Liberty at the Merry-go-round: Leisure, Politics, and Municipal Authority on the Paseo del Prado in Madrid, 1760-1939

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The article offers an overview of the leisure activities on the Prado Promenade in Madrid (Spain) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It argues that a historical inquiry into the regulation of urban leisure is relevant for understanding the debates that the Occupy movements of 2011–12 opened up: (1) the meaning of mass public gatherings with the purpose of spending free time; and (2) the balance of power between the state, the city and commerce intertwined in the current definition of publicness. The City Council’s decisions about the methods and the scope of its control over leisure spaces such as the Prado reveal the ambiguous nature of municipal authority as a representative of the people as well as a mediator between the state and the vendors.
This article takes an unconventional look at the history of one of Madrid’s most emblematic spots: the Paseo del Prado (Prado Promenade). Created in the second half of the eighteenth century, this sequence of boulevards with fountains and benches epitomized the rise of the modern city administration as a moral authority that was shaping the community by reorganizing its members’ free time. Pointing to a key moment when municipal land ownership possessed the power to build beautiful outdoor spaces and encourage citizens to enjoy them, my story is a prequel to the recent wave of occupations of urban parks and squares. In 2011–12, lacking an acceptable model for understanding leisurely crowds as a political force, the western world’s self-proclaimed ‘99%’ and sympathizers compared their use of urban space to a campground. Yet that metaphor could not stand up to the claims from the City Council. Citing the needs of urban hygiene and commerce while also clearly acting in the state’s interest, municipal governments chased the occupants away. Yet have the cities always treated outdoor leisure gatherings in this way? The Habermasian ‘public sphere’, modelled on the city states of antiquity, does not distinguish between the city and the state (Habermas [1962] 1989). In the meantime, the two academic disciplines that are leading the current debates about public space and ‘publicness’ – geography and political philosophy – tend to conflate commercial activity and the actions relevant for the state (Weintraub 1998; Staeheli and Mitchell 2007).

Since models addressing the conflict behind the use of city space by the movements born in 2011 have yet to receive the attention they deserve in political science and geography, contemporary thinking may benefit from insights gleaned from leisure studies, a discipline that has so far stayed away from the debates about the impacts of large groups of people camping in the street without apparent purpose or agenda. Looking at how spaces of urban leisure began to epitomize publicness in opposition to what used to be called ‘agglomeration’, this approach suggests that the synergy revealed by the Occupy movements between the state, the city and commerce is relatively recent. In what follows I demonstrate that the history of urban fairgrounds uncovers the ambiguous nature of municipality – as representative of the people as well as a mediator between the state and the vendors. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the City Councils understood their mission to be compatible with supporting a whole range of activities in public, including camping at night on the Prado. Regulatory functions were limited to the minimal requirements of urbanity. Only when early twentieth-century class warfare took over the spaces of urban transit did the places of urban leisure become an arena in which the state’s interests were openly promoted with the support from municipal administration. In my overview, leisure will emerge as a language in which the City Council historically asserted its power as community builder, money-maker and political player.

In 2011–12, many took a second look at modern theories of urban revolution. The indignados in Madrid established a direct connection with the enragés of 1968, and those looking for a theory of occupation in the United Kingdom and the United States began to cite Henri Lefebvre (Occupy Wall Street Info 2011; Free Jazz at High Noon 2012; Urban Cultural Studies 2012) and the situationists (Davis 2011; Bureau of Public Secrets 2011; Widyaratna 2011). However, as Nigel Townsend (2011) reminded us, ‘las tiendas, sacos
de dormir, tenderetes y pancartas de la Puerta del Sol (the stores, sleeping bags, tents and signs at the Puerta del Sol [Square]) had little in common with the barricades that gave May 1968 its most memorable images. With no Molotov cocktail or workers’ council in sight, onlookers recalled the example of peaceful occupation cited by Lefebvre – turning a market into a festival park – and believed they were witnessing this example come to life (Free Jazz at High Noon 2012). But participants have not agreed with the comparison. In Madrid, a much-forwarded music video La clave está en Sol! The Key is at the [Puerta del] Sol insisted: ‘Eso no es una fiesta, es un cabreo (this is not a party, this is a fit of rage)’ (Comité de Acción-Artes Escénicas-Música 2011).

From the point of view of leisure studies, leisure itself appears to be quite different from what Lefebvre and the situationists imagined as an urban celebration: a liberating explosion of positive energy (Lefebvre 1962; Internationale Situationniste 1966, 1969). John Clarke and Charles Critcher claim that the masses have no stakes whatsoever in urban leisure, at least of the organized kind, because leisure was designed as a set of activities that would keep the labouring classes ‘off the street’ and ‘under supervision’ while also giving them ‘something constructive to do’ (Clarke and Critcher 1985: 134; Billinge 1996). Attentive to the role that the state has historically played in encouraging behaviours consistent with its own needs, historians of leisure rely on Norbert Elias’s sociological inquiry into what he called the ‘sportisation of pastimes’ (Elias 1986). The ‘civilizing process’ of improving manners thus becomes an inherent part of modernization, in which rule-governed activities such as hunting or horse-racing and, later on, football and boxing play a crucial role in channelling violent impulses (Elias [1978] 1991). So, for leisure historians, a peaceful urban gathering simply cannot voice the social protest that it was called upon to redirect in the first place.

The history of urban leisure is, nevertheless, useful in another respect: it explains how the ways in which people were spending their free time outside their homes became a matter of concern for the state. Key to understanding this is the separation of leisure and commerce into two distinct spheres. When the state became a stakeholder in industrial modernization, leisure – initially a category invented by aristocrats who felt the need to protect their free time from growing courtly obligations (Burke 1995) – became shorthand for a system of institutions, policies and cultural norms aimed at controlling the population of factory towns by supervising their free time under the banner of achieving a more ‘civilized’ behaviour. Commercial venues ended up firmly embedded in urban leisure while they also continued banking on their fairground ‘Carnival’ appeal.

