

“Popular Justice” against the Symbols of Conservative Power during the 1854

Revolution in Madrid

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Since 1848 several Liberal movements started to alter the political base of the Conservatives in the European Continent. In 1854 Spain suffered several Progresist-cut revolutions which took place caused by an unsustainable situation: the Conservatives (called “moderates”) groups had held power for ten years, with politics of its last years being a nest of corruption, ornamented with anti-constitutional nuances. The situation was worsened by a famine, which stimulated a military led revolution, followed by a popular uprising. This was successful in Madrid, and promptly extended from here to various Spanish provinces. The result was the triumph of Liberalism, which would sustain power between 1854 and 1856 (“bienio progresista”).

This paper analyses, from a Social History viewpoint, the attacks that took place against the Conservative power groups during the 1854 revolution. Studies the so-called “war in the streets”, looking for popular justice in a sort of “moral revenge of the multitudes” (paraphrasing E.P.Thompson’s expression), by selectively targeting the symbols of power. It takes into account the “collective mentalities”, the constructive processes leading to the representations of power, the systems leading to the resistance against it and the mobilisation of the masses, with the specific manner of assimilation Liberalism undertook to put popular justice in place.

The analysis is based on the case of Madrid, capital of Spain, where the political power that it represented was of the utmost importance, as was that of its most important personalities. Generally these were army officers and politicians of a conservative tendency, loyal to the monarchy, and whose power was based on extended social networks that joined banks with government. On the people’s opinion some of these became the main responsible actors of the situation, and, therefore, its enemies. A direct relationship was established between them and the socially representative spaces of the town. When the popular uprising, asking for justice, took place, the centres that symbolised this corruption were assaulted. In the first place the House of the Queen Regent and the homes of bankers and politicians were attacked, burning their furniture, which was considered a symbol of the wealth accumulated through the missapplication

of funds. In second place the people irrupted, by night, into the see of the President of the Council of Ministers to light its halls and sit on his armchair, a piece of furniture that symbolised a power that should be democratically shared through the election of the people's representatives. In third place they burnt the see of the "El Herald" journal, a newspaper through which the ideology of the Conservative groups was diffused. In the fourth place they attacked, barricades included, the "Casino de Madrid", whose President's life they demanded; he was being deemed as head of a corrupt Institution, a club that materialised the sociability space where that elite designed its social networks and consolidated business, affairs and political alliances: its was the centre of the reigning corruption.

This study is based on the analysis of the press, manifestos, books, literature and engravings of the time, lists with the presentations of new members at the Casino de Madrid, and present-day bibliography to understand and explain the phenomenon from a Cultural History perspective.