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Monday, April 28, 2014

# We are all to blame

Published in *El País* with the title "[La culpa es nuestra](#)", 13 April 2014, p. 31

**It is not only elites who are "extractive"; citizens, the masses, also are**

Now that we have seen that the reforms needed to get over the crisis are only being applied late and wrongly, more and more people are blaming the political system or the politicians, and are proposing costly and risky institutional ruptures. But they are wrong, because the main problem does not lie with the institutions but with citizens themselves. In fact, the decisions taken voluntarily by those who govern us are in line with the preferences of the majority; Spaniards are the Europeans most in favour of having the State control the economy and redistribute income. And that is without mentioning our resistance to cutting public expenditure or freeing the labour market.

We were portrayed well in a recent survey by the BBVA Foundation. While we are happy to be the Europeans that are most critical of politicians and institutions, we are the least interested in becoming better-informed. We claim to hate corruption, but we do not even stop voting for corrupt politicians. When we are not spurning politics, we behave like football fans rather than citizens. It even seems that the main reason we are angry is because politics is unable to support the level of consumption we had become accustomed to. We want reforms, but we want them to only hurt others. If we could choose, no real political option would suit us. It is no coincidence that our responses to the crises of 1957, 1973 or 2008 could well be described as "late, wrong or non-existent", even though back then our institutions were very different.

So it is superficial to only blame our politicians, the elites or the

institutions for today's situation. Changing them would be costly and the outcome could not be guaranteed. And it is wrong to exonerate the masses. The fact is that we all like to "extract" as much as the elites do. Fraud is rampant not only in the taxes paid by large fortunes, but also in the underground economy and in social benefits. And we, the masses, are probably more "dissipating": where we squander most is in over-investment in public works, which receives widespread support even though, rather than redistributing income, it wastes it. This dualism between the masses and the elites could be expected from common voters, but not from intellectuals. They risk committing a similar error to that of the Generation of 1898: scorning the achievements of the Restoration and building institutions from scratch, triggering a process that soon made them irrelevant.

It is true that the solution cannot be only economic, but institutional rupture would not work: the main fault lies not in the transmission of our preferences but in their inconsistency. We want everything but are not prepared to give anything. And above all, we want everything from the State but we do not cooperate in controlling it and, even less, in maintaining it. Under these conditions, even reforms that manage to increase competition among political parties could fail. As the case of Catalonia shows, greater political competition may just lead to propaganda and populism rather than generating more information and better decisions.

We need reforms that go to the root of the problem. They should aim to make our preferences as citizens more rational, making up for our unwillingness to be better informed and cooperate in controlling the public sphere. We need to reduce the costs of informing citizens so that our civic education becomes automatic. We need to make it clear where our taxes go and how we use public services. Hidden tax burdens should be clarified, e.g., avoiding tax "rebates", making prices exclusive of VAT, and informing workers of "employers" contributions to Social Security. There should also be less secrecy about the relative efficiency of public services: let us publish, for example, the earnings of graduates from each university. We should make being informed inevitable, just as it is in homeowners' associations. These are by no means perfect, but they neither waste resources nor follow political leanings when punishing their presidents or administrators for corruption. Though governed by Spaniards, immediacy prevails and even, in cases of fraud, the instinct of possession. Similar forces could be gathered in the public arena. For example, if public wages and tax contributions were published, then the natural inclinations to gossip and envy that we have never bothered to tame culturally could be harnessed to a useful end.

This improved awareness of public decisions would bring our

preferences, which today are more State-centred and against competition, in line with those of Europe. Perhaps then we would be able to accept the introduction of the individual incentives that ensure wellbeing. In Spain, these would have to be more individual than in countries in which citizens are used to making sure that no-one escapes from contributing to the common good. This is key, because failures in collective action plague not only politics but all areas—from education to business, the professions and the media. We need some sort of compensation mechanism for our values so that remuneration is more in line with actual conduct. Individual incentives are what created our “champions”—in business, sport or art. Such Spaniards do not triumph because they renounce their values but because they work in contexts with stable rules in which they are paid according to performance. This model can be applied to all sorts of activities, but it is us, citizens, who are the first to resist it. Not only the elites.

## Discussion

Comments in the “No Free Lunch” blog; José Repullo, “Corrupción: culpables, unos pocos; responsables todos”; Letter to the editor of *El País*; Sonia Alonso, Astrid Barrio, Argelia Queral, Juan Rodríguez Teruel, “Mejorando nuestra educación política”, *El Diario*, 20 de abril de 2014; Andrés Betancor, “Élites extractivas, mayorías extractivas, régimen extractivo”, *Expansión*, 22 de abril de 2014, p. 47.

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