Mobilising memories, evidence and futures: disentangling Huelva from chemical industry

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Abstract

The westernmost provincial capital of Andalucía, Huelva, was chosen by the Francoist regime as a showcase of heavy industrial development with the Polo Químico initiated in 1964. Popular mobilizations started soon against the dumbfounding consequences of these industries, which have deposited an amazing 120 Mtonnes of phosphogypsum less that 500 metres away from the outer neighbourhoods of Huelva. These mobilizations have both increased in intensity and changed in character. The paper describes the interaction between the networks of citizens and associations engaged in the contestation to chemical industries and expert networks and institutions, and intends to raise four major points. The Mesa por la Ría motto, “my Huelva has a ría”, seeks to mobilize the memory of a clean and playful environment from the 1950’s, where many “onubenses” learned to swim (it is now, of course, toxically dangerous). But the river flows on, and an alternative future for Huelva must be built anew; we focus on the task of replacing the Polo Químico as the economic and even symbolic axis of Huelva, achieved among other things through the engagement of architects and their professional institutions, both in the imaginary and practical realms. The development of a body of counterexpertise in health, ecological, economic and legal matters is

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the subject of a third section, where the meshing of “ordinary” citizens and experts, and their distributed capabilities, is emphasized. A final section presents a series of open questions for further inquiry.

1 Introduction: the monster in the ría

Half a mile from the southermost neighbourhoods of the city of Huelva lies an industrial area, whose deposits of toxic, radioactive residues are half as big as the whole city itself. The sheer size of these dumps and settling ponds, 125 million tonnes of phosphogypsum laced with arsenic and assorted heavy metals, is the deep leit motiv behind this paper. How do you oppose such a seemingly irresistible force? How can you imagine your own landscape without it, and keep some hope of it happening? If environmental mobilisations are an instance of people “doing things together” (Becker, 1986), there is already a major joint achievement in thinking of an alternative future on top of 1.200 hectares of a 25-metre-deep layer of industrial residue, and moving towards it for the sake of unborn generations. “I won’t see the ría restored”, they say in demonstrations, “but my grandchildren must”.

People in Huelva, the onubenses, have been trying to do just that for several decades now, albeit in a rather schizophrenic way, i.e., acknowledging the economic affluence bestowed on them by the Polo Químico, while lamenting the radical alteration of their environment, and -bitterly- its health consequences. The Mesa de la Ría\(^1\), constituted in 2002 and comprising now more than 30 professional and neighbourhood associations, political parties and institutions, is the latest incarnation of this protracted movement of opposition to the tangible deterioration of the urban environment. However, they must work in a context where unemployment often draws more fear than pollution-related diseases. Loss of jobs, direct and indirect, is a spectre conveniently agitated by the association of chemical industries (the AIQB –Asociación de Industrias de Química Básica–, Basic Chemical Industries’ Association), which has led to confrontations and counter-demonstrations in support of the “chemical cluster”. What kind of civic engagement can survive to this social fracture, and the huge task of transformation required?

In this paper I report on a preliminary stage of an ongoing research on Huelva’s mobilization to recover their ría (estuary) from

\(^1\)This piece is mainly based on the exhaustive documentation (a digital dossier comprising 5170 documents, press clips, videos and pictures) that Juan Manuel Buendía, a tireless member of the Mesa de la Ría and vicepresident of the Colegio de Arquitectos de Huelva, generously provided. My deep thanks to him and José Pablo Vázquez, president of the COAH.
chemical and energy industry. First I will provide some historical background to the situation in Huelva and the mobilizations led by the Mesa de la Ría. I will then explore how the collective memory of onubenses has become part of the battleground for its future. A third section analyzes how forms of expertise and counterexpertise enable the wide-ranging challenge that this large-scale reivindication requires, particularly in the urban planning and public health areas. We will then summarize the major bone of contention, the construction of the combined-cycle thermal plant started in 2003 by ENDESA. A final section tries to locate relevant questions to be pursued... and provides not a single answer.