The separation of the spheres meant that the state was receiving more sophisticated tools for ‘acting on the social’ (Bennett 2000). The regulation of pleasure grounds was entrusted to municipalities, while commerce developed into the state’s natural ally governable by a combination of economic and regulatory measures. For their business to continue, vendors needed to accommodate the people’s desire for raucous, unruly activity, and yet follow policies seeking ways to harness the masses’ disruptive impulses. Caught in between the ‘law of desire’ and the imperative of civility, commercial stakeholders in industrial cities went along with the regulations while also providing an attractive edge to the government’s attempts to civilize the population. Admitting everyone, vendors openly encouraged public reasonableness.
while also allowing people to daydream, overspend and engage in other irrational activities that transformed their social anxieties into unthreatening and consumable ‘fun’ (Shields 1992). Local authorities receiving income from taxing the vendors were interested in the success of their operations, thus turning into natural intermediaries between state and commerce. City governments often interpreted the demands of respectability to the vendors’ advantage.

The outcomes of the City Councils’ mediation between the private and the state interests are particularly visible in the history of the nineteenth-century institutions of bourgeois entertainment that Peter Bailey (2004) groups together as the ‘leisure zone’. Places such as ‘the modernized pub, the music hall, the seaside pier and dance hall, the hotel and cafe-restaurant, the municipal park and the department store’ became a staple in modern cities. They marketed themselves as respectful of the bourgeois moral norms. In reality, though, these venues became the places where private individuals were transformed into ‘the public’ by engaging in activities involving consumption, nudity and people-watching that state governments would deem either non-educational or simply reprehensible (Bailey 2004: 3). For the municipalities, modern commercial leisure was a boon that attracted businesses and visitors. It therefore merited to be made legitimate by adopting a flexible concept of ‘the public’ as a community able to behave responsibly in the face of temptations posing threats to their wallets or morality.

In the ensuing debates about whether urban leisure could help to build good citizens or whether it, conversely, prevented the public from developing public virtue, the state would, of course, exercise full power and eventually take the upper hand. Until then, the patrons of urban pleasure grounds could take full advantage of the ambivalent relationship between economic and political publicness under the wing of permissive local authorities. Yet how did the ‘leisure zone’ relate to the notion of public space and, more generally, publicness? Now that the 2011–12 protests have brought back the question of the rights to use public space for leisure yet with political aims, there is more need than ever to understand the nature of this constellation.

**LEISURE BETWEEN THE COURT AND THE CITY, 1760–1868**

Madrid, the capital of a country of late and uneven modernization marked by extremely low levels of accumulation of industrial capital, was a bureaucratic centre rather than a manufacturing megalopolis, and its authorities faced the challenge of bringing order to an urban population that differed considerably from the working classes living in London or Manchester – or, closer to home, in Barcelona or Bilbao. Instead of pressing the workers ‘off the street’, in Madrid there was a persistent programme of constructing a community by making its members visible to each other in attractive open spaces, a programme inherited from the Enlightenment. This is why the political history of Madrid’s leisure spaces begins on the promenades, the areas specifically designed by King Carlos III for the purposes of giving a new shape to the free time of the madrileños. That monarch is still hailed as Madrid’s best mayor. Yet in reality, the creation of the promenades marked the decisive moment in the transfer of land ownership from the Court to the City. As the municipal authorities of Madrid received the donation of the terrains, their rights over urban space were recast as a moral obligation to create a community by acting on the inhabitants’ pastimes. The municipality’s civilizing mission
became especially prominent in the early part of the nineteenth century, when the City Council sometimes acted on behalf of the liberals defending the Constitution against King Fernando VII’s anachronistic claims to make his monarchy absolute again.

In the sixteenth century, the change of Madrid’s status from a small town to a capital meant that the city was bound to expand in order to fit in the royal palaces and representative institutions and still have enough space for courtiers and visitors, triggering a wave of urban renovation concentrated around the area called the Prado (literally, ‘the Meadow’). As a cultural watershed between the countryside and the court, the Old Prado (El Prado Viejo) was historically the ‘object of constant desire for remodelling’ (Lopezosa Aparicio 1991–92: 216). Connecting the royal residence to the Atocha Gate, already in the sixteenth century the Prado housed royal processions, courtly festivals and pilgrimages to the places of popular devotion (Lopezosa Aparicio 2002, 2008). In the 1760s, Carlos III donated some of these lands to the City of Madrid for the purpose of an urban renovation. The Paseo del Prado – the result of his efforts – was to add a final touch to the capital’s rationalistic re-planning. Its most attractive section around the fountain of Apollo, also called the Four Seasons, became known as the ‘Salón del Prado’. The name extended to the whole area between the Fountains of Neptuno and Cibeles, which were also known as the Prado tout court. Converted into a promenade, this became the place where old-regime courtly and religious ceremonies were turning ‘public’ in the modern sense of the word.

By the nineteenth century ‘the Prado’ could refer to any point between Alcalá Street and the Atocha monastery. In what follows, I will only focus on one stretch, the current Paseo del Prado. In the 1770s, Carlos III mandated

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Figure 1: The Paseo del Prado and environs in the early nineteenth century. Section of the Model of Madrid in 1830, by León Gil de Palacio (Museo de Historia de Madrid).

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that the Botanical Garden be transferred here from the city’s outskirts. The
garden’s northern entrance was laid out as a semi-circular square leading to
a new structure of the Museum of Natural Sciences designed by the architect
Juan Villanueva. The construction, funded by the confiscated money of the
banned Jesuit order, began in 1785. The work went so slowly that in 1790, in
an effort to generate more interest, Villanueva suggested expanding the project
in order to incorporate a royal library. Had he succeeded, the area would have
become the site of a fully fledged academy of sciences, an Enlightenment ‘city
of knowledge’ transforming nature into culture (Rumeu de Armas 1980).

