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# Politics of Indignation: Radical Democracy and Class Struggle beyond Postmodernity

**Mario Espinoza Pino**

*This article analyzes the social impact, dynamics, and political organization of the Spanish revolt of the Indignados. The article starts with the emergence of the 15M in Spain, criticizing the representation of the movement in the media and exposing the political and economic conjuncture of Spain at the date of the revolt. Then it analyzes the Indignados sociopolitical phenomenon as an articulation of social movements linked by one method of political decision and association: the assembly. After this, it tries to explore the limits and advantages of a noninstitutionalized approach towards social conflict, exposing the social changes the movement has introduced into the Spanish society. Finally, it points out the real obstacles for the 15M as a post-Fordist class movement in an attempt to understand the role of the Indignados like an alternative for political change in Spanish society.*

**Key Words:** Indignados, Spanish Revolt, Class Conflict, Neoliberalism, Social Movements

Thus it happened that Napoleon, who, like all his contemporaries, considered Spain as an inanimate corpse, was fatally surprised at the discovery that when the Spanish State was dead, Spanish society was full of life, and every part of it overflowing with powers of resistance.

—Karl Marx, *Revolutionary Spain*

Thirdly and lastly, it comes to be considered, that those things are not so much within the commonwealth's right, which cause indignation in the majority. For it is certain, that by the guidance of nature men conspire together, either through common fear, or with the desire to avenge some common hurt; and as the right of the commonwealth is determined by the common power of the multitude, it is certain that the power and right of the commonwealth are so far diminished, as it gives occasion for many to conspire together.

—B. Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*

## Beginnings: Beyond the Veil of Representation

The 15th of May 2011 will live for many years in the political memory of Spanish people as the historical beginning of a new wave of social and political conflict in the middle of the global economic crisis. On that date an enormous demonstration took

place in the capital city of Spain, Madrid, linking different collectives and several generations of protesters, all united against the inefficient structures of the Spanish liberal democracy and the powers of the capitalist market. Beyond the heterogeneity and apparent dispersion of the movement, there were clear political objectives on that day, common objectives: the Indignados' critique of the corrupted political institutions—state, parties and trade unions—demanded from the beginning a radical transformation of democracy, questioning the liberal ways of representation with new forms of participatory democratic action. This issue was related with a critical approach towards free trade, financial capital, and neoliberalism as the other side of the Spanish problem: the political power seems to be completely entangled with capital and subordinated—subsumed Marx would say—to it. The gradual privatizations of public services to maximize the financial benefits of the elites and banks show us—without doubt—that politics does not govern for the citizenship but for private economic power. On the other hand, the state apparatuses of the old *welfare* model are now only another dimension of capital: an instrument to *dispossess* people from their rights and create new sources of surplus-value.<sup>1</sup> These two lines of critique made by the 15M will have a concrete formulation in the first measures proposed by the Indignados—for example, a *reform* of the electoral law with open lists and true proportionality, the *nationalization* of the privatized companies and public services, *limits* to the power of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU) in Spain, the *right to and adequate* housing for all the people, the *abolition* of the Sinde Law,<sup>2</sup> the Labor Reform<sup>3</sup> and the Migration Laws, a *radical democracy* guided through *popular assemblies*, etc.

Two days after the first demonstration, and following several episodes of police repression, the central square of Madrid, Sol, was pacifically occupied again thanks to a popular call in Facebook and Twitter; this time the Indignados camped, creating Acampada Sol<sup>4</sup> and a general assembly to organize and spread the movement through

1. For an interesting analysis of these subjects see Harvey (2007).

2. On 6 March 2011 the Sinde Law—called Sinde because of the surname of the former cultural minister—was approved in the Spanish Official Bulletin of the State (BOE) as the 43rd disposition of the organic Law of Sustainable Economy (LES). This disposition regulates Internet download traffic, prohibiting sharing content with any type of copyright, under penalty. In the law, companies' "intellectual property" is protected against users in an attempt to ban the P2P systems and portals used in cultural file sharing (films, books, music, etc.). Several associations of consumers and users have criticized the law, arguing it was only another step in the privatization of the Internet's free space. Finally, the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE) decided not to apply the law. However, on 1 March 2012 the law was fully applied by the government of Mariano Rajoy (PP), banning many webpages where one could download materials for free.

