafts. Although there were no toys at home, my new elemen-

Felechosa, Spain, circa 1966. Banquet for First Communion. Photograph by Renate Fernandez.

tary school was much better endowed financially than the schools I'd attended in Spain. For me, this was epitomized during gym class when, instead of kicking around one precious soccer ball as we did in Spain, we'd play dodge ball with an avalanche of red rubber balls. I bragged to my Spanish friends about this bounty. But my parents, sensitive to some invidious subtext I wasn't yet aware of, made me draft a new letter without the offending passage.

In my glummer moments in Spain, my parents would remind me that I'd appreciate the experience as I aged. Although they've misestimated many things about me, they were perceptive in this one respect. Forty years later I live a very settled existence in the middle of Utah. I don't travel very much and I doubt sometimes whether my upbringing has stamped me in any distinguishable way. But one thing is for sure: our year and a half in Spain in the early seventies was different from my states-side existence, and significantly so, especially in both its highs and its lows. Sometimes there was more privilege and more luxury, but at other times I experienced real hardship and deprivation. This last awareness probably accounts for my continued reluctance to spend money. In that respect I am still a child of the sixties and seventies in the then-backward Spain. And that is so even though the Spanish village of my childhood is now integrated into a flourishing European economy that has embraced consumer culture.

Our venture abroad, at least from my standpoint, strayed very far from the comfortable and virtuous middle class of my parents. It left me with an enduring sense of unjustified privilege, the ever possibility of a sudden change in standard of living and a resulting caution about material things. I really can't be sure of the ever presence of that past. Who could be? But there is something fundamental and enduring in that long-ago experience – another time, another place – that inspires me to dwell on it.

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