Remaking Madrid
For Ana who twice opened my eyes to the world
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I left for Europe in January of 2002 with the idea of writing about Americanization in Spain. I went looking for signs of cultural imperialism, for suggestions of cultural insecurity, and for evidence of either the rejection or embrace of America and the American way of life. After settling down in Madrid, I began examining some of the specific connections between American culture, on the one hand, and Spanish film, fashion, music, and media, on the other. I eventually came to focus on Madrid’s colorful cultural explosion of the 1980s, known as the movida madrileña. Specifically, I was interested in how Andy Warhol and American popular culture in general influenced both the form and the content of the movida.

But as I learned more about “Madrid’s Movement,” I quickly discovered that the effects of Americanization were limited and that it was influenced as much by European cultural trends—especially those from England—as by American culture. More importantly, all of the frantic cultural activity associated with the 1980s—all those public festivals, all those gallery openings, all those packed bars, all that new music—seemed to suggest something more than just a desire to stay out all night and have a good time. It suggested a deeper and more profound change in the capital.

This was not, however, the way the movida madrileña had been understood by scholars or the popular press. Most often it was seen as part of a nationwide cultural renaissance that swept all of Spain after the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. Many also viewed the movement as a kind of belated 1960s counterculture, flowering two decades late in a perpetually backward Spain. And others tried to place it within the international context of a lively and sometimes notorious youth culture. While I came to recognize how each of these three interpretive trends explained certain aspects of the movida, I also noticed that none of these perspectives was rooted in the specific context of Madrid. In other words, despite obviously being called the movida madrileña the relationship between the movement and the capital itself had been overlooked.

As fate would have it, in May of that year I took a break from my work and set off on the Camino de Santiago, or the Road of St. James, across northern Spain from Roncesvalles in the East to Santiago de Compostela in the West. It was on that medieval pilgrim’s road that the very contemporary questions about the movida madrileña, Madrid, and the connections between the two
came surprisingly into focus. Along my month-long journey I expected to see evidence of Basque nationalism—as Basque separatists have waged a decades-long and sometimes bloody campaign for independence against the central government. But I did not expect to see regionalist demands scrawled on overpasses, on viaducts, and on abandoned buildings in every region I walked through, from Navarre and La Rioja, through Castile-Leon, and on to Galicia. And, more importantly for me and my work, in each of these regions, the culprit or the spoiler was always the same: Madrid. Simply put, everyone blamed the capital for everything. Depending on the location and the age of the graffiti, Madrid was home to either fascists, or no-good rojos (reds), or thieves, or to things that can not appear here in print. At the same time, everyone appeared to be defining themselves—or re-defining themselves since the death of Francisco Franco and the transition to democracy—against Madrid, against the capital, against the center. Madrid was, in other words, the “other.” By the time I reached the Cathedral of Santiago, I was left with an obvious question: If Madrid was always the problem, the “other,” what was going on in the capital?

So witnessing those very real and sometimes crude reminders of regionalism, forced me to reconsider what was happening in the center. And it especially made me question what had happened in Madrid since the end of the dictatorship—since 1975. How had madrileños tried to define or redefine themselves? And, against whom? Who did they blame? Who could they blame? Did Madrid experience its own form of regionalism? And, was the movida madrileña somehow a part of this? More specifically, I became interested in how ordinary residents of Madrid dealt with the legacy of the Franco dictatorship in the 1980s, and how the process of democratization had worked in the capital—especially since the capital was literally the home of repression and centralism for almost 40 years. Put another way, I wanted to find out if Madrid was populated by something other than “no good nationalists.”

Exploring these questions about the center—which had first occurred to me when I was on Spain’s northern periphery—turned out to be a sometimes difficult journey that included some ups and downs. As for one of the downs, not everyone was receptive to any change in Madrid’s identity, even during the 1980s. A case in point was a letter I received from the head of Madrid’s main municipal archive, regarding a request I made for documents relating to cultural subsidies. In a very polite letter, the director informed me: “No authority ever has changed, nor ever will change, the identity of Madrid.” In other words, according to this very distinguished gentleman, Madrid’s identity has remained essentially static since King Philip II made it the capital almost 500 years ago. To support this claim, his letter quotes a seventeenth-century text by Luís Vélez de Guevara and a line from Doña Francisquita, a zarzuela from the early twentieth century. Needless to say, he never produced the documents I was looking for. Nor was his opinion about the unalterable nature of Madrid’s identity uncommon among the residents of the capital.
Despite the resistance and the occasional setback, I was also spurred along at times by some small and unexpected discoveries. Like one day when I was waiting to cross one of the busiest boulevards in Madrid, Paseo de Recoletos, which happens to be right in front of the Biblioteca Nacional (National Library). Out in front of that massive library there stands a curious little statue of two figures reading a book together. I had first noticed it many years earlier, but never paid attention to its date or inscription. It happens that Madrid’s well-known mayor, Enrique Tierno Galván, dedicated the statue at the height of the movida madrileña in 1984, and it was funded in part by the city hall. After realizing its context the apparent symbolism of the statue made more sense to me, and it became one of the images that helped guide me through the rest of my work. The statue depicts two young people, possibly a boy and a girl, literally fused or joined together, symbolizing—for me at least—the notion of convivencia, or coexistence. And what helps join them together? A book, a physical representation of culture, and, through the process of reading, of cultural activity. In many ways, these two ideals—peaceful coexistence and active cultural participation—sum up for me what Madrid’s remarkable democratic transformation in the 1980s was all about.