But Napoleon’s army marched in before the construction ended, leaving the
Botanical Garden as that plan’s only survivor. The layout of the area remained
unaltered throughout the nineteenth century, with one crucial exception: the
building designed for the academy of sciences was repurposed to house the
Royal Museum of Paintings. That museum, now known as the Prado National
Museum of Painting and Sculpture, was inaugurated in 1819. Fernando VII
thought that opening to the public the royal art collection would provide a
much-needed facelift to his absolute monarchy in decline. The museum,
however, did not help his cause. In 1821, a coup temporarily reinstated the
Constitution. It took an invasion by the Holy Alliance in 1823 to restore
Fernando as the absolute ruler. Since that time, and until the 1868 revolution,
the crisis of the Spanish monarchy and the destiny of the promenade between
the Salón del Prado and the Botanical Garden would be intertwined.

In 1832, seeking to answer the title question of his famous essay ‘¿Quién
es el público y dónde se le encuentra?’/‘Who is the public and where can it be
found?’ Spanish writer Mariano José de Larra pointed directly to the Prado.
The individuals comprising the ‘public’ were defined by their ability to see and
be seen outside their homes; the Promenade, their place of choice, epitomized
this new reality. Yet in Larra’s time the availability of pastimes on the Prado
depended on the course of political events. For a short time, after the liberal
coup of 1821, modern leisure became all the rage right across the street from
the Royal Museum. The place where the Ritz hotel now stands was then called
the Tívoli, and this is where Spain’s first pleasure garden was created. In 1821,
Perret, the French developer, committed to creating a ‘delicious garden spread
with great taste and elegance’ (Lopezosa Aparicio 2005: 272). These were the
years when the constitutionalist City Council of Madrid was eager to assert its
ownership by leaving a visible mark in the area. A seven-year concession was
issued promptly, bringing to the Prado a modern-style space for public gath-
ering, consumption and entertainment. But after Fernando’s return in 1823,
the new City Council refused to extend to Perret the permission to operate
during the cold season. In 1830 King Fernando, who had always considered
this terrain a royal possession, leased it ‘for perpetual use’ (Madoz 1848: 406)
to the Real Establecimiento Litográfico, run by his acolyte José Madrazo, the
future director of the Royal Museum. For over twenty years, all fun in the
Tívoli would cease.

Thus was established the connection between liberalism and opening the
Prado Promenade for consumption and entertainment: the more liberal the
government, the more activities – and more modern ones – on the Prado.
The rest of Fernando’s rule was therefore not conducive to modernizing
pastimes. In August 1833, while the king was dying, Larra deplored the lack
of any civilized leisure spots and activities in the nation: ‘aquí no hay carreras.
[…] Aquí no se caza. […] No hay coches. […] No hay nada para el público, ¡el
público no juega! (There are no races here. […] No hunting. […] No riding
in carriages. [...] There is nothing for the public, the public does not play!’ (Larra 1833: 805). If one is to believe the ‘sportisation of pastimes’ theory, the leisure system of Madrid was still running on a pre-modern time (Figure 2).

In 1836, an anonymous ‘Resident Officer’ would still describe the section of the Paseo bordering the museum as untamed by civilization and filled with ‘drowsy citizens [...] enjoying a comfortable siesta, rolled up in their cloak’ (Resident Officer 1836, vol. 1: 70–71).

Travel writing and the regulations signed by the kings and the mayors suggest that, despite Carlos III’s vision of the Prado as a place of new sociability, the Prado did not become urbanized. A late 1820s vista still showed the square of the Botanical Garden like a disproportionally large field partially overgrown with grass, with small animals that look like sheep rambling around, a woman seated on a pile of stones still remaining from the museum’s construction, and breast-feeding or lulling a baby (Figure 3). Starting in 1816 and throughout the late 1820s, municipal authorities felt it necessary to forbid bringing cattle and mules to drink from the fountains, washing ‘dogs and other animals’, climbing the trees on the promenades, and cutting the branches (Diario de Madrid 1816). As time went by, the vicinity did not grow any more urban, so in the 1820s the ban on hunting and shooting firearms explicitly mentioned the Paseo del Prado (Diario de Madrid 1821, 1825).

There was, however, a strong reason why rustic folks remained on the Prado and why the authorities were acceptant of their presence, only trying to prevent excesses. Since the sixteenth century, the Prado had served as a devotional path to the sanctuaries of Madrid’s most cherished saints. During the time of Carlos III, as the old ‘meadow’ became a promenade, pilgrims’ itineraries shifted and semi-pagan traditions of rural origins moved in. These were the midsummer celebrations held on the nights of San Juan.
(St John the Baptist, celebrated on 23 June) and San Pedro (St Peter and St Paul, 29 June). The first of these festivities received the name, in Spanish, of the plant that young people were to pick on the night of the summer solstice: the *verbena*. This, then, became the name for all subsequent nightly celebrations in the city. Prior to the time of Carlos III, the ‘*verbenas*’ were confined to the outskirts. The nineteenth-century historian Sebastián de Castellanos (1841: 38) wrote that Carlos III himself ordered the transfer of the gatherings to the Prado. One popular narrative suggested that a possible reason was to tame the violence and rapes that ruled in the previous location of the festivities (Deleito y Piñuela 1954: 55–62).

Since the upper classes also used the spot for their own quasi-rural festivals, the summer nightly gatherings met no opposition (Figure 4). These celebrations dominated the Paseo through the reign of Fernando VII’s daughter Isabel II (1833–68). Only two groups saw it as a problem – on quite different grounds. The first were the directors of the Prado Museum, who complained bitterly, mixing their fears that works of art were located so close to the bonfires with their disdain for the immoral behaviour that persisted on the Paseo during the *verbenas*. While the museum was still a Royal property, that conflict was articulated as a debate between the Court and the City. Another, more complicated, group of complaints came from liberal intellec-

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**Figure 3:** Fernando Brambilla (1828), View of the Real Museo from the Botanical Garden, *etching* (*watercolour original, Patrimonio Nacional*).

