

Introduction

Translating the crisis

Over the last decade, the notion of ‘crisis’ has been a central part of our lives. From the economic crisis that started in 2008 to heated discussions on an impending climate crisis and the multiple political crises that several countries have experienced, our time is characterised by a widespread malaise, a sense of fragility and uncertainty that seems to restrict our ability to predict how events and situations will develop – in fact, the global crisis triggered by the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as this book goes into production has only served to enhance this feeling. In the light of these series of recent changes, several theorists have argued that even our perception of time, which was already undergoing major transformations, has changed altogether. While ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2011) has claimed that we are living ‘after the future’, as we are no longer psychologically able to conceive it, the late Zygmunt Bauman (2017) suggested that we have moved from a belief in ‘utopias’ to one based on ‘retrotopias’: instead of holding the modern view that the future ‘will always be better’, we are returning to the ancient conception of the past as a lost ‘golden age’.

While the frailty and disruption caused by this sense of crisis are hard to deny, a historical detour can often shed new light on contemporary events. As Reinhart Koselleck (2006, 358) reminded us, the word ‘crisis’ – like many other cognates: *crisi*, *Krise*, *crise* – derives from the Ancient Greek κρίσις (*krisis*), which generally referred to a separation, a decision, or a judgment. The latter meaning was particularly relevant, as it encompassed both the legal context in which a matter had to be judged and the decisive choice that an individual – a doctor, a military leader, or a judge – made in a complex situation. After the 17th and 18th centuries, the term found its way across numerous European languages, undergoing a process of expansion in meaning and becoming incorporated into the lexicon of politics, economy, and history (*ibid.*). Within this diversity of senses, however, a few constants can be traced: a ‘crisis’ marks a relevant moment for a society, either as an end or as a ‘transition’, and it is always subject to ‘disagreements’ between different interpretations, as the assessment of its origins and causes depends ‘on the judgmental criteria used to diagnose that condition’ (Koselleck 2006, 361).

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Although historical awareness is unlikely to dismiss our malaise and uncertainty about the present, it can contribute to providing it with a new *political* component. As Koselleck shows, there is no unique and all-encompassing explanation for any given crisis; neither its origins, nor the answers to it, are undisputable or predetermined. Quite the contrary, in fact, as they depend on those ‘judgmental criteria’ that are deployed to understand it. In this sense, therefore, interpretations of the ‘crisis’ are manifold and can be *challenged*. For instance, the psychoanalyst Jorge Alemán has vocally opposed the notion of an ‘economic crisis’, claiming it is merely a disguise for a new process of economic accumulation (Alemán 2018, 15–17). According to Alemán, this process is based on accusing citizens and societies of overspending and ‘living beyond their means’, which makes them lose ‘the confidence of the markets’. Subsequently, in order to ‘restore’ this ‘confidence’, they are forced to make adjustments and sacrifices. However, as we have seen on multiple occasions, this ‘confidence’ proves to be elusive and citizens never know whether the increasing number of cuts and waves of austerity will ever be enough to ‘restore’ it.

Between 2011 and 2016, a series of mass protests took to the streets across a wide variety of nations with the very purpose of defending a different understanding of the crises that their countries were experiencing. Often subsumed under the rubric of the ‘movement of the squares’ (Gerbaudo 2017), the actions, problems, and social composition of these protests were extremely diverse. While some of these movements faced ‘ageing dictatorships’ (Gerbaudo 2017, 55), as in the case of the Arab uprisings (Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya), others criticised the shortcomings of democratic systems (Flesher Fominaya 2017), as in Greece, Spain, and the United States. However, they all shared an intense repudiation of local and global elites, blaming them for placing their own interests before those of the majority of the people. As unemployment skyrocketed, prices increased, and basic services underwent drastic cuts, these movements aimed to give each ‘crisis’ a fairer and more collective response from below.

