

THE AGE OF MEGA-PROJECTS

You said in your recent public speech in Castellon that we're now living in the age of mega-projects. What exactly did you mean by this?

In Europe as elsewhere, we've entered times marked by big-footprint projects, organised efforts to do things never before attempted, adventures of power that touch and transform the lives of millions of people and their bio-habitats, in unprecedented ways. These 'megaprojects' include under-sea tunnels, mining operations, inter-city high-speed railway networks, new airports and airport extensions. They comprise entertainment complexes, nuclear power stations, banking and credit sector experiments and new communications and weapons systems. Megaprojects are distinguished by their astronomical design and construction costs (their price tag is often well in excess of a billion euros). Their complexity, scale and deep impact upon communities of people and their environment are also striking.

What have been the consequences of mega-projects in the region of Valencia?

My impressions are naturally those of an outsider, but the impact of projects such as the lavish opera house, technology museum and sports centre complex in Valencia, and the white elephant Castellon airport, is plain to see, and typical of what happens in the age of mega-projects. Megaprojects create jobs and measurable wealth, scientific-technical know-how and improved services. Many make our lives easier; the invention of the Internet by ARPA is proof positive of that. Often a source of local and national pride, they can generate large profits, but even when no golden harvest results they add hugely to the private fortunes of their designers, owners, managers and shareholders. As Senor Calatrava knows, megaprojects make some people mega-rich. But mega-projects also go wrong.

What are the symptoms of failure?

Unless they are subject to strict public controls, mega-projects often have damaging effects. During their design and execution phases, they suffer construction problems, budget blow-outs and delayed completion schedules. London's Olympic Games is a case in point: its bid was originally costed at £2.37 billion; the probable final cost will be around £24 billion. Spain's love affair with mega-projects, notably in the field of construction, saddled the country with an estimated 100 billion euros of toxic debt. It's probably much more than that. When up and running, mega-projects are plagued by chronic operation problems and 'normal accidents'. Sometimes the mishaps do irreparable damage. Hence the household names: the Bhopal gas and chemical leak, nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl and Fukushima, gigantic oil spills courtesy of the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon, the collapse of Lehman Brothers and Bankia.

Such disasters are growing in number and frequency. I'm afraid that unless things change we're heading into a grim future, one in which risky power experiments have catastrophic effects on the lives of millions of people and their habitats.

Do you see signs of the failure of mega-projects in Valencia, and Spain more generally?

The behind-the-scenes, poorly-regulated patron-client links forged between the Spanish *cajas*, the construction industry and big-budget regional governments have had heart-breaking effects. Their wild love affair ended in misery. The regional government of Valencia, proportionately the most indebted in the whole of Spain, is broke. Its debt is an estimated 25 billion euros. The region is littered with ghost towns, unfinished construction projects and an airport with no planes or passengers. Throughout the country, there is understandably great disaffection among many citizens. Half of under 25s are out of work. An estimated one and a half million people have to decide each day between eating or paying their bills. Perhaps 300,000 young graduates have left Spain since the onset of the crisis. All this is very bad for the spirit and substance of democracy.

Why are they bad for democracy?

It's not just that the near-collapse of your banking system and the current politics of enforced austerity are damaging the daily lives of many millions of citizens. There's something else just as sinister: megaprojects resemble sizeable tumours of arbitrary power within the body politic of democracy. They usually defy the familiar rhythm of elections. Details of their design, financing, construction and operation are typically decided from above. Especially when it comes to military and commercial megaprojects, things are decided in strictest secrecy, with virtually no monitoring by parliaments, outside watchdog groups or voting citizens. Unless they're subject to strict and independent public monitoring, mega-projects do away with democratic procedures. They resemble forms of emergency rule in the heartlands of democracy.

Cases of corruption are common in Valencia. Does the absence of monitoring promote it?

Yes. Corruption went viral. It's true that megaprojects often fail to measure up to the lavish claims made in their defence because of a variety of factors and forces. Simple human miscalculation; the blind arrogance and groupthink of those in charge; inadequate 'hedging' for surprise events; bad decisions caused by poor co-ordination and diffused responsibility chains; systematic lying (what policy analysts call 'strategic misinformation'); and unintended chain reactions all play their part in ensuring that when things go wrong, they really go wrong.

The gargantuan size and hyper-complexity of mega-projects make matters worse. But substantial evidence is mounting (the Danish sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg has done the ground-breaking research) that the root cause of mega-project corruption, the key source of their failure, is their refusal of robust internal and external public scrutiny. Not all disasters are human and megaprojects don't always fail, it's true. Yet when they do fail, in 90% of cases, the main cause is the privatisation of power. Those in charge of operations suppose, mistakenly, that their mega-organisations can be governed in silence – silence within and outside the organisation.

There's something really paradoxical about this silence. It's *produced*, usually through intensive public relations campaigns which have the effect of cocooning the mega-project from rigorous public scrutiny. Lots of positive things are said publicly about the project, despite the fact that they're often untrue. In all this, journalists often play along. A rich diet of promises of access, sinecures and over-dependence on official handouts renders them obedient. They become 'plane spotters', captive cheerleaders of mega-projects, silent cogs in their machinery of compliance.

What can citizens do?

There's a developing crisis of parliamentary democracy in Spain, so it's the duty of citizens to become wiser and more determined, to pay attention to matters of folly, corruption and injustice, to speak out whenever and wherever necessary. Ancient Greek democrats cherished *parrhesia*: bold, frank, courageous speaking out publicly in defence of the common good. Every actually existing democracy now needs a good dose of *parrhesia*. Spain is no exception.

How would you describe the state of democracy in Valencia and Spain?

Twice during the past century, Spain stood at a political crossroad. The present situation clearly differs from the collapse of the republic during the 1930s, or the moment during the late 1970s when fascist dictatorship crumbled. Spain is at a new crossroads. Its citizens and representatives face a fundamental choice. They can continue down the road that leads nowhere, towards a bad-tempered, highly unequal phantom democracy whose key political institutions are distrusted and many citizens feel disaffected. Or Spain can embrace a fairer and more just society protected by a vigorous form of monitory democracy (*democracia monitorizada*). In other words, a new type of democracy in which

there are not just free and fair elections, but where citizens and their representatives also practise the art of publicly exposing and humbling arbitrary power (*poder arbitrario*), wherever it exists.

For this to happen, much will have to change. Spanish electoral laws, which produce unfair outcomes, will need serious revision. New political parties led by honest representatives will be needed; the present two-party duopoly is choking Spain. A new compromise about the past, a fresh regional settlement and a greener and more equitable politics of inter-generational justice are priorities. And public silences will have to be broken. The basic political mistake of the past several decades mustn't be repeated. Hereon, businesses, banks and governing institutions at all levels must be kept humble, trusted and respected only because their power is subject to permanent public scrutiny and, ultimately, to the active consent of all citizens.