

The Whole World Is Like a Nowhere Land Called Alicante

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In June 2015, a coalition of socialists, civil society activists and post-Stalinists gained control over the municipal government of Alicante. In its electoral campaign it called for the participation of the citizenry, a commitment to the well-being of the unemployed and people “at risk of exclusion”, the eradication of outrageous misconduct in local government administration, the universal right to housing, the struggle against climate change, the defense of the Valencian cultural heritage, and, finally, a new model of the city, a city that is democratic, egalitarian, sustainable and based on solidarity. Basically, the cliché campaign promises of the kind have become the modus vivendi of “left-wing” politics. In general, the measures implemented to promote these goals have been neither more effective nor more bold than those taken with ostensibly similar intentions in mind by previous electoral coalitions, and corruption and cronyism have not even had to keep a low profile, although they are not conducted on the same scale as in the past. Meanwhile, an attempt is underway to expand the local garbage dump, open up more land to industrial development, publicize the trademark name, “Alicante: City of Rice”, and promote tourism related to conventions and other special events. For the peace of mind of the real estate speculators who own land suitable for urban development, the municipal government is not considering the restoration of a vanished agriculture, much less does it harbor any intentions of helping to establish a significant parallel economy that could function based on renewable energy and alternative social currencies. At most, a bicycle lane and an “alternative” festival. This is, of course, not at all consistent with the energy and environmental sustainability to which it aspires. The participation of the citizenry, meanwhile, has proceeded in an atmosphere of confrontation with neighborhood representatives and vetoes of the decisions of the neighborhood associations of three districts (Florida, Gran Vía Sur and PAU 2). Nor was the municipalization of public services welcomed with open arms by a “triple alliance”¹ that has exploited those same services for two years, so that this policy has fallen victim to mediocrity, incompetence, the election of charismatic non-entities [fulanismo],² and squabbles over positions in the administrative machinery.

¹ “Triple Alliance”: in Spanish, the “Tripartito”, an electoral alliance of the PSPV-PSOE (Socialists), Guanyar Alacant (local left-wing coalition) and Compromís per Alacant (Valencian nationalists) [translator’s note].

² In Spanish, *fulano* is a deprecatory term that means “nobody” or “anybody”; the neologism *fulanismo*, which appears to have been first popularized by Miguel de Unamuno in 1903, has come to mean support for a political candidate or other public figure, for example, that does not result from agreement with his or her policies or doctrines, but

The interests that really call the shots in the Alicante metropolitan region are still the same as before and the degree of independence that the local administration can exercise for the furtherance of its own policies is minimal. This is why left-wing municipal administration looks so much like right-wing municipal administration. These decisive interests are basically invested in retail trade, tourism and the construction industry, and this is why the unemployment rate exceeds 20% (50% in the Zona Norte), wages are low, most jobs are temporary jobs, and poverty affects more than 40% of the active population. As a “sun and sand” destination, it is the province that receives the most aid from the central government, and is third, behind only Madrid and Barcelona, in the volume of real estate transactions. It is also home to the third largest number of registered vehicles, whose sales figures have only continued to surge since 2013. There are now almost more cars than people in Alicante. New shopping centers are being constructed (Mercadona, Aldi, Consum), old commercial districts are being renovated (Puerta de Alicante), and big companies like Ikea are being courted very attentively: industrial food and furniture are realities as generalized as motor vehicles (3 out of every 5 residents of Alicante consider the private automobile to be indispensable). The average price of residential real estate has been rising for three years and is now approximately 1,500 euros per square meter, within the budget of people with lots of money, but the bank possesses thousands of vacant flats, and the municipal council, despite its promises to do so, has not dared to pressure it to lease these flats to the municipality for social use. The language question deserves its own separate treatment. Optimistically, one might assert that one-fourth of the population of Alicante can speak Valencian, but few write in the vernacular. Its use does not appear to be spreading. To the contrary, neutral attitudes and even hostility to the Valencian language have been on the rise, even among municipal officials. Soon, it will be nothing but a cultural relic, at least in the metropolitan region. Alicantians are not exactly overworking themselves by reading Castilian, either. Their literary illiteracy is striking, a universal feature in the major cities. Nothing to write home about in a city that can take pride in the fact that it has destroyed almost all of its architectural, historical and artistic patrimony.