In this context of global unrest and critique, this book focuses upon the Spanish 15M movement and its afterlives to trace and understand the role of translation in the construction and evolution of a whole set of citizen responses to the ‘crisis’. As will be discussed over the following pages, translation – understood not only as a linguistic, but also a conceptual and political practice – has played a central, yet frequently unacknowledged role in these popular responses, which range from the development of a new activist lexicon to experiments with forms of protest and collective agency, the development of alternative means of communication, or a conscious way of seeking commonality with other collectives, among many others. In discussion and debate with researchers on other social movements (such as Baker 2016a, 2016b and Doerr 2018), I will argue that, through this variety of translational engagements with social reality, Spanish citizens have contributed to a questioning of official narratives on the ‘crisis’, while doing their utmost to turn it into an opportunity for change.

Translation within the 15M ‘climate’

As [Chapter 2](#) will outline in greater detail, the 15M movement started with a series of occupations of squares and public spaces in May and June 2011 to protest against the consequences and management of the economic crisis. Following the Arab uprisings, the 15M played an important role in the evolution of the movement of the squares, giving rise to its first European and Western ‘cluster’ (Gerbaudo 2017, 31). Although occupations only lasted a few weeks, the 15M left a profound imprint upon Spanish society. In this sense, it quickly went beyond the strict notion of a movement to become what thinkers have characterised as a ‘climate’ (Fernández-Savater 2012a) or as a ‘political cycle’ (Rodríguez 2016, 15–18), in order to emphasise the continuity between the movement and later initiatives. This is the angle that I adopt in this book, understanding the 15M as a contested period of Spanish history with different timings and internal tensions, which will themselves be discussed later in this introduction.

Due to its centrality to Spanish society, there is an abundant and solid bibliography on the 15M and its origins (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014, 121–150; Flesher Fominaya 2015a, 2015b), intellectual debates (Kornetis 2014; Moreno-Caballud 2015; Prádanos 2018), and subsequent evolution (Delclós 2015; Rivero 2015; Antentas 2017), along with collective works covering a wide range of related areas (Cagiao and Touton 2019; Zazo and Torres 2019). However, other than my own work (Fernández 2018, 2020a), little attention has been paid to the important role that translation has played within this new political cycle. As [Chapter 1](#) will show, this is far from surprising considering the general lack of studies on the role of translation in this global wave of protests (Baker 2016b, 10–12).

In the context of this monograph, I understand ‘translation’ in a broad sense, as required by the variety of materials and the fluid understanding of participants involved. Over recent years, different scholars have argued that translation has become a key signifier across numerous disciplines (Nergaard and Arduini 2011; Blumczynski 2016), in ways that transcend the strictly linguistic practice traditionally associated with it. In previous texts (Fernández 2018; Evans and Fernández 2018, 8–10), I have shown that the concept of translation has a long tradition of usages in the field of politics that frequently exceed standard definitions within Translation Studies. Similarly, Mona Baker (2016b, 3) has noted in the context of the Egyptian revolution that activist notions of translation do not necessarily match with scholarly ones. In this sense, translation will be understood here as the process of replacing a set of source signs with another set of target signs ‘on the strength of an interpretation’ (Venuti 1995, 18). This process of replacement can be undertaken within the same language or between different languages – what Roman Jakobson (1959, 233) called ‘intralingual’ and ‘interlingual’ translation, respectively – but also between theoretical systems and paradigms: for instance, between politics and economics, or between two different philosophical traditions (Boothman 2010, 110–114,

128–130; Lacorte 2010, 214–217), as Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci had already contended.

Bearing this diversity in mind, this book will trace and analyse the pervasive role of translation, as both a practice and a product, across the political field, following three main lines of study. Firstly, it will show how translation is contributing to the renewal of the activist landscape in Spain through the incorporation of political concepts (such as *comunes* and *cuidados*) in the activist vocabulary and the increasing adoption of intellectual figures (from Silvia Federici to David Harvey, among many others). A second line, strongly connected to the first, will examine the political impact of these practices of translation, as concepts and models inspire new forms of agency (such as the feminist care strike or commons-based collectives) and contribute to the generation of alternative discourses (for instance, against the commodification of housing). Finally, the book will also address the ways in which translation practices aim at finding commonality between different struggles across time and space, highlighting the continuity with historical movements – such as the reappraisal of the early democratic period in Spain and the feminist search for genealogy – or the presence of shared problems in other countries, as is the case with the reception of Latin American populism and the emergence of transnational platforms against ‘touristification’. These three lines of enquiry are certainly not exclusive; on the contrary, they tend to overlap and combine, as well as open the way to other important sub-analyses.