2 A tainted background to a forgotten agreement

The Mesa de la Ría intended to reactivate the long-standing public concern on the future of the Francisco Montenegro Avenue, which was “gradually and stepwise” to be claimed back from chemical and energy industries (the Polo Químico) established there during Franco’s dictatorship. The Polo Químico, or “chemical cluster”, was created in 1964, as a cherished initiative of the “technocrat” -he and the Opus Dei elite network he belonged to were known under this label- minister Laureano López Rodó. Dozens of chemical and energy firms flocked to the generous conditions offered to set up their factories: fiscal incentives, nearby mining resources, cheap workforce and available land (very) close to a major city. Polos, that is, “development poles” or clusters, were one of the major instruments for the Francoist regime to plan and organise the coveted wave of industrial growth that swept Spain.
in the 60’s and 70’s, the “development years” (los años del desarrollo). Cities vied for Polos, and onubenses were initially overjoyed to be awarded such a major prize. Up to sixty firms were established, mainly along the Avenida Francisco Montenegro leading to the Punta del Sebo and the Colombus monument, and the Outer Port, across the ría.

But hopes were soon chastened. Huelva took a dive to the bottom in the per capita income ranking, and the deterioration of the environment became glaring. A nuclear plant was rejected by the public and institutions in the early 1970’s, and pollution kept mounting until it became critical in 1975-1977 (Fernández, 1999, 87-88). On the 28th of December 1976, levels of $\text{SO}_2$ shot to 3000 units, over seven times above the maximum acceptable level. In 1976 the public prosecutor office denounced the situation, and the architects’ professional institution (Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Huelva, COAH) organized a series of conferences on the subject, and launched an initiative for the gradual “uncoupling” of the major chemical facilities, based on the first integral diagnosis of the problem. Huelva’s “civil governor” (a rather important figure at the time) set up an Subcommittee on the Environment, which was composed of neighbourhood and professional associations, together with industry and trade union representatives. The socialist party, PSOE, ran in town hall elections on a platform that included the relocation of all factories within 8 years. In 1978, thousands of onubenses marched against the health and environmental problems caused by the Polo Químico.

At any rate, environmental and urban development problems associated with industry were hardly new to onubenses. Some kilometres upstream from Huelva, along the Tinto (red) river, the late XIXth- and early XXth-centuries operation of the worldwide renowned Riotinto mines, auctioned off to the English in the 1870’s, are a direct antecedent to the chemical industries in Huelva’s history and the onubense collective imaginary. The railway that transported processed mineral from the mining area to the Riotinto wharf for cargo boats stunted Huelva’s development towards its waterfront. It also triggered a proto-environmental revolt as far back as 1888 (“the year of the shooting”, el año de los tiros), when the permanent thick layers of smoke (la manta, the “blanket”), caused by the “teleras” (open-air roasting of mineral), contributed to a peaceful demonstration for better working and living conditions, that ended in a bloodbath precipitated by the governor.

Collective memories run deep in Huelva’s mobilizations, and have helped maintain a continuous level of resistance, coalescing in mobilizations and massive demonstrations (supported then by the socialist
party and trade union, PSOE and UGT) and public opinion pressure, that led in 1991 to the Mesa por la Recuperación de la Avenida Francisco Montenegro, and the signing of a formal agreement among political parties, public administration (local and regional governments), industry representatives and trade unions. The agreement covered the gradual termination of industrial activity along the Avenida Francisco Montenegro, and a plan to minimize the impact on the environment and public health. This agreement became formalized in the Plan General de Ordenación Urbana (urban planning normative), passed in 1998, whereby no new industrial facilities were to be installed in the area.