**Figure 4:** Anonymous (Valeriano Bécquer? 1864?), Madrid, The Carnival on the Prado and by the Rondas, *detail, etching* (*Museo de Historia de Madrid*).
tuals concerned with the role of leisure for the future of the state. Unwilling as they were to separate themselves from their fellow Spaniards, these writers, nevertheless, claimed that mass leisure did not support civic attitudes. In 1839, the future liberal historian Modesto Lafuente sarcastically described the actions of semi-drunk crowds on the Prado as a ‘parlamento popular (people’s parliament)’ with its ‘gran asamblea (grand assembly)’ divided into ‘numerosos coros o grupos, o como quien dice, colegios electorales de baile (numerous circles or groups or, as one would say, dancing electoral colleges)’ (Lafuente 1839: 418). If the verbenas were any indication of people’s ability to exercise public virtue, the leisure activities on the Prado Promenade seemed to cast a dark shadow over the future of Spain’s democracy.

REVOLUTION AND RESTORATION IN THE ‘LEISURE ZONE’, 1868–90

In 1868, when the revolution dethroned Isabel II and until the dynasty was restored in 1874, a public debate about the forms and spaces of urban leisure definitely emerged. As a 1905 commentator summed it up, these reforms were seeking social justice and not structural transformation:

… se creyó en la época revolucionaria conseguir algo con solo establecer casas de vacas, fondas y chocolaterías para saciar las aspiraciones populares en boga, concediendo al pueblo de Madrid la satisfacción de que pudiera comer en el mismo sitio que fue reservado a los reyes y magnates (… in the revolutionary times it was believed that something could be achieved by merely building garden pavilions, eateries and chocolate shops in order to fulfil the social fad of the time: give to the people the satisfaction of being allowed to eat in the same place that had been reserved for kings and magnates.)

(Grases y Riera 1905: 10)

Hence, the changes achieved by revolutionary city councils consisted of liberalizing the entertainment offerings without regulating them. The tendency to expand the repertoire of leisure activities by making consumption accessible continued during the Restoration (1874–1902), when Madrid’s municipal authorities began to speak openly on behalf of ‘the people’. At that time, the City Council and commercial associations partnered up to set the standards for the celebrations on the Paseo del Prado.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was therefore marked by two seemingly opposing processes: the emergence of gated areas for leisure and the expansion of the open-air fairs around the Paseo del Prado. On the one hand, bourgeois ‘leisure zones’ were emerging on and around the Paseo; some of them charged admission fees and enforced certain norms of behaviour. This was the case of the Jardines de Buen Retiro (Buen Retiro Gardens), which the City Council turned into a gated pleasure garden complete with cafés, elegant vending kiosks, gazebos, band kiosks and dancing grounds. (That piece of garden, formerly a Royal possession given to the City Council, was eventually eliminated in 1905 to build the grand Palace of Communications, currently housing the City Council of Madrid.) Even though the development of the Jardines was entrusted to private investors, the City Council kept the right to regulate the admission fee (one peseta) and hours of operation and to ban the usage of fireworks. Municipal administration also reserved the right to authorize the programmes of events when deemed necessary. No one could remain
Another area of gated expansion was located east of the Paseo del Prado, in the Parque de Madrid (Madrid Park, currently the Retiro). Formerly a Royal property, it was now a municipal park. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was gated along its perimeter and provided with monumental entrances. However, as a public property it could not charge admission. As a consequence, sections of that park were selected to be entertainment zones, and those areas did charge a fee. In 1881, when the Campos Elíseos (an earlier privately operated and gated leisure area) was closed, exhibition pavilions began to emerge in this park. The first became the site of the Mining Exhibition (1883). In the following years, several more buildings were added. The territory adjacent to the Zoo was fenced to become the site of the Philippine Exhibition (1887) and its colonial sequel ‘exhibiting’ an Alaskan Esquimalt tribe (1900). Although these were gated spaces, the only attempt made by the City Council to regulate the visitors’ behaviour was the ban on begging articulated in the 1896 municipal order (Mariblanca Caneyro 1991: 238). In 1905, when the Jardines del Buen Retiro disappeared, that area of the Parque de Madrid was selected to take on some of its functions and become privately managed recinto ferial (festival grounds). Once again, it was declared that the admission fee would never be higher than one peseta. When the festival grounds were finally built in 1908, their commercial success was modest; they frequently changed hands (Mariblanca Caneyro 1991: 274).

Contrary to the story of British crowds being chased away from the streets by the state, Madrid’s pleasure territories more closely resembled Bailey’s ‘leisure zone’, controlled by permissive municipal authorities and crowd-loving commercial stakeholders. Indeed, all aforementioned venues around the Prado either continued the democratic programme of allowing everyone admission to places previously reserved for the happy few or fed off the exhibition frenzy continuously on the rise since the 1851 London Great Exhibition. Furthermore, there were very few rules in Madrid’s parks, be they municipally or privately managed.

This brings us to the second transformation of the world of urban leisure. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the expanding territories of leisure in Madrid were not conceptualized as a substitute for, but rather as an add-on to the open-air fairgrounds on the Paseo del Prado. The only difference was the ban on overnight stays in the newer areas. With the City Council’s continuing support, the fairs on the Paseo del Prado were happening more and more often; their size was expanding and so was the repertoire of fairground activities. In 1878, the Paseo del Prado became a new setting for the festivities of San Isidro, the patron saint of Madrid, held in the middle of May. This occurred at a time when that patriotic festival was becoming the area’s biggest pleasure and commercial fair, with its own swings, merry-go-rounds, shooting range pavilions, restaurants and hundreds of liquor kiosks set near the Manzanares river next to the San Isidro sanctuary. Thousands of provincial visitors attracted by discounted railway fares were coming to Madrid to join leisurely locals, and the City Council and commercial associations saw new financial opportunities. In May 1878, the City Council decided that on the Paseo del Prado,

además de las vistosas y elegantes tiendas de toda clase de objetos, la diputación provincial, el ayuntamiento, la representación del comercio e industria y algu-
Starting in 1889 and continuing well into the 1930s, the Paseo also hosted celebrations taking place long after San Juan and San Pedro: the Cabalgata de San Lorenzo and the Feria de Otoño (Autumn Fair held in September). On the latter occasion, vendors were authorized to install kiosks in front of the Botanical Garden but not facing the Prado Museum (Diario Oficial de Avisos de Madrid 1889; El Día 1889).