A significant element of translation in this context is its diffuse, multi-layered, and multi-channel nature, which I describe through the concept of *expanded translation*. It is clear that our historical time is characterised by an overflow of sources and information, which multiplies and accelerates exchanges, and by a global dominance of English that has blurred ‘the boundaries’ between ‘author and translator’ (Bennett and Queiroz de Barros 2017, 365), since authors and readers of texts are increasingly able to generate their own versions and translations without requiring the intervention of a professional translator. In this context, it has become increasingly non-viable to chart the circulation of a concept, an idea, or an author exclusively through a predefined set of translated texts in the traditional sense. As I argue in different sections of this book, a key source for understanding a given process of translation might appear in a derivative text (articles, forewords, summaries, or interviews) or even in other interactions (social media, TV shows, assemblies, activist meetings, and speeches, among others), as a whole mass of instances of linguistic exchange is generated. As such, the construction of meaning and the use of translated concepts, authors, and models implies a collective process, which is non-centralised (multiple agents can join it without previous requirements) yet also unequal (as certain agents enjoy more power and visibility than others). In consequence, the study of expanded translation will tend to focus upon the existence of tensions, oppositions, and imbalances, as they help to outline the main semantic boundaries of each given case.

Translation as an interdisciplinary tool

As is often the case, this project emerged through a combination of inspiring precedents and perceived shortcomings. In particular, the capacity of translation to cut across a variety of disciplines implies an awareness of, and potentially an engagement with, several traditions. For a start, as noted in the previous section, neither the field of Hispanic Studies, nor Translation Studies, had approached the role of translation in this political cycle. However, this does not imply that this research refuses to establish a dialogue with scholarship in these areas. On the one hand, my approach to the Spanish context is strongly embedded in different analyses developed by a set of contemporary scholars, activists, and thinkers across various fields (such as López and Rodríguez 2011; Kornetis 2014; Flesher Fominaya 2015a and 2015b; Moreno-Caballud 2015; Rodríguez 2016, among others), who have espoused a critical perspective of the country's history and politics. On the other, my interest in the evolution of political and activist concepts aligns with an increasing body of literature on the topic, manifested in the emergence of new collective projects that aim to chart the transformation of vocabularies. An invaluable reference would be the *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies* (Cassin 2004), adapted into several languages, which posited both the centrality and the limits of translation in the evolution of philosophical concepts. However, my approach is more directly linked to the reassessment of activist vocabulary undertaken by Fritsch, O'Connor, and Thompson (2016), who set out to update Raymond Williams' (1975) *Keywords* project, as well as the study on translated and adapted concepts in the Spanish fields of sexuality and gender proposed by Platero, Rosón, and Ortega (2017). With these two projects, I share the perception that activist language has evolved greatly over recent years, and this necessitates an effort on our part to start a process of mapping and clarification. Finally, although my approach is strictly contemporary, I have also benefitted from reflecting on the collective work developed by the Genealogies of Knowledge project (genealogiesofknowledge.net), based at the University of Manchester, which focuses on the genealogy of social and political concepts across history through processes of translation, retranslation, and mediation. While publications from the project are in progress (Jones 2019 constitutes a perceptive example), the conferences organised in Manchester (2017) and Perugia (2019) were excellent opportunities to engage with other scholars and to refine thoughts on my own work.