But the political context changed with time, even as the environmental and public health damage and its denunciations continued. Eleven years later, the COAH asked the signing parties to attend a meeting in order to reactivate the process of recovery of the ría, but the 1991 signatories, major political parties, PP (conservative) and PSOE, trade unions and employers’ associations did not show up. This lack of attendance certified a radical change in the character of the process initiated by the Mesa de la Ría, and turned it into a citizen-oriented movement led by professional institutions (with the COAH as primus inter pares) and neighbourhood associations. One of the first initiatives of the Mesa was the collection of signatures for a petition to hold a referendum, as contemplated in the Reglamento de Participación Ciudadana (citizen participation local government regulations). The number of signatures required was 10,000. The Mesa obtained just over 20,000, in a 150,000-strong, socially divided city, but the referendum has to this day not taken place. About 12,000 people attended a festive garbanzada (“chick pea” festival) at the Punta del Sebo on the 12th of October 2004 (this is the “Día de la Hispanidad”).

The former signatories of the 1991 agreements drafted a new document backtracking on their previous commitments, which the Town Hall approved on the 31st of March 2005. Outside the Hall, a tense exchange followed between “poleros” (supporters of the Polo Químico, mainly UGT trade unionists), and Mesa de la Ría supporters, opposed to a new thermal plant built by ENDESA (without a municipal licence) and voicing their public health concerns. Thousands of onubenses attended a second garbanzada on the 6th of November 2005, after the remnants of a hurricane brushed for the first time in decades² the Spanish southwestern coast and prevented them from celebrating it on the 12th of October as the previous year.

²This phenomenon has been linked to climate change, which in a sense closed the ecological circle.
3 Cleaning memories

“Mi Huelva tiene una ría”. That’s the title of a recent film by Mavi Villatoro, a Paris-based onubense who supports the Mesa efforts. My Huelva has a ría is the first line of a local flamenco song (a fandango), and one of the mottos found in the garbanzadas, banners, press releases and websites. Well, but of course, Huelva is located between two rías (river estuaries), the river Tinto’s and the Odiel’s; why should it need reminding? In fact, because of the overwhelming barrier to the South, the Polo Químico and its dumps and settling ponds, the city has been built “with its back to the ría”, as the activists complain. But it used to be otherwise: Huelva’s past is rooted in the ría, and anchoring this past in the debate is the first step towards claiming it back for the city’s future.

The fight for the social imaginary can be condensed in Figure 2, a picture from the 50’s of the beach around Christopher Colombus statue\(^3\), before the Polo was established. This particular photograph is found in most of the posters, websites and presentations of the Mesa, and is to the movement a kind of Exhibit A of what the area used to be and what it must somehow revert to.

![Figure 2](image.png)

*Figure 2:* Taking a bath in the Punta del Sebo beach (an industrial toxic area now), 1950’s.

There is an interesting social class dimension to this fight for the memory of the city. After the reactivation of citizen mobilizations

\(^3\)To be precise, the “Monument to the Discoverer Faith”, by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, and donated in 1929 by the US Government. The monument itself, the best-known image of Huelva, is a few metres from ENDESA’s thermal plant.
by the Mesa de la Ría, part of the local press—a largely supported by chemical companies—rather surprisingly denied the Punta del Sebo had ever been the city’s recreational area, as claimed by the Mesa. Onubenses went to Punta Umbría, a few kilometres away and in the sea coast (not in the ría), they said. People over 50 answered that Punta del Sebo was the beach for the working classes, which took (“for one peseta!”) a light, roofless train from the city to the Punta del Sebo, where they bathed. Punta Umbría was for the higher strata of Huelva and “señoritos” (high-class people) from outside Huelva.

The AIQB spokespersons also contested that Punta del Sebo was relevant at all to the collective memory of onubenses. The answer by the Mesa de la Ría spokesperson explains nicely why the struggle to uncover the memory connection of the city to the Punta del Sebo area, and the fight for the removal of chemical industry are densely connected in onubense culture:

the memory of our history is centred on the Punta del Sebo, in a sense that can be sneered at as bucolic, but that is essentially reivindicative, because this collective memory goes against nobody and nothing, but just cannot forget its beaches, its leisure spaces, the absence of smoke, its tree-sided avenues, the tourist train, etc., where a type of citizenly coexistence developed, which could have led to another possible quality of life... (COAH press release, 2nd January 2003).

