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The indignad@s and the struggle for other forms of making democracy

Abstract. This paper is going to become a chapter of an edited book titled *Regards on the Crisis in Europe*, to be published by professionaldreamers. Barbero argues that: “Even if one can grant that the Spanish 15-M movement was affected by the same type of contradictions that also affect the majority of social movements, and that not all the expressed positions were coherent with a socially transformative movement – if any such movement actually exists – it must be recognized that 15-M represents a step in the long march towards a new way of making democracy, towards a new form of relation between politics and society and, ultimately, towards a new citizenship.”



When a virtually unknown *Real Democracy Now!* [*Democracia real ya!*, DRY] erupted on the Spanish public scene, announcing a series of national mobilizations, not only its actions but its very name immediately appeared controversial. It was especially so in those milieu where debate about democracy is a constant preoccupation. From the one hand, there is no shortage of social movements, both on the left and the right, who self-candidate as the prophets of a new democracy in the current state of disorder. From the other, the very fact of claiming with urgency the horizontality of political decisions may well be in tension with the time that is required by democratic discussion and deliberation.

Nonetheless, in view of social mobilization, DRY was undoubtedly expressing a popular feeling. Indeed, many people in Spain feel it is time to stop bearing with a political and labor-unionist class whose decisions, far from healing the brunt of an economic crisis that has already produced four million of unemployed workers, were going to cut further on social security, save the bankers and support the culprits of previous mismanagement.

At the very least, the disconnection between the political class and society is evident. The neoliberal thrust toward transforming citizens into mere consumers, severing them from political participation, had indeed triumphed. And fact is that the moment in which such a mobilization erupted was not trivial – as if Stephane Hessel¹ had been more of a prophet than an ideologist.

The images of thousands of people in Iran, Egypt, Syria, Morocco and Libya, who were marching in the streets, squatting the squares and directly facing both pacifically and not the army and the police of dictatorial and despotic governments, provided ample evidence of popular and democratic activism. The despised civil society of the so unfortunately-termed Islamic countries was imparting a lesson of struggle for dignity and democracy to a West mostly blinded by compulsive consumption and televised banalities. The news from Tahrir Square and the many other squares in the world, the Che Guevara banners and closed fists were reverberating through the Twitter, Facebook and the other social media platforms' profiles of activists in Europe awaiting for the gunned barricades taking.

¹ *Indignez-vous!* Indigène, Montpellier (2010).



Furthermore, in the antechamber of some Spanish municipal elections, as well as in some governmental departments, both autonomous and “forales”, always symptomatic to foretell the next political turnout, it was the right time for a fist on the table. And, actually, many politicians, especially those of the “Socialist” Party, were becoming nervous. Vociferousness and abstention was, perhaps ironically, mobilizing the undecided and episodic supporters of the Socialist Party (PSOE) towards the streets rather than towards the ballots. Certainly, the Popular Party (PP) was delighted by this outcome, and was calling for police intervention to quell the “few riotous”. The juridico-political machinery of Power did not linger to praise the local Electoral Juntas and lend them the argument of the defense of the legal right to a free and unhampered campaign – which amounted to keep the radical and their meetings at bay, and even to repress them if necessary. In this context, there was even an attempt to legitimize forced and probably illegal evictions from public space under the pretext of leaving space for an alleged football celebration, which usually give way to vandalism – which is quite telling about the democratic habit of the current government².

The point is that DRY, and what happened since the movement of the 15 May (15-M), achieved one of the largest popular mobilizations in the history of the Spanish State. Of course we could not, and should not, forget the anti-war demonstrations and those that, under the banner *Nunca mais* [*Nevermore*], protested against the Prestige oil disaster on the coast of Galicia and the Cantabric sea. And now the popular scream *Otra política es posible* [*Another politics is possible*] led to overcrowded assemblies all over Spain. The spirit of Tahrir Square was present at plaza del Sol in Madrid, at plaza Catalunya in Barcelona, at plaza Arriaga in Bilbao and in many others, crossing even the borders, through #Spanishrevolution, towards London, Paris, Berlin, Milan, Prague, New York, Sidney and many other places of the planet where indignant people were meeting, some of which probably pushed by the disillusion with a market that promises work and produces forced migration.

Undoubtedly, what has distinguished the 15-M from former mobilizations has been the absence, and even the rejection, of the institutional political and labor-unionist class. The motto *No nos representan* [*They do not represent us*], beyond expressing disillusionment, was turning into a new praxis. Apart from occasional spokesmen,

² Nonetheless, Plaça Catalunya was soon retaken: <http://diagonalperiodico.net/La-gente-desborda-a-los-mossos-y.html>



participation in the assemblies was made by singular persons (not individualist individuals) who did not belong in any organization of movement. People were talking about their own personal condition and experience, about being an unemployed, a student without a future, a precarious worker, a retired worker whose pension is going to be cut, a former anti-Franco militant, a stigmatized illegal immigrant. In other words, it was the act of showing in public the reasons of one's indignation and the wish for change which transformed anonymous subjects into activist subjects who were breaking with traditional politics. And the very notion of political actor was rejected, since it evoked the enmity of the "representative" government in place.

This does not mean that the assemblies did not have democratic, representative and participatory aspirations. The format of the general assembly, the rules of internal organization into workgroups, the norms (*guías*) to conduct debates and to live with other in the camp confirm this. The expression "awakening of the civil society" may perhaps refer precisely to the awareness acquired by many people that there exist other ways to mobilize, squatting squares and institutional buildings, marching in the streets, as former social movements already did in the past.

The debate about violent action was not absent. It was raised by forced evictions enacted by the police in plaza Cataluña and the subsequent attempt to squat the Catalan Parliament, where a meeting to cut social securities was scheduled. Although some spokespersons were subscribing to pacific resistance, the images of clashes between demonstrators and the police enabled politicians to denounce the illegitimacy of the movement. But since even critics of the 15-M extol Paris' May 68, does anybody remember those barricades, and the burnt cars in the Latin Quarter? There are very few revolutions in history where the strength of power has not be fought against with some type of strength.

After various months of squatting, the movement has evolved. The Winter Palace has not been conquered, but popular resistance has effectively protected a number of persons who were menaced by bank loans³, by detention due to lack of staying

³ "Una sentada paraliza un desahucio en Orkoien. Por primera vez en Euskal Herria, una sentada paró un desahucio. Una pareja de ancianos iba a ser expulsada de su casa por adeudar 35.000 euros". *Gara*, 5 July 2011; "50 indignados contra un desahucio. El 15-M llama a través de las redes sociales a acudir a Malasaña para impedir el desalojo de una anciana enferma de cáncer y de su hijo discapacitado". *El País*, 19 July 2011.



permits⁴. And the same resistance has then led to summoning new demonstrations (June 19, against the European Stability Pact and the July 23 Popular March).

Even if one can grant that the Spanish 15-M movement was affected by the same type of contradictions that also affect the majority of social movements, and that not all the expressed positions were coherent with a socially transformative movement – if any such movement actually exists – it must be recognized that 15-M represents a step in the long march towards a new way of making democracy, towards a new form of relation between politics and society and, ultimately, towards a new citizenship.

(translated from Spanish by Andrea Mubi)

⁴ “Madrid protesters force police to retreat in clashes over treatment of immigrants. Residents in multicultural district of Lavapiés inspired by 'indignant' protest movement”. *The Guardian*, 18 July 2011.