

Profiles from Spain – Category 6

Elisabet Tejero and Laura Torrabadella, Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona

JULIAN

Julian is a 43-year-old man born to Barcelona. He is the only child of a working class family. His father works for the communist trade union and his mother works as housewife. Julian entered University at the age of 15. From that moment on he began to live on his own and combined studies of Economy and Antropology with different jobs. It was the latest years of dictatorship, and he participated intensively in the communist university political activities against the Regime. He was arrested twice and was expelled from University and condemned to six years of prision. His father bribed a civil servant and Julian left the prision one year later. Julian had then several and different jobs. He spent many years working as a sailor and had a variety of experiences in the enterpreneurial world, in which he acquired a high status in the management staff. During this period Julian had a girlfriend with whom he married. In that time Julian met an adolescent orphan boy and his wife and him decided to be his tutors. Two years later the boy left the home and after a long period without any news, Julian was informed that the boy had died due to an overdose of drugs. Julian had an important traffic accident and he spent two years in the hospital. When he could integrate himself in the labour market he discovered he had been infected of Hepatitis C in the hospital. During this period a very good friend of him died from AIDS and he felt deeply affected. From that moment on his trajectory started to change. Julian left the enterprise and became unemployed. Problems at home started and Julian had a crisis with alcohol. Finally Julian and his wife decided to divorced. From that moment on Julian began to work in temporary jobs (both in the formal and informal market) thanks to his informational networks of friends, and eventually collaborated with an NGO that works with children and adolecents in the neighbourhood. Julian has lived in different cities where he has found a job, but currently he is living with friends in the center of Barcelona and is unemployed.

Julian constructs his story as an argumentation according to which his situation cannot be simply considered under the experience of unemployment, because he is permanently active. *I've been unemployed every time I've decided to leave a job, I'm a person who need changes and new*

challenges. For me, reading, walking, thinking or sleeping is being alive and active. However, Julian describes how being unemployed at the age of 43 as a traumatic event. He qualifies the search as humiliating because the State and the entrepreneurs make him feel impotent. He considers the whole bureaucracy and policies linked with the question of unemployment a big lie. For that reason he presents himself as an anarchist ideology learnt during his university years who wants to live with consistency his ideology against the State, the family and power relationships in his everyday life. In order to achieve this he has had to assume a new pattern of life. As he points out, *becoming poor has been more difficult than people can imagine.*

According to the most relevant elements of Julian's biographical data and self-presentation defined so far, we could hypothesize about Julian's biography being structured by a crucial turning point. This takes place when he realises that he has become an ill person for the rest of his life. The deaths of his son and his friend act together as two unleashing factors for his biographical rupture. *When I realised that I had the virus I thought that I was going to die. Then, the death of my friend meant so much for me and I started to think that life was short and I didn't want to be the cold manager I was by then. In my job they didn't understand me and I decided to break that circle.* The divorce culminated the process of rupture in his 'standardized trajectory of professional and family man'. This situation gave him the opportunity to retake the role of a 'young' autonomous person (developed during his University years). The solidarity system established with his friendship networks acts as the material and emotional support for developing his present strategy: *I know that I'm a good person who runs alone, and I know as well that I'm running against me.* Illness and economic precariousness makes his 'anarchist' way of living very risky. For this reason, future is only lived in the short term because as he says, *time and space are unforeseeable.*

OSCAR

Oscar is a 48 year-old man who has been born to a rural area from the South of Spain. At the age of 13 his father died and his mother, sister and him moved to Barcelona. Oscar continued his studies by combining studies with jobs. At the age of 17 he was employed in a multinational enterprise, where he developed a political and trade union education. One year after (in 1969) he entered the Socialist party and the Socialist trade union. In 1974, he was dismissed from the enterprise with an economic