Through its focus on the movement of the squares and its afterlives, a third field of engagement for this monograph is political activism and social movements. As will be discussed in [Chapter 1](#), Translation Studies has started to engage with this large area of research over the last decade, addressing the potential of translation and interpreting as an activist tool and contributing to a modest, but very solid body of literature. Surprisingly, however, there have been very few attempts to engage with translation from the field of activism and social movements: Conny Roggeband's 2007 article on transnational exchanges between feminist movements, Olga Malets and Sabina Zajak's

(2014) framework for the implementation of transnational norms and laws, and Nicole Doerr's (2012, 2018) work, which focuses on the central role of political translation for deliberation within multilingual and multicultural groups. In my view, this absence is partly due to conceptual choices within the discipline of social movements. On the one hand, as Roggeband (2007, 246) has argued, processes of exchange between social movements are frequently conceptualised in terms of 'diffusion', a concept borrowed from communication studies that obscures the complexity of the process, overlooking the role of specific individuals and groups in the adaptation and transformation of ideas and concepts. On the other hand, several scholars have adopted the concept of 'brokerage', defined by Sydney Tarrow (2013, 19) as 'the process through which a third party acts to create a connection between two other actors who would remain unconnected except through the action of the broker'. 'Brokerage' represents a wider-reaching notion than 'diffusion', as it focuses on the active role of agencies, organisations, and individuals in the process of communication. In this vein, for instance, Romanos (2016) has analysed how Spanish migrants in the US served as brokers between the 15M and Occupy Wall Street, contributing to the incorporation and adoption of practices previously explored at the occupations in Spain. Nevertheless, as this monograph will show, 'brokerage' still fails to acknowledge the *transformative* nature of translation, which rests both on subjective (e.g. the ideas and perspectives held by translators) and contextual factors (linguistic, social, and political differences). In the light of this absence, this monograph also aims at advocating the potential benefits of the translational framework for research in movement studies.

The lack of engagement between social movements and translation becomes even more striking if we consider the importance of 'translation' as a concept in political theory. As argued in [Chapter 6](#), there is an important lineage of thinkers who have conceptualised political activity in terms of 'translation', ranging from Antonio Gramsci's reflections on 'translation' and 'translatability' as both opportunities and constraints to political praxis (see Boothman 2010 and Lacorte 2010 for a reconstruction) to contemporary approaches by Judith Butler (2000), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006, 131–147) or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Negri and Hardt 2009, 340–351), among others. Beyond multiple differences in objectives and approach, this heritage of debates has popularised the usage of 'translation' as a concept that emphasises the importance of establishing practices of communication and a shared political language that allows understanding between a variety of social agents seeking social transformation. As I argued earlier, these processes of reflection are not only paramount to my own approach, but also play a significant role in discourses mobilised by activists and politicians studied in this book.

Times, levels, and languages of the 15M climate

Earlier in this introduction, I noted that my approach to the 15M is not restricted to the concrete movement that emerged in 2011, but rather addresses

the 15M as a ‘climate’ or historical period where multiple collectives coexist. Adopting this framework of analysis, however, requires a certain mapping to orientate readers. Emmanuel Rodríguez (2016) has proposed to divide the political cycle into a ‘movement’ phase (2011–2013) – marked by the occupation of the squares, the anti-eviction movement *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Flesher Fominaya 2015b), and the *Mareas* (‘Tides’) in defence of public education and healthcare (Iglesias-Onofrio, Rodrigo-Cano and Benítez-Eyzaguirre 2018)— and a ‘party’ phase (2014–2016), dominated by the creation of Podemos and the development of wide municipalist platforms at a local level (Rubio-Pueyo 2017), such as Barcelona en Comú or Ahora Madrid. The collective Fundación de los Comunes (2018, 10–11) has added a third phase to this periodisation, beginning in 2017–2018 and marked by a revitalisation of non-institutional struggles, such as the feminist movement (see [Chapter 4](#)) or the pensioners’ movement (Alejos Escarpe 2018).