The Alicantian model does not have a very good track record with regard to marital relations, either: it ranks second among the provinces of Spain in the number of cases of domestic violence (more than 9,000 reported incidents per year) and also has the second-highest divorce rate (3 divorces for every 1,000 residents).³ Despite its benign climate, Mediterranean sociability, festivals and an impressive leisure services industry, the people of Alicante are no happier than people anywhere else. Nor are they more authoritarian, or more infantilized, or more self-centered, but they are more uprooted, and the degree of decomposition of their personalities is disturbing. Concerning their political class we may paraphrase Chesterton, and say that not having ideals does not make one less

from an identification with the candidate’s image or name, or a blind hope that he or she will be a savior; the candidate might as well be just anybody because no real doctrinal commitment or understanding is needed to become a fictional entity fabricated according to the specifications of the advertising industry. The fact that there is no corresponding term in English is itself revealing of the shallowness and vapidness of politics in the English-speaking countries, where this phenomenon has been taken for granted for so long that no special word for it has been coined [translator’s note].

³ This figure is based on the “crude divorce rate”, which includes children and other non-marriageable elements in its denominator: although it does not seem very impressive at first glance, it is actually higher than the crude divorce rate for all Western European countries and is only slightly lower than the corresponding ratio for the United States (3.2 per thousand) [translator’s note, based on data reproduced by Wikipedia from various years between 2001 and 2016 for a selection of countries, mostly in Europe. See: en.wikipedia.org].

of an idiot.⁴ To give just one example: the appalling spectacle of the aborted initiative to change forty-seven street names bestowed by the Franco regime. It is a city in an advanced capitalist regime, but with respect to mental health care it is a third-world city. There are almost 70,000 mentally ill persons in the metropolitan area, to which must be added several thousands more if we count the addiction-related behavioral disorders that require treatment; no surprise there, but what is scandalous in this case is the almost total absence of means to treat the disorders, to hospitalize the ill, to follow up on their treatment, to re-insert them into normal life and to provide them with dignity. It is the worst place to be depressed. And there are not, nor is there any intention of creating, any truly public places, that is, places for encounters, for discussions, for the ongoing dialogue of the residents. Yes, La Muntanyeta complies with some of these requirements, but they are only used occasionally. Thus, the city model has not changed one bit under the new municipal government: it is increasingly more diffuse, grey, disconnected, gentrified, hierarchical, class dominated.... It is, however, the perfect city for going shopping, for going to the beach or having a few drinks.

The city of Alicante, Madrid's beach and the Mecca of all retirees with enough money to go there, is hostile towards excluded elements, pro-Madrid [españolista], maintains bad relations with its own residents, is by no means "eviction-free", and fosters shallow, self-centered, bovine and socio-pathological behaviors; it is ecologically unsustainable, out of equilibrium with the surrounding territory (twelve million arrivals at El Altet [airport] every year), and is defiling the environment (the dump at Fontcalent, for example, does not recycle materials nor does it incinerate organic residues). Finally, in view of the fact that the participation of the citizenry in their local government is reduced to voting once every four years—almost 40% of the eligible voters abstain—there could hardly be anything less democratic. And those who now govern will continue to govern until the voluntary servitude of the governed ceases. As long as civil society does not break with the city-supermarket; as long as it does not set in motion a process of socialization and self-organization; as long as the neighborhood assemblies do not express their opinions, formulate their demands and elect revocable committees to administer the res publica, there will never be any democracy. The text that follows may be a positive contribution in favor of this change, keeping in mind that it was written in 2006.

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The Destruction of Alicante

During the last fifteen years the peninsula has undergone a brutal process of urbanization that seems to have no end in sight, whose origin must be sought in changes induced by capitalist globalization. Countries that were incapable of basing their economic growth on technological innovation, on an abundance of cheap energy or low wage levels, were forced to exploit their only resource, the territory. Unbridled urbanism is the instrument their leaders employed to convert the destruction of the territory into the accumulation of capital. The cities, fragmented and barely habitable, have spread the contagion of dehumanization to the rural areas and to nature, completely subjecting the territory to the exclusive, trivializing plans of the commodity.

The map of the world is being increasingly dominated by the construction industry. This is particularly true of Spain, where it is the driving force of the economy. In 2005, more credit was

⁴ The original phrase attributed to Chesterton appears to be something to the effect of, "Not believing in God does not make us less idiotic", but I was unable to locate the exact quotation [translator's note].

advanced to the construction industry than to the industrial sector; only eight years before, the industrial sector received three times as much credit as the construction industry. The surface area of the country subjected to paving and construction has increased by 40% between 1987 and 2005, much higher than the rate of population growth during the same period. During the last five years, 2,630,000 homes have been built in Spain, 800,000 of which were built in 2005 alone: there is one house for every two Spaniards. Spain builds more than any other European country. It has the largest real estate market in Europe, which does not mean that it is the country with the most affordable housing; quite the contrary, mortgage indebtedness has broken records and families now devote 41% of their net annual income to paying for a roof over their heads. A large part of the population does not own the little cubbyholes they occupy, and young people and other wage workers who rely on temporary or casual jobs cannot afford to own a residence. The construction costs of government-subsidized housing are ridiculously low, but even these units are not affordable for most people. Instead, two million houses remain vacant year-round and twice as many are used only intermittently as second or third homes. Today, a house is an investment, mere capital, the object of a global real estate market. In 2003, between 800,000 and 1,700,000 families made inquiries about buying houses on the peninsula, and the Spanish real estate market is now the leading European market for second homes.