compensation, and got a job in a private tube company where he actively participated in a long term strike. He was then transferred to the public railway company. In 1977 he was accused from sabotage for supporting the strike in solidarity with some socialist activists killed in Madrid, and he was moved to the South of Spain. During these years, Oscar continued his political and trade union activities and he married in 1978. He returned then to Barcelona and after a sindicalist fight the railway company expelled him again to a Southern Spanish region. In 1990, Oscar got the divorce and moved alone far from his wife and his two sons. He moved to his mother's home in Barcelona, where he is currently living. From that moment on Oscar has not found a stable job. In 1997 he decided to claim for a job to the Regional Government, by doing a hunger strike over three weeks in the front door of the Government's building. After this experience Oscar decided to organize an unemployed's movement. They develop different activities, such as the occupation of the neighbourhood city council and the State unemployment office. Oscar and the unemployed movement are at present involved in a public campaign for claiming free charge in the public services for those who are long-term unemployed.

Oscar's story is that of a very politicized person who has been socialized in the male working sphere from a very early age. He presents his life in a very narrative tone through which his political experiences are linked with the labour market. In fact, he presents the world of work and the world of political action as two parts of the same reality. *My entrance in the big factory was my starting point as an actual worker, a political and trade union activist.* Oscar's political identity is the structuring principle of his life. In this sense, Oscar presents himself as a critical but faithful socialist fighter. *No matter what happens I'm an 'ugetist' (UGT is the name of the socialist trade union), I have never wanted to break away from them.* Oscar's political role can be therefore considered as a permanent biographical resource which is operative beyond biographical ruptures, such as the fact of being divorced and becoming unemployed.

By exploring these two latter aspects, it can be seen how the divorce might constitute a turning point in Oscar's life. Like many other times in his life he moved from one city to another, but this time he had to deal with a new situation: unemployment. *When I left my family and my job, I went to Barcelona where my friends from the party and the trade union were, and I thought that everything*

would be easier. But nobody helped me to get a job. Everything was so complicated! From that moment on, Oscar adapted his political activist role to a specific fight: the organisation of an unemployed movement. He is aware that his historical participation within the party and the trade union legitimises his political actions in spite of the conflictive consequences for him in terms of personal relationships with both organisations. As he says at the end of the interview: *I'm using all my arms. On the one hand, I'm carrying a personal and public fight by claiming for a political commitment with unemployment by municipality (socialist) and the Regional government. On the other hand, I'm pressing my own organisations in order to get a proper job.* In this sense, Oscar's biographical strategy, after eight years of economic and labour precariousness, is still structured by the political action and oriented to get a stable job.

LUCAS

Lucas is a 54 year-old man born to a working class neighbourhood of Barcelona. He is the only child of a lone parenting home formed by her mother and grandmother. When he was a child his father abandoned them, and at the age of twelve Lucas left studies and started to work at home helping his mother. At the age of nineteen Lucas began to work in a small company as apprentice, and at the age of twenty one Lucas set up his own business as electrician. Ten years later he married and had two children. During their childhood Lucas actively participated in the school parents' association and in the neighbourhood community. In 1992, the business started to suffer the impact of the economic crisis. That year Lucas received a working proposal from an Italian enterprise, and he decided to close his business and accept the new job. Lucas spent three months in Italy doing a special training course. But this company went bankrupt one year later, in 1993. From that moment on, Lucas became unemployed and left his commitment with the school and neighbourhood associations. During the last years, Lucas has been working informally for other industrial companies in a very precarious situation. Many of them have gone bankrupt as well. For a short period of time Lucas received the unemployment subsidy, and some time later he got a social salary due to the precarious economic situation of his family. Nowadays his wife's wage is the main economic support for the family. Two years ago Lucas started to work few hours as a volunteer in a NGO that works with disabled people. Today, he continues with this activity with a precarious contract for three hours a day.