Although this temporal framework is fundamentally sound, I consider the stance taken by Diego Sztulwark to be more productive. In his analysis of the Argentinean crisis, Sztulwark (2019, 91) claims that an approach based on ‘linear sequences’ should be replaced by the ‘coexistence of temporalities’ – instead of seeing politics as a line that progresses across history, we need to focus upon a variety of events that coincide in time, but have their own patterns and dynamics. In this sense, viewing the 15M as a historical period defined by the notion of coexistence allows us to grasp the continuous interaction between citizens, activist collectives, and various forms of political groupings more vividly. Instead of placing these interactions in the strongly delimited phases of the temporal outline, this perspective acknowledges that each group evolves in a given way, which is nevertheless subject to exchanges and tensions with the rest. Besides, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, citizen platforms and collectives have emerged, mutated, and even disappeared across the whole period, further complicating a strictly linear approach.

The question of times and collectives dovetails with the place of citizen media within the materials of this book. In the opening volume of the series in which this monograph appears, Baker and Blaagaard (2016, 16) proposed an ambitious definition of citizen media that encompassed both ‘physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations produced by unaffiliated citizens’ and ‘the sets of values and agendas that influence and drive the[se] practices and discourses’. Although this monograph is not directly grounded in the field of citizen media, it certainly covers a variety of such media as they interact with other political and cultural formations. Within the context of this book, I would argue that the majority of my case studies could be placed over a continuum of citizen practices, siding with Baker and Blaagaard’s (2016, 2) assumption that any conceptualisation of citizen media is ‘inevitably porous’. At one end, there would be those interventions that could be understood as proper citizen media, such as the 15M occupations, urban commons (like *La Ingobernable*, studied in [Chapter 3](#)), or the numerous examples of citizens spontaneously interacting around meanings, translations,

and concepts within different networks (discussed, for instance, in [Chapter 6](#)). At the other end, I would place the evolutions of citizen media that have solidified to the point of becoming institutionalised, as would be the case of Barcelona en Comú (discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 5](#)) and certainly Podemos ([Chapter 6](#)). While sharing some of the concerns and practices that characterised them in their emergence as citizen-led platforms, these formations are now subject to a whole set of inner tensions, power imbalances, and institutional responsibilities that frequently place them in contradiction with the causes and values they originally supported. In between those poles, it would be possible to place a whole set of citizen groupings that have generated a certain degree of affiliation through their persistence over time, while managing to retain their independence from institutions and corporations, such as cooperatives (addressed in [Chapter 3](#)) and the various activist groups and platforms analysed in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#).

A final caveat is required in terms of the languages and cultures used in this text. As the reader might know, Spain is a multilingual state. While Spanish (also known as Castilian) is the only official language across the country, four other languages are co-official in different communities: Galician (in Galicia), Basque (in the Basque Country and neighbouring areas of Navarra), Catalan (in Catalonia, Valencia, and the Balearic Islands), and Aranese, a variety of Occitan spoken in north-western Catalonia. Another two languages – Asturian and Aragonese – are protected in different regions, although they lack any special status. Therefore, addressing translation practices within this diversity requires a certain degree of choice. In this sense, I have aimed to strike a balance between the opposing necessities of precision and representativeness. In the analysis of politically committed publishers, which is developed in [Chapter 2](#) and re-emerges in [Chapter 4](#), I have focused exclusively on translations into Spanish, which constitute the largest part of the publishing field. Due to the particularities of the cultural and political contexts, flows of translation into other languages would have required separate analyses. However, in the reconstruction of political concepts, discourses, and activist groups conducted in different chapters, I have incorporated an important number of Catalan-speaking examples, as well as cases from Galician, Basque, and Asturian. Unless otherwise noted in the bibliography, all translations from these quoted examples are my own.