3. The labor reform announced by the government of Rodríguez Zapatero in 2011 was a pack of measures to make the job market more flexible, with the aim of reducing unemployment. But the previous reform of 2010 had revealed the true meaning of "making more dynamic" the labor market: cheaper dismissals for employers, the weakening of collective negotiations and trade unions' power, less legal justifications for dismissal, etc. The reform of 2011, approved in the middle of social conflict, continued the line of the law of 2010: abuse of the internship contract in employment (with minimum salary or without it), more limits to collective negotiation, and unlimited temporality in contracts.

4. "Sun Encampment."

Spanish territory and beyond. Soon, the general assembly divided itself into different commissions (Food, Action, Communication, Infrastructures, Legal, Internal Coordination, and Cleaning) all led by different open assemblies with a horizontal structure. When the camp secured its conditions of existence, the commissions developed their competences, generating working groups in different areas: economy, politics, national, international, culture, LGTB, feminism, thought, analysis, etc. Acampada Sol began to create a solid web of social relations thanks to its ability to produce its own sources of knowledge and information through the Internet (webpages, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter) and its own press. All the working groups and projects of the Indignados were articulated via assembly organizational terms: horizontal democracy, global consensus, reflexive public deliberation, and a well-founded critique of traditional leadership and representative forms of political action. And all of them were open to everyone who would like to participate with his or her own voice. During the Acampada, the center of the city was completely repoliticized, transforming the squares and streets near Sol into spaces of democratic deliberation; the shops and department stores of the zone were eclipsed by the people and their political actions and decisions. The economic rationality and commodification of the shopping centers coexisted in extreme contradiction with acts of solidarity, generosity, radical criticism, and fresh projects of social justice. This contradiction lasted a month until the general assembly, integrated by all the people of the Acampada and the 15M, decided to leave the camp and spread their projects and antagonisms through district and town assemblies, all of them intertwined and coordinated.

Since the first days of the camp, the whole Spanish media—from left to right—started a campaign to “represent” the sociopolitical phenomenon of the Indignados, building an image of the movement that we can call, in a classical Marxist way, *ideological*.<sup>5</sup> The media was not the only problem: many intellectuals who tried to understand or criticize the 15M contributed with their cultural capital, interests, and class prejudices to the construction of a stereotype suitable for the media and the Spanish “common sense.” On the one hand, a major part of the progressive media tended to represent the movement as a disorganized multitude without real projects and disillusioned with the sterile political life of the country; although their protests could be legitimate (we are in “times of crisis”), the Indignados didn’t seek political power. In fact, their insistence on assembly democracy and their critique of the party

5. I refer to the way Marx and Engels use this term in their classic *The German Ideology*: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx and Engels [1932] 1968). Therefore, the ideology of the dominant class is one of the main ideological mediations in the production of social subjectivity. A distorted social image of the Indignados has been constructed by the hegemonic Spanish media, which is sponsored mainly by capitalist companies and financial corporations. Even *El País*, one of the most popular periodicals traditionally associated with the Left, is now another tool of an increasingly repressive and homogeneous system. Nevertheless, thanks to the counterinformation of the movement and some marginal media, the “social common sense” has understood—as the last polls affirm—that many of the demands of the 15M are legitimate and necessary. See, for example, this index of public opinion: <http://www.simplelogica.com/iop/iop12011.asp>.