Half of the houses sold in the recent past are located on the Mediterranean coast; between 1995 and 2005, their sales prices almost tripled. The shoreline is where most of the construction is taking place and the convergence of interests known officially as the “Valencian Community”⁵ is the most paradigmatic case of the power of the “builders”. Overall, the urbanized surface area grew by 52% during the last decade, significantly more than in the rest of the country, while the urban core areas themselves only grew by 11%, which indicates a diffuse, disconnected urbanization, implemented at the expense of lands robbed of their agriculture, woodlands, scrublands, swamps and marshes. In many localities this new kind of urbanization accounts for more new residences than the downtown districts and practically every city is currently in the grips of a similar dynamic. The relative influence of the “Community” in the Spanish state as a whole has increased in terms of stock market valuation, jobs and demography, based for the most part on tourism and construction, and everything indicates that the future will be based on the same foundations. During the last fifteen months, the Consell de la Generalitat has given the green light to a thousand Integrated Action Programs [Programas de Actuación Integrada—specific local development programs] (PAIs), the offspring of the very close relations between the construction companies and local institutions. It is therefore not surprising that the construction industry is responsible for 42% of income in the municipalities. Because the construction industry is almost the only source of financing and economic revitalization (and also the primary cause of political corruption), the municipalities have approved plans for the next few years that involve the construction of 700,000 homes, with all the accompanying infrastructure, roads, high-voltage power lines, incinerators, shopping centers, leisure and entertainment districts, sports stadiums, golf courses, etc. As a result, the population is expected to increase over the next ten years from six million to 15 million people and the environmental impact will be much more flattening and destructive than all the damage inflicted up until this time. The total absence of water does not seem to discourage the promoters, since they are confident that they will be able to obtain it by cutting off the supply of water to orchards and irrigated fields and, if necessary, by desalination.

⁵ The official name of the autonomous region of Valencia in Spain [translator’s note].

Within this “Community”, the province of Alicante is the part of the territory where one has the best vantage point from which to observe the process of the domestication of society, and of the natural landscape for tourist consumption, promoted by the new, out-of-control development plans of a local ruling class, led by the construction industry and sustained by the indifference or consent of a majority of the population, depoliticized, tamed and without character. Each city undertakes, within the overarching framework of certain standardized models, to follow its own particular road towards massification and dispersion, in accordance with the narrow interests of its leaders and accompanied by the typical local-color clichés; it is curious how “Paquito el Chocolatero” [a popular song written in 1937], the “Misteri” [the “Mystery Play of Elche”, a religious procession commemorating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary] or “Les Fogueres” [the Bonfires of Saint John—established as a signature festival for Alicante in 1928, but with a long history throughout Spain as a Midsummer’s Eve festival] have served to elaborate a false identity that still endures, contributing to local amnesia and ideologically legitimizing the barbarous policies of the hierarchs, who are the first to disguise themselves as “one of the three Wise Men” [“*rey mago*”], the “Moor” or the “*foguerer*”. Pseudo-traditions are weapons against memory, and therefore ideological factors contributing to deracination. The more that individuals yield to them, the more they separate themselves from their real history and the more indifferent they become towards their real surroundings. Alicante is the enclave from which decisions with the most cruel consequences for the territory originate; of the ten largest corporations in the province, six have their headquarters there (four are construction firms). Furthermore, this nowhere land offers to the gaze of the observer all the features of that type of urban theme park that is taking over the coast and transforming it into a *continuum* of vulgar, trashy cities, the most noteworthy with respect to their degree of degradation being Pego, Dénia, Benidorm, Altea, Teulada, Calp, Santa Pola, Torrevella, Almoradí, Guardamar, etc. We shall now focus on the history of the conurbation of Alicante.