In this manner, the Restoration regime turned the Paseo del Prado into an ongoing commercial fairground lasting from May to September. Additionally, on the days of San Isidro, San Juan and San Pedro the Paseo would also house a round-the-clock pleasure fair with merry-go-rounds, swings, open-air dances and freak shows. The word ‘verbena’ now referred not only to nightly gatherings but also to their locations on urban fairgrounds. In the meantime, the adjacent gated areas worked on modernizing this repertoire. On the days of the San Isidro festivities, the Jardines del Buen Retiro (prior to their closure in 1905) would host the annual Flower and Bird Exhibition and the Madrid Park, initially the site of the Exposición de Ganados (Livestock Fair), would later on host the batallas de flores (competitions of carriages or automobiles adorned with flowers). In the Park’s olden-day small zoo (Casa de las Fieras) one could visit a dog exhibition and a fine arts show organized by the Círculo de Bellas Artes (Fine Arts Association) in opposition to the state-run national exhibitions. All gated areas also hosted their own fundraising verbenas for those who preferred nightly gatherings without the company of non-paying fellow-madrileños.

From 1886, the San Isidro festivities were gradually refashioned into celebrations of the birthday of King Alfonso XIII (born 17 May), receiving support from the Royal family, the military and private corporations. The 1895 official programme, for example, gives us a glimpse of a series of activities lasting for fifteen days, of which only the first day featured religious acts commemorating the patron saint (Ayuntamiento de Madrid 1895). Other days offered an array of things to do or see ranging from bullfights to a military parade in the King’s honour, to concerts and charity events. Importantly, this festival also offered a series of sporting competitions in the form of horse or bicycle races. But there is no evidence that the verbenas in the Museum’s environs had ceased, suggesting that the City Council was trying to redirect the audience’s attention towards newer venues in the hope that the old-school gatherings would then fade away.

The reorganization of ungated urban festivals marked a developing partnership between the City Council and commercial associations that would affect the celebrations on the Paseo del Prado in future decades. Rather than ban urban fairgrounds, the officials expanded them by fostering attractions deemed more civilized. Reaching the beginning of the twentieth century, we therefore find that no one was rejected admission to the Paseo del Prado or lured into a stadium. Instead, the entire centre of Madrid, in front and behind the Museum, was being transformed into an enormous leisure zone where old-school merry-go-rounds coexisted with cycling competitions and ambulant vendors received the right to establish more solid stalls. And while more
respectable entertainment venues received increasing attention, they did not prevent nightly gatherings for those wishing to make a bonfire and spend a night under the stars.

**LEISURE UNDER PRESSURE, 1890–1936**

Yet rather than offer a lasting picture of social harmony, the fairgrounds on the Paseo del Prado remained inclusive only as long as the street was not politicized and the commercial sphere failed to attract social reformers’ attention. The Promenade had staged political self-expressions since the 1870s. Curiously, it was women who initially gave the area this new meaning; their political agendas were not necessarily progressive. During the so-called ‘mantilla rebellion’ of 1872, upper-class monarchist women came out to show off their traditionalist head coverings in defence of Spanish values against the democratically elected King Amadeo. When a group of conservative *carlista* women joined in protesting against political detentions, the impression was so strong that the illustrated press ran an etching of the event (Figure 5).

By 1890, however, political action on the Paseo del Prado had acquired different tones. The promenades in front of the Botanical Garden and the Museum were convenient thoroughfares for marching crowds, and the Salón del Prado offered a spacious stopping point for the orators. Thus, since May Day 1890, visitors to the Museum became witnesses to many Republican and left-wing protests. Normally held on Sundays, these events were often presented as real working-class celebrations, giving socialist writers an occasion to portray cleanly dressed workers acting out bourgeois values. In a well-ordered way, they were venturing to the Prado side-by-side with their women and children, without any alcohol or bonfire detected nearby (*El País* 1909). Class warfare and gentrification were the spark that brought about what the Museum authorities and those wishing to reform people’s manners in the nineteenth century could not do – regulate leisure.

![Figure 5: Anonymous (1872), Madrid, Demonstration of Carlista Women at the Prado against Political Arrests, etching (Museo de Historia de Madrid).](image)
This was how the ‘civilizing process’ in the interests of the state reached the Paseo del Prado. However, what makes the history of urban fairgrounds in Spain interesting are the seemingly counter-intuitive ways in which the standard model of leisure studies played out under quite different political regimes: King Alfonso XIII’s monarchy (1902–31), Miguel Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship in support of that monarchy (1923–30), and the Second Republic (1931–39), especially its first, Socialist-led reformist government (1931–33) and the Popular Front coalition that won the election in February 1936. In order to understand how they dealt with popular leisure, it is essential to know that in Spain this Victorian-style improvement of manners was an intellectual child of the nineteenth-century Krausista reformers. Their ideas, however, were not adopted by the elites until the twentieth century, when the first generation of the Krausista disciples gained access to power.