system, capitalism, and corruption seems to condemn them to the dead end of utopia, and—“as we all know”—only parties can change the political direction of society in a liberal democracy. On the other hand, the discourses of the press associated with the Right fluctuated between the social stigmatization of the movement—anti-system people, radicals, bad students, losers, lower class—and their conversion into terrorists or just “rats.” From the intellectual front, two different interpretations emerged:

1. The 15M is *excessively emotional and lacks reflexive thought*; the Indignados are nothing more than a discontent and reactive multitude that has apparently found new ways to express their dissent, but in the end they are victims of their own *spontaneity* and *disorganization*. Although they rage against the system, they don't know how to use their rage: “if emotion is appropriate to destroy, it turns out to be particularly incompetent to build anything. People of any class and condition meet in the squares and shout the same slogans. They all agree in what they reject, but a hundred different answers would be received if they were interrogated by what they want . . . emotion is inappropriate to configure something coherent and durable” (Bauman 2011, my translation).
2. The 15M is not only a *post-Fordist revolt* but also a *postmodern* revolt; it is only the *aesthetic representation* of a revolution in the middle of capitalism and its effects are more apparent than real. Only violence can break truly with capitalism: “without repression the protests are condemned, more than to the defeat, to ineffectiveness. This way, the *Acampada de Sol* turns into symptom of everything that is bad in our system and of the inability to reform it from within: a thematic park of the counterculture, as surprising or uncomfortable as an ambulant flea market” (Volpi 2011). Or in a more Leninist way: the Indignados are petite bourgeoisie, the discontent middle class struggling to reconquer the welfare state, not class revolutionaries. A vanguard party is needed to command the discontent.<sup>6</sup>

These forms of representing the 15M movement are not only false but also ignorant about their projects and their ways of organizing a plural antagonism. Despite the different nuances, the media representation tends to stereotype the Indignados as youth protesters, disorganized and non-political, thus forgetting that the movement is *intergenerational* and has created, since the day of its birth, a solid package of political measures against the crisis and the corrupted structures of democracy. The only way that the term “non-political” could describe the movement in a limited sense would have to do with their rejection of parties and trade unions. But this rejection should not be decontextualized from Spanish political life; the PSOE and PP—parties of the moderate left and the right, respectively—have proven that the only true politics under their terms is the neoliberal way: destruction of social rights, inequality, and extreme increases in unemployment. Their differences—important in past decades—have been practically erased by the technocratic homogeneity imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the European Union, and European financial capital.

6. See, for example, the press release of the PCPE about the 15M, insisting on Leninist forms of organization and criticizing the 15M as an interclassist movement: <http://www.pcpe.es/comunicados/item/268-sobre-las-movilizaciones-iniciadas-el-15-m.html>.

These parties' submission to capital and corruption have created a social feeling of betrayal in the people, forcing them to seek and build new institutions and common spaces in order to express their political aspirations. The same applies to the major trade unions: UGT and CCOO have been seriously criticized by the 15M because of their political co-optation (subventions, elitism, corruption, weak social pacts, etc.) as inefficient Fordist state apparatuses incapable of representing the interests of the actual multitude of the working classes. But these critiques made by 15M about the political structures of Spain do not make the movement's own projects either "non-political" or disorganized. The 15M movement—as we'll see later—is generating an alternative understanding of politics and social institutions by means of popular assemblies, webs of communication, and common knowledge production. The image in the media about the Indignados could not be more false and premeditated, built to discredit and—as we have seen recently—criminalize the movement.

On the other hand, many intellectuals have misunderstood the proposals and critiques of 15M, and the way they have tried to comprehend the movement is absolutely naive. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, with his opposition between emotion and thought, remains ideologically and sociologically blind; from his perspective, an understanding of the movement's roots and its dynamics seems to be impossible. Bauman simply projects the "spontaneity" of 15M's first days onto the development of the movement as a whole without knowing anything about its structures and common objectives. Besides, "indignation" is not only a reactive or negative "affective force" against political structures, nor is it a mere repulsing of the old order without ideas to transform society.<sup>7</sup> This indignation creates at the same time that it destroys; it has generated links of solidarity between the people, including collective deliberation and different social values to confront the crisis. Its rationality is dialectical: *negative*, because it is a radical critique of the post-Fordist society and individualistic postmodern values;<sup>8</sup> *positive*, since it puts into practice forms of immediate collective democracy and political actions that go beyond the status quo.