The story of Lucas is, like in the previous two cases, a story of someone socialized according to the male productive role. *During that time we were educated for working day and night.* Following this structuring principle, Lucas' presentation recollects the most important events of his working life without giving specific details from his family of origin or his own family. Lucas presents his life as a standardized life course until 1993, when the Italian enterprise went bankrupt. From that moment on, Lucas starts to narrate his life as an excluded person. As he points out at the beginning of the interview: *the first thing I must say is that I'm absolutely excluded from the working world.* This introductory self-definition two conflictive dimensions of his status as long term unemployed. First, he presents himself convinced about the end of his working career, and secondly his pattern of orientation is deeply based on the productive sphere. His strategy consists of investing his daily time working in the precarious black economy e.g. when friends ask him for some domestic arrangement as electrician or collaborating over three hours a day for the NGO. Lucas is filling up his time and his social space in order to avoid the sense of uselessness.

The experience of long term unemployment has also had a big impact on his family relationships. In contrast to the other cases, Lucas' nuclear family develop a strong unity in order to face problems. Despite the fact that the costs of unemployment are lived as a private issue, Lucas refers to a general assumption according to which there are a lot of people in his same situation: *I'm sure that my story will be similar to the other interviewed, all of us are alone because politicians don't know what to do with us, and with the end of work. Our last resource is luck and personal networks to get temporary jobs.* Lucas is therefore fighting against his own experience of exclusion trying to solve the dilemma of having lost his working role through maintaining alive the links with a productive activity. Social networks become the main resource within a context of informality.

MARTA

Marta was born in 1953 to a little village from Andalusia. Marta's family context is that of a rural extended family. Marta is the fifth of seven sisters, who were grown up by Marta's grandmother from mother's side and Marta's mother. Her father worked in the farming sector until Marta's tenth birthday, when he emigrated to Germany to profit from the better labour opportunities of the 1960s in central Europe. Marta was then sent to a Catholic boarding school in the city

(Granada) until she was 18. Marta, unlike most of her sisters, was offered the possibility to study in a bigger city like Barcelona, once her father returned from Germany with some savings. She was 18 when she started studying nursery, which she combined with a job in a electricity factory. Marta could soon get a job in a big State hospital of Barcelona, first as auxiliar and gradually as nurse. After 22 years of employment, only interrupted by the maternity leave during the birth of her two children, Marta was expelled from her job due to a 'staff restructuring', together with other 500 employees. The hospital where Marta has been working has now been privatised. Marta is now 45 and has been engaged in various occupational courses and other activities within the neighbourhood, during the two years she has been unemployed.

Marta starts her self-presentation by introducing her long trajectory as employed person, and the lack of possibilities for her to find a new job: *I know it's over, who wants a 45 year-old woman when so many young people are competing with us?* The use of a 'we' perspective represented by those belonging to her age group (and sex?) against a more competitive 'they' represented by the younger generations synthetically summarises her present perspective regarding her relationship with the labour market, in the sense that she does not expect to get a job in the formal sector anymore. But Marta has seemed to find a 'third way', beyond her roles as worker and mother/wife within the family context. *I never thought I would be one of the affected, I always expected to get my old age retirement in the hospital, but, unemployment maybe means for me the possibility to do things I would have otherwise never done. It's a matter of destiny.* Marta's evaluation of her experience of unemployment as related to fate contrasts to her active social involvement in the community. Unemployment for Marta might have therefore represented a biographical rupture which leads her to re-define her relationship within different spheres of social life. Marta is open and willing to take advantage from the few but actual opportunities offered by the Spanish Welfare State. Getting her unemployment benefit, accepting the training courses to get the 'tokens' for a better curriculum, making sport and social work within the neighbourhood are activities which make her feel active and citizen with specific rights. Marta feels entitled to receive a compensation for her long working trajectory in the labour market . Her relationship with the labour market affects her relationship with the family -domestic sphere as well. Marta feels legitimised to negotiate her position within the family after what she qualifies as a 'big upheaval', when getting the unexpected news of her dismissal. Since her

family's expectations regarding Marta's work at home increased substantially, Marta had to find a balance between her presence and absence at home. *They thought I would stay more at home; but I like to go out, I can't stay sewing at home, like most of my neighbours do.* In spite of combining both reproductive and productive tasks Marta is clearly ascribing herself to the visible role of the 'public space', where she can more easily find a social recognition of her work. However, one of her final statements regarding her future reflects Marta's labour-market oriented centrality, which does not seem to be opposed to her argumentation based on fate elements. *I'd accept any job which would be offered to me. No matter under which conditions.* A deriving hypothesis from the comparison between the biographical data and some elements of the self-presentation presented so far could be summarised as follows: the event of unemployment in Marta's case has not only been experienced as very painful, but has not implied a real turning point in Marta's lived through life, in spite of the many things which have changed in her life at an objective a level.