In 1905, the largest wave of redevelopment since Carlos III began to transform central Madrid into a twentieth-century capital. Small streets around the Calle Alcalá were cleared to make space for the Gran Vía; the Jardines del Buen Retiro were erased by the Palacio de Comunicaciones, and the open space of the Salon del Prado was transformed into a palm grove. In the same year, it was decided that the area of the former Tivoli gardens across the street from the Prado Museum would become the site of a new world-class hotel: the Ritz (1910). While it was still under construction, museum directors doubled their efforts to displace the nightly gatherings from the Paseo. In 1907, José Villegas Cordero asked the authorities to dispatch a guard who would prevent paupers from sitting on the stairs during the Museum’s opening hours.

Still, ultimately, it was not the love of art, but rather the need to make the area safe for tourists that would force the City Council to reconsider the fairgrounds on the Paseo. In 1913, in an unprecedented move, the City Council went against the Association of Fairground Vendors and relocated the verbenas and kiosks from the Prado closer to the Atocha station. At the beginning, it was a very timid decision: vendors and kiosks were confined to the walkways in front of the Museum and the Botanical Garden, ‘quedando libre toda la parte del Paseo del Prado y las inmediaciones de los grandes hoteles’ (leaving clear all the part of the Paseo del Prado and the areas adjacent to grand hotels) (El Globo 1913). In an effort to adjust the aesthetics of the vending stalls to the new clientele’s taste, the authorities even requested that the vendors have the appearance of their kiosks approved prior to the fair ‘para que estas verbenas ofrezcan un aspecto más agradable que al presente (so that these verbenas could offer a more pleasant sight than they currently offer)’ (El Globo 1913).

The decision to move vending kiosks even closer to the Museum, of course, upset the directors of the Prado, who continued protesting. Their assistance, however, came from an unexpected direction. In 1915, Pablo Iglesias, the founder of the Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and the General Workers’ Union (UGT) who at the time was also a representative on the Madrid City Council and at the Cortes, criticized the Mayor’s complicity with commerce in allowing ‘que jardines, paseos…industriales (the industrials to occupy gardens, promenades and sidewalks)’ (El Imparcial 1915). Painting a class-conscious picture of Madrid’s public spaces, Iglesias also claimed that ‘la verbena solo sirve…emborrache (the verbena is only good for making the worker drink and get drunk)’, as the writer Pedro Mata reported, and requested that the verbenas be moved to the outskirts of the city and away from the Prado Museum (Mata 1916). This was, to my knowledge, the first attempt to ban leisure
activities from public spaces in Madrid, and in 1916, all celebrations on the Paseo del Prado were banned or transferred to the Pacífico area.

If the City Council agreed to this readjustment, they were far from becoming anti-commercial: small-scale commerce simply fell victim to the class conflict on the Prado. Expensive hotels, matched by the rapid growth of luxurious blocks of flats, made it important to minimize the presence of the lower classes that were too noticeable on the Paseo even without the verbenas. In 1924, the concierges of these new buildings would put petroleum jelly on the benches on the Paseo to further assist the City Council in ‘cleaning’ the area (La Voz 1924). But this presented the authorities with a question … Could the verbenas harmonize class structure, providing an alternative to more dangerous worker-led protests? Or were they merely themselves another manifestation of class warfare?

Commenting on Iglesias’s ‘odio a la verbena (hatred toward the verbena)’ and the ensuing displacement of these events from the Prado, Pedro Mata supported the former view:

_Tambièn a mì, individualista furioso, me perturba y me molesta mucho cuando voy por la calle el día 1° de Mayo tener la desgracia de tropezarme en el camino con la manifestación obrera, y que me impida cruzar de una acera a otra_ (A furious individualist, I also feel disrupted and disturbed when, getting out on May 1, I have the misfortune of running into a workers’ manifestation preventing me from crossing the street).

(Mata 1916)

In contrast to such truly bothersome happenings, the verbenas, for Mata, were ‘la única fiesta gratuia, pintoresca, clásica y netamente popular que teníamos (the only free, picturesque, classic and neatly popular celebration that we used to have)’ (Mata 1916). In the new development, decisions about whether or not to ban the festivities from the Paseo heavily relied on whether those with power wished to see the festive crowd as bourgeois, urban workers and lumpen-proletarians or, simply and nostalgically, as ‘people’. Alberto Insúa’s 1926 novel _La señorita y el obrero, o un ‘flirt’ en la verbena de San Antonio/A Señorita and a Worker, or A ‘Flirt’ at the Verbena of San Antonio_ even suggested that the temporal oblivion of class structure at the verbenas (that, after all, celebrated patron saints) could produce the social ‘milagro de amor y democracia (miracle of love and democracy)’ (Insúa 1926: 60).

While the ideology of the verbena was a matter of dispute, the ‘verbenophilia’ and ‘verbenophobia’ cut across all party lines. Among those who disliked them, we find not only Iglesias (and later on, another important Socialist intellectual, Andrés Ovejero) and the conservative-leaning authorities of the Prado Museum but also the controversial politician Antonio Maura who promoted a revolution from above but went against Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship. Among those who believed in the verbenas were the pro-republican writer Ramón Gómez de la Serna and his pro-fascist friend Ernesto Giménez Caballero. The former, who called himself ‘the spontaneous son of the Prado’ published in 1919 the Promenade’s richly illustrated history (Gómez de la Serna 1919: 1). In 1930, when General Dámaso Berenguer began to dismantle Primo de Rivera’s regime and the verbenas were authorized on the Paseo del Prado again, Gómez de la Serna celebrated the decision as a mark of the times, _en que se vuelve a saborear la era de libertad que hace tiempo no gozaba Madrid_ (when one savours again the freedom that Madrid had long not enjoyed) and as ‘lo más sintomático de una nueva época, con Parlamento y con aire democrático.
the best symptom of a new epoch, with a Parliament and a democratic spirit’ (Gómez de la Serna 1930: 3). In the same year, Gómez de la Serna and Giménez Caballero presented in the Madrid Cine-Club a film titled *La esencia de la verbena*/*The Essence of the Verbena*, which equated the world of fairground attractions with modernity and its visitors with the harmonious and inclusive community where ‘nadie se ríe de nadie (nobody laughs at nobody)’ (Giménez Caballero 1930: 7’30”). In the meantime, until such a utopia existed, the directors of the Prado Museum would again have to protest, citing the need to create an environment that would not scare away foreign art-lovers and the occupants of the nearby luxurious hotels. The Círculo de Bellas Artes and the San Fernando Academy stood with the Museum, while commercial stakeholders courted the press to make public the peace and good order reigning at the vending stalls. In the history of the Madrid *verbenas*, 1930 stands out as the season when everyone seemed to have an opinion.