We shall define Alicante—Alacant in the language of its former inhabitants—as the urban agglomeration located between the A-7 highway and the sea, bounded on the north by the town of El Campello and on the south by Santa Pola. This mass of buildings still preserves a residual structure that vaguely recalls the city that once bore the name “Alicante”, but the basic ordering elements are not the avenues or the plazas, but the transportation arterials that connect the residents with their seven shopping districts, their four or five golf courses, and their various leisure and entertainment zones, all watched over by the new, emblematic buildings, towering enormities of twenty or thirty stories. It is estimated that there is one shopping district for every seventy thousand potential consumers. Alicante is structured around the beltway and the highways to Murcia, Elx, Ibi, Alcoi and Valencia, and is broken up into seven major shopping districts, which, not counting those at the beach at San Juan, are: the Corte Inglés, the Boulevard Plaza (at the railroad station), the Gran Vía (in the northern part of the city), the Port of Alicante (at the Polígono de Babel), the Panoramis (in the port district), the Vistahermosa district (in the eastern part of the city), and the Playa Mar 2/Alcampo, in La Goteta, not far from the former “Camp of the Almond Trees”, where in April of 1939 twenty thousand republican prisoners were herded together, without any plaque to commemorate their fate. The metropolitan area of Alacant-Mutxamel-Sant Vincent del Raspeig-Sant Joan-El Campello presently has about 430,000 inhabitants, who, added to the inhabitants of the neighboring metropolitan area of Elda-Elx-Crevillent-Santa Pola altogether comprise a metropolitan area of more than 700,000 inhabitants, still not enough to really tip the scales in the network of power of globalization, which demands units of a million and a

half people for viable tertiary economies. In fact, its impact on regional decisions is still minimal. Only 25 of the top 50 Valencian companies are located there, which means that its ruling class doesn't really amount to much. In reality, it is not even a class, nor is it really even an elite; it is only a handful of predatory businessmen, mediocre public officials and careerist politicians who seem to have no other plan than to convert the whole metropolitan area into a residential suburb of Madrid thanks to the AVE high-speed rail line. Their only purpose is to follow the trail that was blazed a long time ago, the one that transforms cities into supermarkets where you only hear the discourse of the commodity. Their predecessors redesigned Alicante and imposed upon its denizens a particular use of time and space, organizing their existence in isolation and dis-possession; they have merely added consumerism. For the urban environment no longer allows for any other social use of what we would unjustifiably refer to as a city besides mind-numbing work, frantic consumption, industrialized leisure and motorized mobility. How did we get here? From what dust was this mud fashioned? Let us delve into the past of Alicante, during the Franco regime, so that we may subsequently observe the evolution of this city during the transition from a regime of national development to the present regime of globalization.

During the Republic, working class Alicante constituted a very well-defined, compact area: the district bounded by the old city center and the neighborhoods of San Antón, Las Carolinas, el Pla and Raval Roig. It was from this district that the column, "España Libre" and the battalion, "Alicante Rojo", departed to defend Madrid, and most notably it was from this district that Francisco Maroto went forth with his proletarian centuries to liberate Granada. The rate of trade union membership was very high; Alicante constituted the second largest local federation of *sindicatos únicos*⁶ in the "Levantine Region" after the Valencian federation, larger than others with solid trade union traditions like Alcoi and Elda. It all came to an end on that fateful first day of April in 1939, when all of Alicante was transformed into one vast prison. Maroto, who represented the workers of Alicante at the Congress of Zaragoza, was imprisoned at the end of the war in one of the houses on the Pla del Bon Repós. The order of the Franco regime was gradually imposed on the city and the republican bourgeoisie was replaced by a class composed of Catholic oligarchs and fascist civil servants whose mission was to totally destroy the pride of the old, now-defeated proletariat and to prevent the rise of a new one. Alicante maintained a steady rate of growth during the forties and fifties, which triggered a constant flow of peasants from the southeast of Spain in search of means of survival that had eluded them in their native villages. The city's leaders gave the green light to a series of urban development projects characterized by a total absence of order and planning, oriented more to the confinement of the working class population than to its accommodation. The new apartment buildings, with their tiny, depressing flats built with second-rate materials, were built without any relation to each other, far from the city, separated from the urban fabric of life, without either transportation or garbage collection services, often without sewer systems and sometimes even without adequate water supplies (Alicante experienced serious water shortages during the fifties). This was the origin of more than twenty "unique population entities" ["entidades singulares de población"—an official designation for statistical purposes similar to "metropolitan areas" in the United States, but also including population centers on a much smaller scale], such as Ciudad de Asís, the area around San Gabriel, the cluster

⁶ Trade unions that were integrated both industrially and geographically, composed of local, regional and national federations of each industry, as well as local and regional bodies composed of the representatives of all trades in a locality or region [translator's note].