FLORA

Flora was born in 1951 in Barcelona. Her family of origin was an extended one. After the death of her younger sister in 1962, nine people lived in the house: three of her grandparents, both of her parents, two brothers, a maid and herself. Her family of origin from both sides belonged to a cultural upper/middle-class and were highly committed with the Spanish Republic and its progressist values in a context of big ideological polarisation before, during and after the Civil War. Flora's grandfather from mother's side was deputy of the Republic and her grandmother from father's side was a suffragist. Both of Flora's parents were pedagogs and set up together a Catalan liberal republican school in Barcelona, where Flora completed her school trajectory. At the age of 18 Flora entered University to study psychology and combined her studies with different jobs in the teaching sector. During the third University year she was about to leave psychology in order to start pedagogy. She finally finished her studies some years later. Flora actively participated with other young people from the cultural and politicized atmosphere of the late 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. Like many young people in those years Flora went to the Balears to live in an alternative way in a hippy community and participated in the feminist and student movement by striking at University. In 1972, 21-year-old Flora left the family house

because of an argument with her father. She worked in different jobs in e.g. in the library of one faculty's department; and as a teacher of handicapped children until 1979. At the age of 28 Flora left her job in a school, where she had a position as civil servant, in order to set up a kindergarten on her own. This initiative failed as well as her relationship with her boyfriend. Some months later Flora returned to the parental home, where she has been living until the present day. Flora has not got another job since then. She made an agreement with her brothers according to which she would take care of her parents in exchange of a monthly salary paid by them. Flora has been taking care of her parents until both of them died. Her mother died one and a half year ago. All this years Flora has suffered a serious depression which led her to make an attempt to suicide. She has undergone a psychoanalytic treatment for five years and has been interned in a psychiatric hospital. Flora works now as a voluntary member of an NGO for immigrants in the old town of Barcelona.

Flora starts making clear to the interviewer that she has not much to tell on her professional career or working trajectory, and starts her narration by pointing at two events which marked her life, namely, her sister's death and the argument with his father, which led her to leaving home. *I suppose I never overcame her death, and... then the contradictions of my father, his big contradictions regarding my education.* Flora's first words reflect her understanding of the interview contract. Probably because of her clinical experience, Flora thinks that what is expected from her is to explain the roots of her 'problem', which is a non manifest but present issue in her story. Maybe this is a reason why her main narration is strictly focused on her childhood and youth years and finishes with an endevaluation: *And then I came back home, that's actually my life story, everything what came later is not so important, do you want to put me any questions?* As a result of this large narrative gap of more than twenty years, the questions put by the interviewer follow Flora's relevance system and are therefore focused on her first part of life, thus getting a rich picture of the political, cultural and family environment in which Flora grew up. The only likely interpretation out of the biographical data and the own structure of the interview is that a radical turning point took place when 28-year-old Flora returned home after having left her last job as a teacher. From the on, she adopts a new caring role which heavily contrasts with her previous professionally-centred and political trajectory within the students' and

feminist movement of the 1970s. Even though she recognises that her priority is not to look for a job, but to recover herself from her last signs of depression, she presents herself as a long-term unemployed, yet with the specificity of a mental illness: *It's been years that I've been looking for a job, but it's more and more difficult as time goes by... and given my situation in my head still more*. Flora's experience of unemployment, therefore, cannot be understood without considering a long blockage, in which she has been excluded from the outer world. Today Flora has an extremely vulnerable and disadvantaged position in the labour market in spite of her cultural capital and academic qualifications, which constitute an exception for her generation of the post-war. However, by being actively engaged in the community work, there seems to be a continuity with her young years as hippy.