4 Expertise, counterexpertise and public perception

This section touches on expert knowledge, as it bears on the Mesa de la Ría activities and public support. The tense relationship between expert knowledge and the environmental movement has been well explored (see (Jasanoff, 1997), among many others). On the one hand, knowledge obtained and validated through scientific communities is often the only available diagnosis of the problem itself (Yearley, 1997, 228). On the other, Science has been wielded as an epistemic tool to deny the legitimacy of lay citizens to intervene in public debates on its development, application and consequences (a deep-running version of this argument can be found in (Latour, 2004)). The ability of lay citizens to reorient, contest and also generate expert knowledge has been highlighted (Rabeharisoa y Callon, 2002).

Here I contrast two areas of controversies: urban design and public health. It can be argued that the Mesa’s arguments are strongest in
terms of the first, but most successful when addressing the second, as the Polo Químico provides a readily available frame for attribution of personal and family disease (cancer, paramountly). In order to fully take into account the “emotional collective biography” of onubenses one would probably need a more sophisticated theoretical grid that I am able to deploy (perhaps along the lines of Emirbayer y Goldberg, 2005).

4.1 Disentangling the urban imagination from a chemical mire

A major thrust in the activities of the Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Huelva (COAH), the leading component of the Mesa de la Ría, has been to draw and share with onubenses a possible picture of a transformed seafront in the framework of a reorientation of Huelva’s urban economy. The COAH organized in April 2003 an “Encounter of Cities Before the Sea”, where they intended to learn from experiences of radical restorations of seaside Spanish cities such as Tarragona, Barcelona, Málaga or Bilbao, with its paradigm of rust-to-cultural-titanium, the Holy Guggenheim Grail. The COAH presented then a first version of their own project for the ría, “Huelva EJE”, and claimed the recuperation of the Avenida Francisco Montenegro was feasible, when compared to other interventions in Bilbao or Tarragona.

A new economic model, with a greater input from services (mainly tourism) was put forward, which hinged on the city expansion towards the Punta del Sebo through cultural and leisure areas, in order to connect the city to the Palos de la Frontera and its monuments (as the reader knows, Christopher Columbus set sail from this port), and gain a “sense of centrum” that it has in fact never achieved.

COAH’s participation in MILUNET was crucial in legitimising and buttressing their ability to think out of Huelva’s chemical box. MILUNET (Multifunctional Intensive Land Use) is a EU-backed network “dedicated to the generation, collection, exchange and transfer of knowledge on the subject of multifunctional intensive land use as a means to realise more sustainable urban (re)development in Europe” (International Institute for the Urban Environment, 2003, 4). Through MILUNET the COAH tapped into EU-level structures and programmes directly, i.e. avoiding often hostile local and regional institutions. MILUNET works under the auspices of the Interreg IIIC and the URBAN II programmes.

To what extent has this urban reorganization reached rank-and-file onubenses? Their discourse tends to fall into two categories: those who see no real possibility of dramatic change, at least within their
lifetimes, and those who see more plasticity in the options available, and draw on the economic diagnosis of the situation of the chemical industry, which has shed thousands of jobs and reduced its weight in Huelva’s overall product. As the COAH’s project suggests, tourism and services-related activities are already the major source of income for onubenses, and will surely expand in the future—if the city is able to adapt in this direction. This new “development narrative” is certainly increasingly common among citizens, and is directly connected to the joint efforts of experts brought together by the Mesa de la Ría (such as the prospective studies of economists such as Universidad de Huelva’s Professor García del Hoyo, a spokesperson for the Mesa and collaborator of the presentations to MILUNET sessions). As a middle-aged participant at the 2004 garbanzada puts it wistfully, we have been deceived... they set up the factories, we didn’t know anything... yes, they gave us jobs, that’s true, but I don’t know whether I’d rather have pollution or underdevelopment... we can see now that Huelva is going to make a living out of agriculture and tourism, and this [pointing at the Polo] is not compatible with that...