Though Bauman thinks the 15M does not have to deal with the individual/collective problem thanks to its assembly dynamic, conflict and difference are at the base of the assemblies, and assemblies are only mediums to produce dialogue and common

7. "Emotion is unstable and inappropriate to construct something coherent and lasting" (Bauman 2011, my translation).

8. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, postmodernism—as the "cultural logic" of late capitalism—involves the spheres of mass cultural production/consumption and also the sociocultural values of the people. Therefore, postmodernity produces political subjectivity because the workers and citizens of different strata live their everyday lives through its discourses, aesthetic appreciations, and ideological and affective standards. We can talk about a moment of de-differentiation inside society, in which the economic, cultural, and political structures start to blur its limits. The cultural sphere seems to be commodified from its roots thanks to an expansion of the society of consumption, and affectivity, creativity, and knowledge are—at the same time—subsumed by capital. The effects of this subsumption are the loss of temporality; consumption represents for the people an eternal and mobile present without direction except for capital's accumulation—the blurring of social and political references for individuals, including the concept of class—and a brutal commodification of their way of life. As we can see, it is the perfect "cultural superstructure" for neoliberalism, credit, and financial capital. See Jameson (1991).

perspectives about the projects and tasks to be realized. The diversity of individual opinions or answers to the crisis and the limits of representative democracy are not the “weak point” of the 15M; on the contrary, they are the source of the life of the movement because without conflict or dissent a consensus or a common political space cannot be forged. But there is another thing Bauman does not see because of his “emotional” point of view: the common production of knowledge and subjectivity. The Indignados are students, teachers, technicians, cognitive laborers, the unemployed, and workers of many other sectors and not simply the “masses” or the alienated sons of consumer society. They have abilities—intellectual, physical, affective, and creative—and they put these abilities into action to understand the social space and the national situation.

Intellectuals who think of the 15M as a postmodern revolt are also mistaken about what has occurred in Spanish society. Acampada Sol was not a mere “flea market” or “symptom” of the problems of late capitalism. The camped people posed a strong contradiction in the center of a capitalist city, transforming its heart into something totally different: a space of popular democracy. It is true, as Jorge Volpi says, that for many people the camping appeared only as a curiosity, but this is not an argument that can reduce the power of the *anomaly* the Acampada has represented. The everyday life of the capitalist city had to coexist with its other, and the effects of this coexistence are still alive in the assemblies of the towns and districts. The 15th of May and the occupation of Sol were not aesthetic representations but immediate collective actions, immediate democracy. With respect to violence, the pacific development of the “Spanish Revolution” has to do with a strategic and collective decision: the media belongs to public and private corporations which are deeply rooted in the system, and, because of this, violent behavior creates an image that will be criminalized by the media and, at the same time, will legitimize the repression of the police forces. In contrast, a pacific revolt delegitimizes the intervention of the police and repression, unveiling explicitly the structural violence of the system, thanks to the media coverage. This pacific action has revealed itself as more powerful than violence, increasing the social acceptance of the movement.