of José Antonio in Benalúa, Los Ángeles, San Agustín, and the one thousand houses whose construction was sponsored by Francisco Franco, and the cluster of towns formed by La Paz, Tómbola, Divina Pastora and Rabasa. Particularly noteworthy is the Low-Cost Housing Cooperative [La Cooperativa de Casas Baratas], which built a “Garden City” in 1960, an extremely ill-chosen name, since it had nothing to do with the ideas of Ebenezer Howard, that great anarchist dreamer, but was instead inspired by more prosaic republican plans for government-subsidized housing. The appalling conditions of the time prevented the workers from accumulating any savings and they were therefore unable to pay the dues required for membership in such cooperatives, which is why this Garden City became a peripheral island of the incipient middle class. In the late 1950s, the authorities of the Franco regime, under pressure from an enormous wave of internal migration, continued to pursue their existing construction policy. Although a General Plan for Urban Development was approved in 1958, the first such plan of this name, the municipal zoning ordinances necessary for the implementation of the Plan were not passed until 1967, when the Plan was revised to ensure the continuation of the urban anarchy that had prevailed up until that time. Alicante was a private preserve of the construction companies and their operations were so scandalous that in 1964 a lawsuit was brought against them by the Professional Association of Architects of Valencia [*Colegio de Arquitectos de Valencia*]; corruption was institutionalized, but it was not until 1969 that an insider blew the whistle on the first widely-publicized case, the delivery of 750,000 pesetas to a member of the city council. With the Taibilla reservoir compensating for the chronic water shortages, a whole series of urbanization projects was approved and a flood of new residential districts was superimposed on the already-existing towns, such as Juan XXIII, Virgen del Remedio and Colonia Requena, consolidating a ghetto outside the city’s northern boundaries. To the east, government-subsidized housing was built in Fondo de Reones (the “Workers’ District”) and in La Sangueta. Workers with steady jobs could live in Altozano, in the various extensions of El Pla, or in one of the newly-rebuilt neighborhoods.

During the 1960s, the population of Alicante increased from 120,000 to 190,000 and the number of residential units in the city increased from 34,000 to 79,000, although the new construction was much more extensive than one might deduce from these numbers because the destruction inflicted on the old downtown district was considerable. The excesses of the construction companies were only compounded by their new predilection for verticality, with the blessing of the authorities of the Franco regime, and the old zoning regulations that restricted buildings to seven stories were repealed. At first, this idea was conceived in accordance with the principles of rationality inherited from the modern bourgeois architecture of the Republic, as it was in that tradition that the professionals who designed the first tall buildings of the Dictatorship were trained. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the latter were replaced by a new generation of architects, whose sole motivation was greed: verticality meant more money. In 1960, the Rambla Méndez Núñez was rebuilt with tall buildings dominated by the fourteen-story Torre Provincial, and in the following year the horrible Gran Sol Hotel was built, a one-hundred meter tall glass phallus, which set the standard for Alicante’s subsequent urban development. The hulking pile of Los Representantes, near the downtown market, the Corbusierian complex of 506 units that was called from its very first days by the residents of San Blas “the Beehive”, along with one of the ugliest buildings in all of Europe, “the Pyramid”, provided the finishing touches. The ruling class had displayed its tastes in architecture, and they were as pompous as they were repulsive. Alicante was crowded with skyscrapers, up to the point that it had more than Valencia. In 1980, in the downtown district alone, there were six buildings taller than twenty stories and more than

a hundred that were at least twelve stories tall, along with numerous others of the same sort in the beachfront districts. The construction boom was stimulated, even more than by the continuous arrival of internal migrants, by the demand generated by the middle classes who came of age under the regime of endless development, who abandoned the downtown areas and preferentially relocated to the west of the city, an area that was increasingly disfigured, leading to the appearance of impersonal residential districts like Florida, Portazgo, San Blas, Polígono de San Blas, Polígono de Babel, etc., and they were forced to use automobiles to get around. The internal migration did not stop there. It was also directed towards the east (Vistahermosa, Nou Alacant) and towards the shore, and first of all to the beachfront at San Juan. Meanwhile, the former working class neighborhoods of the old city were targeted by avaricious speculators, who wasted no time in demolishing them in order to replace their former houses with enormous, tasteless buildings, symbols of the power of Alicante's new bourgeoisie. This is what happened in parts of Benalúa, Raval Roig, Campoamor, Santa Cruz and El Pla. In the same vein, a "unique building" like the Meliá Hotel raised a wall between the beach of El Postiguat and the port district. Another uniquely aberrant pile of masonry, the Feygon building or the "Alicante", did the same at the Explanada; together with the Gran Sol and the Riscal building, it defined the new *skyline*⁷ of the real estate moguls. Modernized Alicante was no longer a city attached to its port and contained within the precinct defined by the railroad station, the Castle of San Fernando and Mount Benacantil. Its radial structure was abolished, replaced by a conglomeration parallel to the sea, divided into three pieces: one, crossed by the highways from Santa Pola and Elx leading to Murcia and Madrid, was the zone of industrial complexes and warehouses; another was constituted by the city properly speaking and its outlying districts; the third was the zone of the beaches. Alicante was originally a city designed by a liberal bourgeoisie with close relations to the countryside and to maritime trade that was hardly disturbed by the hustle and bustle of horse and carriage traffic. The uncontrolled growth that it underwent under the Franco regime shattered not only the internal equilibrium between its neighborhoods, but also the city's equilibrium with the nearby rural districts. The worst offender in this regard was the automobile. The pro-development municipal administration attempted to adapt the city to motor vehicle traffic by orienting its growth around the main transportation arterial, the Alfonso X el Sabio Avenue, and a focal point, the Plaza de los Luceros, but the motorization of the middle classes rendered any rational solution to the traffic problem impossible, and conditions only got worse with continuous urban expansion. By 1967, the automobile had become, along with verticalization and the suburbs, the third factor of destruction of the city, and the most effective instrument of a barbarous urbanism.