4.2 Cancer, distrust and radioactivity DIY

If perceiving health personal troubles in the framework of public issues, as Wright Mills’ classic famously suggested ([1959]2000), is a first step towards this health-based environmental mobilization, Huelva cannot help to provide one. Large sticky smoke plumes seemingly glued to factories’ chimneys, the and irritated throats by atmospheric sulphur helps remind anyone who approaches the Francisco Montenegro area that there is a large volume of chemical industrial activity a few hundred metres from their homes. After Love Canal, as Schnaiberg (2001) argues, the “environment” in environmental movements has been redefined to include industrial development factors affecting public health at the local level. Environmental mobilisations of this kind have largely engaged in forms of popular epidemiology, whereby “laypersons detect and act on environmental hazards and diseases... community activists repeatedly differ with scientists and government officials on matters of public definition, study design, interpretation of findings, and policy applications” (Brown, 1993).

While Huelva protesters and Mesa de la Ría members have participated in this type of effort, challenging official figures for cancer incidence and their significance, or underlining the prevalence of asthma (among the highest in Europe), it is the radiactive potential of the
phosphogypsum dumps and settling ponds that has been most forcefully publicized. This is probably linked to the availability of technical devices (Geiger counters) that allows any citizen to check by themselves radiactivity levels at the deposits, which are over 100 times above maximum acceptable levels at some points of the ría. In recent TV programmes (such as “1equipo”, at Cadena Cuatro), a local protester just showed the crew the levels of radioactivity as sampled at the phosphogypsum area.

In a pattern that keeps reappearing in the history of Huelva’s episodes of contention, mistrust of expert assessments of public health issues of the area is tagged to the peripheral situation of the city in respect to Seville (the regional capital) and Spanish society in general. They point out bitterly that while the 1998 Aznalcóllar toxic spill\footnote{It is ironic that at least part of the high toxicity of Aznalcóllar’s spill was in fact due to the Polo Químico “shadow ecology” (Dauvergne, 1997): Río Tinto Minero, FESA, FORET y Minas de Almagrera sent their the residues of pirite treatment, with a very dangerous level of heavy metals and arsenic. The regional authorities may have been aware of the fact that Aznalcóllar dumping site was not impermeabilized.} that threatened the survival of the natural space of Doñana received immense media coverage and continuous scientific monitoring, large-scale spills of the phophogypsum dumps and settling ponds have not merited that much concern: “are a bunch of ducks worth more than 150.000 onubenses?” they complain.

5 New or renewed? ENDESA’s thermal plant and the widening of the repertoire

The major setback for the restoration of Huelva’s urban environment was the decision of the biggest energy company in Spain, ENDESA\footnote{Nowadays itself in a European-level, megabucks tug-of-war involving Germany’s E.On and Spain’s Gas Natural}, to build a new combined-cycle thermoelectric generator, which has recently been completed. As mentioned above, the 1991 agreements had called for the stepwise recuperation of the Avenida Francisco Montenegro as the facilities’ life-cycle ended. However, in the summer of 2003, ENDESA decided to apply for a licence to “renew” its thermal plant, the oldest facility installed in the area. ENDESA’s plans were probably a response to increased competition from modern energy plants located in the Outer Port.

Based on urban planning regulations (the PGOU) that incorporated the 1991 agreements, Huelva’s local government denied EN-
DESA’s application for a licence to build this new plant (disguised as a “renewal” of the old facility, that contradictorily was to be demolished after the works ended). ENDESA appealed to the local government corresponding instance, but lost. However, with some chutzpah, building continued all along, while ENDESA appealed to the Andalusian Higher Court, which for the first time ever upheld a cautionary suspension of Huelva’s local government licence denial, and therefore allowed ENDESA to finish building the plant.

This outraged the Mesa de la Ría, since the definitive installation of the new plant would mean postponing the recovery of the Francisco Montenegro area for decades. The Mesa accordingly increased its efforts and diversified its strategies. The most significant action is their “jump” to the Spanish Parliament through a “private member bill”, (proposición no de ley), sponsored by left parties, including the Catalan independentists Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya. The bill was voted to be included in the Energy Commission on the 23rd of December 2005, and is still pending resolution.