On the other hand, the “Leninist critics” of the Indignados are blind and hold a totally anachronistic point of view; the movement does not need an intellectual vanguard or a party to represent it because representation and elitism are precisely two of the problems of the Spanish situation. Their understanding of class conflict, as if we were in the nineteenth century or at best in relation to Fordism, does not help to understand the actual antagonistic currents but rather hinders this objective. The accusation of “petit bourgeois” thrown at the 15M or the use of the term “interclassist” as a pejorative adjective exposes clearly the dogmatism and some of the limits of certain communist formations in Spain; they can only think about class, society, or post-Fordism with old theoretical and political concepts: class as a homogeneous bloc, militants as an elite with the knowledge—the truth—to lead revolution, and the vanguard party as the hierarchical space of political decision. But from this perspective a solid knowledge of the actual contradictions and antagonisms cannot be produced, nor can an effective political opposition to capitalism and liberal democracy. The specter of Marx is not behind these parties, but the ghost of Stalin.

There are additional discourses that have tried to “represent” or to approach the Indignados movement, some of them opportunist (as, for example, the minority

conservative party UPyD) and others supporting their own causes like IU/PCE or IA. There have been dialogues because of the existence of similar objectives between several parties, trade unions (CGT, CNT), and the movement, but today the movement is still absolutely independent of parties or syndicates, affirming itself as horizontal, open, and assembly-oriented. On the other hand, many of the measures proposed by the 15M to overcome the crisis and the limits of democracy are more radical than the measures that the traditional left parties would accept, and this is an element of friction in the political conversations between the two sides.

### The Indignados: Conjunctures, Dynamics, and Objectives

Going beyond the ideological ways of representing the movement, we have to talk about the internal articulation of the 15M, its dynamics of action, and the content of its objectives inside Spanish social structures—that is, inside the Spanish political and economic conjuncture. If we were to describe the political situation of Spain at the moment of the revolt, we would have to mention three intertwined spaces of social tension. The first two are the constant privatization and impoverishment of social and public services—as a measure of austerity to confront the crisis—and the strong deregulation of the work sphere, two factors that increase the lack of protection for the most vulnerable classes. The third factor, in which the others are founded, has to do with the productive structure of Spain and its conversion into an orthodox neoliberal economy in the context of the European Union.

The two main sources of economic growth in Spain—from “*franquismo*” to our days—are the tourism trade and the construction and housing industry, with many growth/decadence cycles based on the overexploitation of the latter. With the acceptance by Spain of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and its objectives (reduction of public expenditure, inflation control, and deregulation of the labor market), Spain entered the neoliberal era, opening the door to the power of financial markets. This treaty sanctioned the antidemocratic structure of the European Union, the liberalization of the central banks, the separation of capital from political and national controls, and the triumph of capital—especially in its financial form—against workers’ rights. The second great explosion of the construction and housing industry in democratic Spain (2000–2007) created apparent generalized growth for the country, but it was founded in the complete indebtedness of the local economies by means of credit stimulation. As Isidro López and Emmanuel Rodríguez (2001) have said (quoting Robert Brenner), in Spain we have witnessed an “asset-price Keynesianism”: to increase economic growth and raise consumption, economic policies offered credit at a low interest rate, something very attractive for the middle classes and even for people with low income. This policy encouraged households to invest in financial assets that generated an incredible—and artificial—growth of wealth, feeding the wheel of credit. However, Spanish salaries were frozen, and the policy of reducing public expenditure started to destroy some working-class rights; in other words, this policy allowed capital to create a “wealth effect” that produced the false appearance of generalized prosperity, generating a type of passive consensus in Spain. When the “subprime crisis” started in the United States in 2007 and all the markets were



collapsing, the credit crunch harshly affected the Spanish economy and its construction industry. This industry was the motor of the national economy, the source of speculation and benefit, and when credit fell all the economy was shocked and the construction bubble exploded. The result: indebted homes, banks in need of rescue, uninhabited houses, bankrupt companies, and a sense of panic in all economic sectors.

From 2008 to 2011, the crisis increased its effects on the Spanish economy, and moderate left parties like the PSOE began to implement neoliberal measures to overcome the crisis. Known in Spain as “*recortes*,” the plan was to reduce public expenditure at all costs, destroying the public healthcare and education and transforming the rights of workers into nothing; under discussion was the promotion of formative contracts until the age of thirty (poorly remunerated), low-price dismissing, lower unemployment benefits, trash employment, more flexibility, etc. The 15 May movement began in this context, with the tension of the announcements of more neoliberal measures and an aggressive labor reform made for the satisfaction of markets.