During the 1970s the population of Alicante increased by 70,000. Construction in the new districts continued under the aegis of piecemeal development plans targeting various parts of the city. The Adoc building, a vertical monstrosity on the seashore inspired by fascist architecture (the Torre Pirelli of Milan), inaugurated the mutilation of Albufereta, while along the shoreline at San Juan enormous apartment complexes were still being built without rhyme or reason. Within a few years, nothing at all remained of Alicante's agricultural hinterland and its venerable stone towers. Unlike Benidorm, where the vertical impulse initially obeyed the strictures of a conservation plan to protect the remnants of the coast—which, by the way, was unsuccessful—here it was all business, symbolizing in its own way the totalitarianism of the new society, whenever

⁷ In English in the original text [translator's note].

the symbols of a real political and social life have been erased. In the capital of the province is the Riscal building, now the Estudiotel Alicante, thirty-five stories tall; we can imagine what kind of “dialogue” of forms that this gigantic cuboid pile of cement carries on with its surroundings. The anti-natural character of these skyscrapers was so pronounced that, in contact with the benign climate of Alicante, the anti-esthetic element par excellence was elevated to a category of the city’s trademark scenic landscape: the sun-awning [*toldo*]. The fragmented city became a socially neutral, zoned space, sown with erect architectural lumps of shit, but without any reference points, and therefore without memory, even without language: the fate of the Valencian language is testimony to this. It became a disordered and vulgar place, a backdrop for making money, ideal for a mass-produced, privatized and consumerist lifestyle. Officially, the conurbation of Alicante was born in 1973 with the creation of the Municipal Consortium [*Mancomunidad*] composed of Alicante and its neighboring cities, which meant that traffic jams, gentrification of the downtown areas, destruction of the landscape, disappearance of the local agriculture and immeasurable generation of waste were no longer specifically Alicantian problems. All the coastal areas of the province succumbed to the same pathology, particularly in the south, where the water of the Tajo-Segura diversion project allowed the construction of countless urban centers. Any adventurer could set up as a real estate speculator in one of the coastal cities and get rich quickly. In ten years, the small real estate brokers and construction firms had become powerful corporate actors allied with the banks, and wielded major influence in the local municipal governments. The construction companies were the spearhead of the new bourgeoisie, and they were the ones who would be calling the shots in the “democratic” political future. The combative proletariat of the republican era has been replaced by a much more numerous, yet also much more docile, successor. Without any tradition and without any past, it came to Alicante without really penetrating it, remaining isolated in its peripheral enclaves, which were veritable deposits of labor power without qualities. It did not possess the means to produce its own collective identity in its neighborhoods, and therefore it was incapable of constituting a community of interests, that is, of establishing class bonds. Nor was it capable of acting as a class at its workplaces. There was hardly any industry in Alicante, and most jobs were in the service sector, construction and management. A tertiary economy does not need any special infrastructure, nor does it require any particular preconditions, unlike an industrial economy; its occupations do not demand even the most cursory apprenticeship; its workers are warehouse laborers, construction laborers, waiters, retail clerks, civil servants, hotel housekeepers, restaurant workers, domestic servants, etc. The size of the enterprises of the tertiary sector is often quite small, which is why the workers are dispersed and isolated, competing with one another, many with temporary contracts, others working in the underground economy, off the books. This precarious existence is compounded by their lack of roots; thousands of workers have come to Alicante—and are still arriving—just to work during the summer season and then go home, and at least half of its population increase is accounted for by recent arrivals, born elsewhere. In such circumstances, the external contribution of the proletarian element only serves to accelerate the decomposition of the native working class. Despite the fact that wage workers constitute more than four-fifths of the population, the working class of Alicante would never acquire the combative spirit that was attained by the working class in nearby cities such as Elx, Alcoi or Elda.