Although the bill would be, if approved, non-binding, the very fact of having succeeded in taking the issue to Congress has, according to Mesa supporters, “scared the wits out of local politicians”, who would be running the show in a localist, “caciquista” (local notables’ pseudodemocratic government typical of XIXth and early XXth centuries in rural, backward areas such as Andalusia or Galicia,, with little concern for citizens and public interest.

6 Opening up the inquiry

After this sketchy summary of what the latest mobilizations for the relocation of chemical and energy industry in Huelva have been like, in this section I list a number of questions that this preliminary inquiry has led me to; in the spirit of a workshop, I would be really grateful for your comments on their interest and potential avenues for further research.

6.1 Treadmills, commitments and disentanglements

One could think of the situation described above as a scaled-down version of the global treadmill of production ((Gould et al., 2004) is the latest restatement I am aware of). The political-economic network of the AIQB, local political parties and trade unions, the “additions” (pollution) of the chemical and energy industries, all look
like a model case of a local cog of the treadmill: “Politicians were induced to provide direct and indirect support for such expansion: They received strong support for doing this from investor-managerial groups. And they received public support from workers and their unions who supported virtually any and all kinds of ‘economic development.’” ((Gould et al., 2004, 297)). Does the Mesa de la Ría efforts to recover the ría from chemical and energy industry automatically “qualify” as going against the treadmill, i.e., reorienting Huelva’s development in a sustainable direction, then? The generic concern about the contradiction between local reconfigurations and global strengthening of the treadmill probably applies here. It is not for me, I think, to adjudicate on the matter, but rather check empirically whether the actors on the ground are aware of the time-scales and potentially contradictory goals of urban renewal and global sustainability. Is there a positive feedback between these dimensions? Do citizens become sensitized to longer-term, planetary level issues as a result of their locally defined concerns? At the level of the leading associations in the Mesa, this is at least quite present in their understanding. As the COAH expresses in their project *Huelva EJE*,

Future growth cannot be guaranteed without integration into a global strategy of sustainability, based on fair valuation of the natural environment, the careful use of scarce natural resources, and a drastic reduction consumption of non-renewable energy sources. Acting on this will require development in thinking, valuation an action by those involved in production activities.

A probably overlooked achievement of the Mesa is the challenge to the “growth coalition” (Molotch (1975); revisited in Jonas (1999)) of Huelva chemical and energy companies, politicians and trade unionists, to provide *public justification* of the options available, their stage in the life-cycle of the facilities, etcetera. Although the Mesa has always pointed out that they support industry and the jobs attached, it has called into question that their present and probable future weight in the city’s economy warranted a complete surrender to their managers’ decisions, and this has been taken up in citizens’ discourse. It is significant that the reaction of the FOE, the onubense entrepreneurs association to the Mesa de la Ría initiative was framed precisely in terms of rejection of the possibility of planning development, which was compared to Soviet-style quinquennial plannification.

A different strand of research would try to understand the type of political commitment that the Mesa de la Ría mobilizations have fostered. Are we more likely to find a “personalized” or “communitarian”
(Lichterman, 1996) type of commitment under these conditions? On the one hand, there is a strong localist, communitarian strand in the Mesa discourse, which plays on themes of the Polo defenders as not “true onubenses” (most AIQB leaders usually live outside Huelva and were born elsewhere). On the other, the very long-term haul nature of the recovery effort has fostered a “personalized commitment” type of engagement, that is cosmopolitan and frames the local struggle within the broader vision of a way towards increasing global sustainability.

6.2 Public health and environmental goals

As the row between Polo workers and Mesa supporters developed outside the Town Hall, the Mesa de la Ría spokesperson, Aurelio González, had to intervene in a bitter exchange between a UGT trade unionist, who claimed that tobacco was more dangerous to your health that the Polo, and a man who cried indignantly that his children had died of cancer. Aurelio González had to remind the man, brought to bitter tears, that “the enemy is ENDESA, not the Polo”. Is this a hint of deeply-hidden fracture between the agendas and mobilizatory abilities that revolve around personal and community health, and long-term reorientation of urban political economy?