The role of critique in politicised research

As readers might have already guessed, this research draws upon an essential part of my life over recent years: innumerable hours of reading and writing, but also of attending meetings, conferences, and assemblies, joining rallies and sit-ins, contributing to debates, giving talks and seminars. It was not primarily a scholarly interest that drew me towards this topic; writing this book was rather a consequence of my involvement in political and activist life. Therefore, I prefer to dismiss from the start the false pretence that this book might have

been written from a detached, supposedly objective position. However, unlike what certain dogmatics tend to believe, dismissing objectivity does not imply falling into the trap of a partial and self-celebratory work. On the contrary, my goal has been precisely to develop a critical and consistent analysis of my own generation's political achievements and failures. The difference between the militant author, the activist, and the professional political agent lies precisely in the possibility of distance and retreat. When the struggle is over, when the assembly leaves in disarray or an election is lost, the author can go back to their writing space – no matter how precarious this might be – and re-examine facts with different eyes, without aiming to justify or condone them. The agenda, the agreements or dissents, the strategy or the party line are no longer valid as measures of rightness or wrongness. And it is there and then, in the confrontation between the lived experience and the tools of reflective thought, where a contingent and temporary lesson might emerge and be useful for ourselves and for others.

Structure of the book

As discussed in this introduction, the present monograph establishes a dialogue with the fields of Translation Studies, Hispanic Studies, and Social Movements, which implies that I have aimed at addressing potential readers across all three domains. With this purpose in mind, I have not assumed any background knowledge and have provided a clear context for the main debates in the book. Inevitably, this implies that each reader will face the book from a different disciplinary angle, finding greater relevance in some sections than in others. Nevertheless, I hope that my take on these issues will also be of interest in those cases that are more familiar to the reader.

The first chapters of the book establish the foundations for later analyses. [Chapter 1](#) presents the particularities of activism under globalisation before providing an in-depth overview of the relationships between translation and activism in this historical period, highlighting both the existing bibliography and potential gaps in research. In [Chapter 2](#), I reconstruct the social and cultural characteristics of the 15M movement, uncovering a number of strands for the study of the larger 'climate' that has followed. Relying on approaches from different disciplines, I understand the 15M as a period characterised by renewed political engagement and disaffection with the immediate past, which creates an acute need for new concepts, references, and models in which translation plays a key role. In the final section of [Chapter 2](#), I apply this lens to the renewed momentum of politically committed publishers and highlight their importance in the 15M climate.

The following three chapters focus on the centrality of translation practices for political activity within this period. Despite their differences, all three share a focus on the process of expanded translation of key concepts for activism and politics, as well as a concern for the ways in which political action incorporates translational components. [Chapter 3](#) presents a detailed study of the

‘commons’ – a paradigm for horizontal and collaborative action – and its complex translation between languages, but also between theory and practice, without neglecting its conflicts and tensions. Importantly, the concept of the ‘commons’ will interact with other notions in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#), showing the interdependence of activist vocabulary. [Chapter 4](#) addresses the importance of translation in the evolution of the feminist movement through the study of its genealogical practices and the centrality of the concept of ‘care’ in the development of the 2018 feminist strike. [Chapter 5](#), meanwhile, covers a variety of activist collectives that share an opposition to the Spanish economic model, based upon the commodification of housing and mass tourism.

Finally, [Chapter 6](#) provides a case study of the political party Podemos, created in 2014 as a response to the new political cycle that opened in 2011. As will be argued, Podemos represents a unique example of a ‘translational’ party, as an important part of its foundations, early discourse, and communicative practices are indebted to translation. At the same time, Podemos offers an opportunity to address the limits that certain understandings of translation can pose to political activity. In this sense, the party offers a cluster of some of the most relevant examples of translation practice in this period, yet also some of its clearest failures and distortions, thus providing an appropriate counterpoint to previous chapters.

Across [Chapters 2](#) to [6](#), I have interspersed the main sections with independent textboxes, a common practice in the social sciences. Textboxes provide an opportunity for the discussion of lengthier examples that would perhaps break up the reading experience if analysed within the main text, but deserve more attention than a footnote, which all too frequently escape the attention of readers. In some cases, the textbox functions as an expansion on an issue that has been mentioned, while in others it serves as a counter-example, an opposition, or even a criticism to the main line of thought. Since they create intervals between larger sections of discourse, readers are welcome to integrate them into their reading or to address them after they have finished reading a chapter.