Political change did not transform the economic landscape. The socialist municipal administration did not depart from the legacy of the Franco regime, and only limited its initiatives to rationalizing the development trend, by gilding the pill of its brutality, and making preparations

for expected future challenges. Thanks to the fact that the population had stabilized in the 1980s, urban renewal and infrastructure rehabilitation projects were implemented in the various city neighborhoods, the circle of the beltway of highways around the city was completed (the Gran Vía), and a new PGOU [*Plan General Municipal de Ordenación Urbana*—General Guidelines for Municipal Urban Planning] was formulated that made large tracts land that were ideal for urban development available for real estate development. In 1986 the new middle classes commenced their exodus from their traditional downtown neighborhoods towards the eastern outskirts of the city (El Garbinet, Vistahermosa) and the beach zones, spurring a surge in demand for housing, parking and vehicular access. This was the death sentence of certain relatively well-preserved places like Cabo de las Huertas and La Condomina. Housing prices went through the roof and stimulated new construction, once again the driving force of the local economy. Furthermore, the opening of El Corte Inglés diverted all shopping activity to Maisonnave Avenue, sealing the fate of the old downtown shopping district—the historic San Francisco section of the old city—which had previously performed this function, and which then began to decay while awaiting its museification and conversion into a leisure and entertainment zone. This new “hotspot” was itself provisional, however, for during the next decade its retail earnings would be split with other emerging “hotspots”. The touristic vocation of Alicante affirmed by the socialists was still in effect; El Altet had become the fourth busiest airport on the peninsula during the summer months, the chosen destination of five million sun and sand tourists. The tourists did not come to stay, however. Ever since the sixties, Alicante was only a temporary destination even for those who worked there. In fact, the main activity of the Alicante metropolitan area was the construction of second homes, first of all for the residents of Alicante itself, and then for the residents of Madrid and the elderly residents of the North. The socialist government of the country faced an intractable contradiction. Its electoral base, the middle class, had made its own contributions to the destruction of the city and was not going to support anti-development policies, which is why, far from opposing the forces against which it could hardly fight, it tried to form an alliance with them by crushing the last obstacle standing in the way of the creation of a real national real estate market, i.e., the small-scale landowner. The law governing land ownership passed in 1990 placed serious limitations on the rights of ownership and provided the regional governments with the most effective instrument to suppress protests against the abuses of the urban development programs. The Valencian Generalitat, in the hands of the socialists, passed a Law for the Regulation of Urban Development that effectively surrendered the municipal governments to the construction interests. In the guise of the figure of the “agent of urbanization”, the *alter ego* of the real estate development promoters, the small-scale landowner or homeowner was expropriated without the right of appeal, and obliged to pay the expenses of the urbanization of the property which he or she had owned for many years, provided only that the municipal government would approve a Plan for Integral Jurisdiction presented by that very same “agent”. The excesses were proportional to the economic interests at stake, that is to say, they were very numerous, and would continue to characterize the whole subsequent period.⁸

When the People’s Party assumed control over the Valencian Generalitat, it was the construction industry that really took power. With the industrial crisis battering the three provinces and agriculture in the process of becoming extinct, the ruling class was still playing its same high

⁸ This legal expropriation of property owners is analogous to the law of “eminent domain” in the United States [translator’s note].

stakes game; in the case of Alicante, not affected by outsourcing, an attempt was made to exploit “la millor terreta del món” [the “old sod”]⁹ for speculative purposes. The key element for the speculators was not so much the resistance of the small-scale landowners against the developers, but rather the whole system governing the assessment of real property valuations. Merely changing the zoning classification of real estate automatically multiplied its price by a factor of 25, which is why real estate transactions normally began with the purchase of some rural, industrial, infrastructure- or entertainment-related, green zone, etc., real estate, at a ridiculously low price, followed by its transformation into real estate subject to urban development. The ensuing re-zoning of urban real estate proceeded at a frenzied pace, and even caused prices to rise so high that they had to be compensated for by verticality. The 1998 Reform of the Real Property Assessment Law passed by the People’s Party offered the opportunity to convert any parcel of land into real estate eligible for urban development, which made more land available on the market at a time when housing had been transformed into a mere investment. Speculation became institutionalized. When interest rates fell and the stock market collapsed, their constant rise in prices made the purchase of residential properties very profitable (between 1996 and 2005, the cost of a house on the coast tripled). This is demonstrated by the fact that in 2001, 16% of the residential properties in the province were vacant; in Alicante alone there were 22,000 vacant residential units. The first thing the “People’s” administration did was authorize the resumption of various development projects that had been suspended due to a series of criminal investigations, most notably the Alicante building (previously known as the Feygon building), a veritable architectural behemoth situated in the shopping district, and to increase the maximum height of future construction by fifteen floors. The regulations established by the previous PGOU had in the meantime become obstacles to the construction industry, which lobbied for the drafting of a new, more permissive PGOU. Work on this new PGOU began in 2000, and in 2002 a preliminary revision was released. The real estate boom was extended by a powerful injection of credit and by the arrival of foreign capital, the product of the internationalization of the secondary mortgage market and the market for second homes. Now the real estate business was trying to attract the European ruling class, adapting its advertisements to the limitations of the lifestyle of the retired executive: good communications, video surveillance, swimming pools, parking garages, golf courses and gyms. The policies of the coastal conurbations are directly ruled by the construction industry. All the talk about “sustainable” growth, as well as the new legislation (the Valencian Urban Development Law and the Law for Territorial Development) merely announce that from now on the abuses will be dissimulated and regulated. The second most powerful sector is that of distribution (in Alicante, 44% of enterprises are retail sales operations, and half of the surface of the city is devoted to shopping centers and supermarkets). The big shopping centers are not places for buying necessary provisions but veritable instruments of urbanization. They are the actual urban reference points, the authentic poles of orientation; they define the new functional districts of the conurbation and tend to concentrate all commercial, cultural and leisure activity within their precincts. Outside of these areas, it would be hard to find a bookstore or a movie theater in Alicante—and this in a city that has sponsored a public relations campaign to characterize it as a “city of the cinema”. In these retail concentrations the everyday life of the residents is rendered susceptible to industrial processing. The economic globalization that took place between 1995 and 2005 produced more far-reaching changes than any preced-