I suppose this is an instance of a broader theme: are public health concerns (an instance, at first sight, of anthropocentric environmentalism) unproblematically an ally for global sustainability concerns (biocentric environmentalism or ecologism)? In terms of the different types of commitment to environmental politics, “[t]he distinction between ‘personal complaint’ and ‘global concern’ environmentalism parallels, albeit imperfectly, that made between concern with the ‘brown’ issues of pollution and environmental hazards, on the one hand, and the ‘green’, even ‘leafy green’, concern with the preservation of what remains of relatively pristine natural environments, on the other” (Rootes, 1997, 320).

I am now beginning to understand that what is at stake is more than the concrete success of popular epidemiology in the turf of its expert version, but the ability to challenge the scales of the definition of the problem itself, the validity of knowledge deployed, and the very architecture of the public ground of debate. To be concrete: I mentioned above that the main public research institution at the national level, the CSIC (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Higher Council for Scientific Research) has carried out a rather thorough assessment of Huelva’s ría along several dimensions (dietary, epidemiological, radiological, etc.), with somewhat upbeat results. But the levels measured were those of the present, whereas the incidence
in onubenses’ health may have been due to the slow accumulation of toxics along a four-decade period.

However, what to make of Schnaiberg’s misgivings on the “deflecting” rather than synergic role of community environmental health concerns in relation to broader ecological themes? There is an interesting alternative framework that is perhaps really “deflected” by an exclusive focus on the Polo Químico health consequences, which is that of “environmental justice” (Pellow, 2004). The relatively high levels of cancer incidence in Huelva, around 10 per cent over national averages, are usually dismissed by means of comparison to nearby provincial capitals, such as Cádiz, with comparable or even higher figures, and “explained” as the result of unhealthy lifestyles (a oft-quoted figure is the 41 per cent of smokers in Huelva, compared to the national average of 31 per cent).

But this leaves out of the debate the astonishing high mortality risk in the triangle located precisely in Huelva, Cádiz and Sevilla, the historically neglected western Andalusia. “Some evidence exists that in some of these areas there is a high level of damaging environmental (for example, river transported heavy metals and urban air pollutants, occupational (for example, asbestos), and social factors (for example, unemployment and overcrowding) which may increase the risk of death” (Benach et al., 2004, 281). There is certainly a disconnect between the alarming clustering of mortality levels in the area and its almost negligible relevance in the public sphere; it remains to be discussed whether a scaling-up of the denunciation of this in terms of a shared environmental injustice is somehow deflected by local environmental struggles based on public health concerns.

6.3 Changing political contexts, "civic mini-traditions” and types of commitment

The case of the Mesa de la Ría may be providing an intriguing case of the “return of the citizen” in Spanish public life, an interpretation for which I should provide some historical background. The vibrant civic life in the last years of the Francoist regime and the first stage of the transition to democracy fostered a rich ecosystem of associations, among which those based on locality were very important (Soledad García). The agenda for local reform was strongly supported by the innumerable left parties active at the time. The elite-led transition to

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6This has both irked protesters and given Polo defenders a rhetorical resource often heard in exchanges.
democracy, the “pacto” (formalized in the Moncloa Pact, for instance), and most of all the ascent to power of the PSOE, was translated into a “programmed disenchantment” of public life (Ortí, 1989), that ruled out the participation of citizens in public issues through channels outside those linked to political parties and the social partners.

As the Mesa de la Ría adopted a citizen-oriented strategy, political parties and trade unions demanded that they “leave politics to politicians”. As mentioned above, however, the involvement of civil society had been legitimated by deliberative institutions such as the Subcommitee for the Environment created in 1976, so one could read the reactivation of civil society mobilization by the Mesa de la Ría as building upon a shared tradition of engagement with urban reform that the exclusive rule of political parties (the “partitocracy”).

References