This is why in the spring of 1931, when Berenguer resigned and Alfonso XIII fled the country, many were curious about or concerned with the prospects of the ‘republican verbenas’ (*El Heraldo de Madrid* 1931a). However, while rumours about possible disruptions to the *verbenas* were arriving from other cities (such as San Sebastian), there was no visible change in the capital. Although the 1931 *verbenas* overlapped with the general elections (held on 28 June), Mayor Pedro Rico continued the line of his predecessor and allowed the fairground on the Paseo. Only in retrospect can one distinguish the marks of novelty. Many benefit *verbenas* were now collecting funds for unemployed workers (*El Heraldo de Madrid* 1931b); some beauty pageants distributed the titles of Miss Republic (*La Libertad* 1931a), and a small kiosk appeared on the Paseo del Prado selling tickets to a soccer match (*El Heraldo de Madrid* 1931c). Newspapers reporting about the century-old problem of theft during the *verbenas* now adopted a tone between sarcasm and conciliation:

… lo malo de todo esto es que a los festejos populares acuden personas de muy distinta condición social, y entre un grupo de personas decentes se cuela a lo peor algún ‘rata’ (…the bad thing is that people of very different social conditions come to popular celebrations, and into a group of decent people a ‘rat’ can unfortunately sneak in).

(*La Voz* 1931)

In the years that followed, the press saw the *verbenas* as a testing ground for class relationships under the new rule, and while the government was debating the Statutes of Catalonia and the project of land reform, these relations were not peaceful. Meetings of over twenty participants were not allowed, and security organizations were keeping an eye on fairground stalls, suspicious that people might be using them for unauthorized political gatherings (*La Libertad* 1931b). During the fair of La Virgen de la Paloma, a group of communists was arrested in a soft-drinks kiosk on the Prado and charged with attempting to form a secret cell. Tensions were so high that in 1932 the traders at the Madrid stock exchange panicked upon hearing explosions, grabbed their belongings and ran out of the building – only to see with relief that the noise was coming from the *verbena* fireworks (*El Imparcial* 1932). In the same year the pro-monarchical *Gracia y Justicia* published a caricature of some madrileños running away from the *churros* kiosks that reminded them of recent peasant violence in Spain’s villages. And while tensions between class struggle and popular celebrations were hovering above and around the Paseo del Prado (Juliá Díaz 1998), newspapers such
as *El Heraldo de Madrid* continued their humorous exploration of the fairground solidarity. One note reporting a stolen wallet asked that the perpetrators forgive the owner (himself a journalist) for carrying so little money and begged them to return the documents (*El Heraldo de Madrid* 1933). If the *verbenas* were indeed becoming a social laboratory, then it was once again time for reform. This is where the Republic brought their most visible change to urban festivals: the modern forms of ‘sportisation’ reaching beyond the upper- and middle-class horse, bicycle and car racing. Mass competitions, initially, were registered in areas other than the Paseo. In August 1931, the festival programme of La Virgen de la Paloma included boxing matches. In 1932, the San Pedro *verbenas* in the Retiro organized by the Círculo de Bellas Artes included a swimming competition. During the San Juan festivities of 1933, sport came to the Paseo in the form of a non-commercial foot race. In the same year, Los Hijos de Madrid (The Sons of Madrid) association that had been managing the gated fairgrounds of the Retiro began to explore a new activity in a new location: a nautical *verbenas* on the beach of the Manzanares River. Football matches first appeared on the programme of the San Pedro *verbenas* in Vallecas in July 1935, but symbolically, this sport had already been a part of the experience on the Paseo del Prado since 1932, when a football-themed merry-go-round was installed there. We can therefore conclude that the Republican reformists (later seconded by the conservative cabinets of 1934–35) of this time took a ‘soft’ approach to regulating the *verbenas*. Rather than banning uncontrolled activities on the Prado, they gradually developed a list of ‘civilized’ or ‘sporticised’ alternatives, while also encouraging the development of new venues away from the city centre. Moreover, the *verbenas* on the Prado were re-branded as a neighbourhood celebration of the Congress district and even included ‘civilizing’ beauty pageants for the title of Miss Congress. In every other aspect, the *verbenas* featured the traditional repertoire of amusements ranging from serpent tamers and horchata parlours to dancing girls and pleasure rides offering a simulated trip to Shanghai (*El Sol* 1933; *La Voz* 1934; *Madrid Ilustrado* 1935).

While these developments were taking place, the image of the *verbenas* was also changing. For Socialist and Republican politicians, fairground celebrations no longer seemed déclassé, commercial or degrading for the workers. Instead, they were becoming a place to capture the masses and do politics. In 1933, Indalecio Prieto, then the Minister of Public Works, announced a ‘subterranean’ *verbenas* in the recently completed section of a railway tunnel under the Paseo de la Castellana. The event apparently did not take place, but the press took the occasion to joke about a new ‘tubo de risa’ (funhouse; literally ‘laughing tube’) (*El Siglo Futuro* 1933; *La Voz* 1933) (Figure 6). In 1935, Manuel Azaña, the leader of the Republican Left and one of the minds behind the creation of the Popular Front, decided to take a walk at the *verbenas* on the Prado and was greeted by the crowds so large that he was forced to make a hasty retreat by catching a nearby cab (*El Heraldo de Madrid* 1935). In their next issue, *Gracia y Justicia* (1935) did not fail to advertise ‘Manolo’ as a new freak show attraction, next to a fish-woman and a man with five mouths, but Azaña’s walk at the *verbenas* (concomitant with the populist restyling of Azaña’s political persona after his release from prison in 1934) foreshadowed one important change: if these celebrations were indeed the place to find ‘people’, rather than any specific class, the political attitudes of the Left towards these ‘people’ would have to change.