⁹ An expression that denotes love for one’s locality or region, in this case Alicante [translator’s note].

ing period with respect to labor, ways of life and the character of society. During the period of globalization, the environment of Alicante radically simplified its everyday lifestyle. Holed up in their apartments, its residents only ventured forth to drive their cars to the privileged sites of encounter with the commodity, entertainment districts and shopping centers, strolls on the beach or on the streets of some theme-park style, high-security, redefined neighborhood, from which every last trace of poverty, marginalization and misery has been eliminated. Hence the insatiable demand for parking lots and office space. Alicante is part of the world market and this is best illustrated by the immigrant population that is arriving from countries impoverished by capitalism to perform the most degrading jobs and resides in the vacated homes of the declining neighborhoods abandoned by workers with better prospects, such as, for example, Virgen del Remedio, Virgen del Carmen, Juan XXIII, San Antón and San Gabriel. There are now about thirty thousand immigrants in Alicante, and they account for the most recent increase in the population of the city. They are not an underclass or a new lumpenproletariat. They are workers who have been uprooted by capitalist globalization from their towns and cities and thrown onto the internationalized labor market in the worst possible conditions. They are the advance units of a movement that is similar to the one that brought millions of peasants to the cities between 1940 and 1980, and the effects they will have on the advanced zones of capitalism will be considerable. The social question will not be posed again without taking them into account.

Barring a major financial crisis, exacerbated by a brutal drought that would render all water diversion projects useless, the logic of capitalism will drive the conurbation of Alicante to endless growth, destroying more territory and concentrating more population. The 15,000 useless residential units of the Rabasa Plan are the most immediate example, but not the worst, since the real estate market will not stop expanding and disintegrating the small-scale industrial economies of the inland municipalities and transforming them into satellites of the predatory economy of the coast. Obviously, if one wants to defend the territory from the avalanche of development plans that are currently being promoted one will have to stop the process of urbanization by confronting the powerful real estate interests, which are abundantly represented in the municipal governments by corrupt politicians and on the venal executive boards of the savings banks. A mass movement with a well defined program of struggle, one that will clearly delineate the contending parties, is necessary. To begin, we have to dispense with all political programs that call for more development, such as, for example, the plans promoted by the opposition socialists, the platforms of the “green” left or the environmentalists: municipal or regional government purchase of land and buildings, green tourism, the construction of “low-income” housing, the re-zoning of rural real estate for development projects, etc. Different proposals can serve to prepare for the collective re-appropriation of space if they are situated within the perspective of de-urbanization and ruralization: a moratorium on development projects, special tax levies on vacant housing, organic agriculture, urban gardens, renovation of the homes of workers ... to which we can add the occupation of vacant buildings, the rejection of private transportation, boycotting the big corporate retail outlets, intervention to lower the price of housing and to freeze the accounts of the construction companies. To make Alicante habitable we will have to undo the long process of urbanization described above and demolish two-thirds of its buildings. The social struggle will be fundamentally opposed to development and urbanization, or it will not exist. However, neither the suppression of the market for housing nor the reconstruction of the countryside will be sufficient unless they are accompanied by a way of life that is alien to consumerism, unless wage labor is abolished, unless the public space is reconstructed, unless

the party system is abolished, unless the citizens' assembly is restored, unless the lost knowledge and customs that have fallen into disuse are recovered, unless community exchanges are restored, unless ways of human coexistence are established, free and egalitarian and based on the locality, and unless all the other aspects of generalized territorial self-management are present.

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