When the Popular Front won the election in February 1936, Azaña, soon to become Prime Minister, described the cheering crowd at the Puerta del Sol as another *verbenas*:
Algunos novatos estaban muy impresionados, pero yo recordaba la noche del 14 de abril del 31 y la de mayo que precedió a la quema de los conventos, y todo esto de hoy me parecía una verbena (Some [political] novices were very impressed, but I remembered the night of 14 April 1931 and also the one in May that preceded the burning of convents, and to me all that seemed like a verbena).

(Azaña 1966: 569)

At that moment ‘verbena’ was clearly an ambiguous term: not a political rally, but rather an uncontrolled mass gathering that could have turned ugly. Moreover, the memory of the burning of convents suggested that what made the verbena so eerie was the presence of anarchist-leaning groups.

Would the Popular Front succeed in taking over the verbena? After all, its ideology proclaimed interclass solidarity of men and women coming together to protect their own well-being against an enemy termed ‘fascism’, and the verbenas could be a perfect metaphor for the movement. The anti-government coup of 18 July and the subsequent war made irrelevant the issues of popular leisure. Still, a later comment from the former ‘verbenophile’ Ernesto Giménez Caballero makes it clear that in the post-1936 imagination the verbenas, indeed, became ideological, and that this ideology no longer was simply about ‘people’ but rather about political parties. In 1938, already firmly grounded as
a pro-Franco intellectual, Giménez Caballero summed up the experience of the Popular Front as a ‘encanallamiento de los carruseles de verbena democrática y social’ (degradation of the merry-go-rounds of the democratic and social verbena) overtaken by the UGT (United Workers’ Union) ‘entre polvo, polvo, churros, aceite, violencia, mareos, chulerías, aguardientes, campanillazos, socios de la UGT, “pasen, señores, pasen” (with its dust, dust, churros, oil, violence, vertigos, vulgarities, alcohol, bells ringing and the members of UGT [saying], “please, come in, señores, come in”)’ (Giménez Caballero 1938: 3). Only eight years had passed since he sang the praises to the ‘essence of the verbena’.

CONCLUSIONS
The history of urban fairgrounds traced above suggests that the consolidation of the liberal state required leisure zones to be aligned with public space, and pastimes accordingly adjusted, so that all leisure activities in the open could be seen as conducive to public virtue. That transformed fairgrounds into the sites of political activity: while decidedly neutral and enjoying the City Council’s full support, the celebrations on the Prado, nevertheless, have elicited fears from the municipal authorities ever since the street became the arena of mass action. Happy crowds and small-scale commercial vendors servicing them were reborn as political forces when the municipal authorities sided with the state and began to privilege large-scale commerce.

What can the Occupy movement learn from the fairgrounds on the Paseo del Prado? One would surely have to make a quantum leap to move from the ‘verbena’ at the Puerta del Sol that Azaña feared to the campgrounds that would cover the same square 75 years later. And yet post-industrial protesters can learn something from the debates surrounding the fairgrounds in the industrial age. Under the ancien régime, the municipality allowed commerce to rule. The revolution and the regime’s transformation into a parliamentary monarchy were marked by a tendency towards ‘soft’ regulation: acting together with commercial stakeholders, the authorities developed areas attractive to the social groups receiving limited voting rights. However, the gated areas did not replace free fairgrounds that enjoyed a much wider social appeal and did not elicit direct intervention on behalf of the City Council: on these lands, it acted merely as another vendor. Thus until the end of the nineteenth century, ‘publicness’ took the guise of economic activity often happening in municipally owned spaces. However, this balance began to shift at the turn of the century, once the street became the arena of political action. At that time, Madrid was becoming an industrial megalopolis whose vendors had to withstand competition from large-scale and internationally owned commercial enterprises. The polarization of the market and the rise of political parties triggered a separation on the fairgrounds. In the face of growing social conflict, the authorities began acting together with large businesses and the state and against fairground vendors on public lands. And this is when the creators of worker parties took interest in the debates about leisure, unexpectedly siding with the state.

At the same time, the municipal administration ceased to support the amorphous interclass community gathering at the verbenas and the small-scale vendors. This is why in the first decades of the century the locations of fairs would change just as frequently as the political regimes were modifying their attitudes toward the ‘people’. But the separation between the leisure area and the changing definitions of the ‘public’ was never made explicit. The vendors insisted on their loyalty to the state while the state authorities cited the needs of public hygiene and the
damage to tourism and commerce even when it went against the vendors. Those who remember the end of the occupation of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona will recognize these arguments.

But was there really a time when those ‘fiesta’ settings could have effectively obtained political results from a ‘cabreo’, as the 15-M Movement would have it? The transformation of urban pleasure grounds into public spaces was a gradual process that involved assigning new connotations to both leisure and publicness. Understanding how it happened suggests new ways of looking at leisure politically: as a territory and a set of activities that have not always been subsumed under the limited definition of public space as an area of state interest. Allowing scholars and protesters to rethink publicness, a historical inquiry into the debates between the state, the city and the market involving the meaning of urban leisure also expands the twenty-first-century repertoire of public actions. Lessons learned on the fairgrounds of the past may help us transform the fight for harmonizing the public and the private currently suffocated in an ambivalent ‘cabreo’ into a better-articulated task.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archival research for this article was funded by a Regular Research Grant from Marquette University and by the Robert and Mary Gettel Research Fund. The author wishes to thank Sally Anna Boyle and the editors and anonymous readers of the Journal of Urban Cultural Studies and the International Journal of Iberian Studies for their helpful comments.

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SUGGESTED CITATION


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