The great demonstration of 15 May responded to this critical situation, articulating inside it the protests of all the collectives and individuals affected by the crisis and directed against the neoliberal offensive of the dominant classes. As I have said above, two days later the 15M began to take the structure of a great assembly, self-organizing all the antagonisms that had participated in the demonstration on the 15th. But this articulation process—wide and fast—has to be understood not as an incredible *événement* but as the result of the experience of the collective antagonisms acquired by many during the last ten years in Madrid and other parts of Spain. When we say different “collective antagonisms,” we try to point to the coexistence of several movements with ideological compatibility (though not always): for example, *okupas*, radical trade unions (CNT), republicans of the Left, libertarian communists, LGBT groups, social democrats, leftist students, and so on. Associations in defense of human rights, the right of a public education, or a decent healthcare system also participated in the revolt. Despite this “leftist” appearance, many people without clear ideologies or with only partial or reformist perspectives integrated into the demonstration and the movement. But the experiences of these groups revealed themselves as definitive in the composition of the 15M: without multiple collectives with assembly experiences or experiences of horizontal organization, the development of the movement would have been more difficult and slow.

The first thing that attracts our attention is the diversity of political ideologies involved in the 15M, the heterogeneity that constitutes the movement. If we want to think about the Indignados as a political subject, we have to abandon some Fordist topics or commonplaces about what makes a revolutionary subject or, at least, a subject of antagonism. For example, we cannot adequately think about the Indignados with classic terms such as “unified class consciousness” or “vanguard”: these two concepts are in need of a third, “the party,” the real subject of the political transformation in other moments of the class conflict. But the concept that allows articulating a unified “class consciousness,” “vanguard,” and “party” is the necessary mediation of political “representation.”

The 15M rejects all forms of classical representative policy, considering such as unnecessary to transform the conditions of existence. We have to change the classical perspectives in order to enter and understand the proposals of the Indignados.

Opposite to a homogeneous “class consciousness” we can talk about the “common production of class/political consciousness,” instead of “vanguard” we have to think in terms of “plural and horizontal leadership,” and in place of “party” we must put the “assembly.” The concept that substitutes for “representation” is “participation.”<sup>9</sup> Although this is a schematic presentation, it is a good point of departure to understand the internal structure of the movement.

What does the “common production of class/political consciousness” mean? Following E. P. Thompson, we can say that classes only exist through struggle and that struggles create classes. Class is not a static positivistic category; class is made of experience, different types of habitus, historical memory, and sociopolitical objectives.<sup>10</sup> Of course, class is linked to the mode of production, but we cannot

9. The John Holloway-Enrique Dussel debate, one of Latin America’s most important political discussions, may illustrate some differences between representation and participation. Holloway presents a well-founded critique towards the state as a capitalist space, submissive to the logic of capital below a perverse liberalist mask. The state is not a tool for the classes and social groups in struggle, the state is another enemy to beat because it tends to reproduce the logics of hierarchy, control, and social exclusion. We have to think of other ways to organize society. Dussel, however, criticizes Holloway’s point of view with a more moderate Gramscian perspective. Without the state, we will give all the power to capital because neoliberalism seeks the destruction of all public institutions. We have to create nonliberal institutions to unify the people in a process that seeks to arrive at direct democracy. Participation in the state is, for Holloway, a betrayal and an impasse for social movements; a critical approach that tends to participation—and not only to representation—seems to be Dussel’s choice. These two ways of thinking are present in the 15M, which is maybe nearer to Dussel’s point of view than Holloway’s. The problem in the Dussel perspective—and this is a problem of the 15M too—is that creating new institutions, including the state, presupposes both a true regeneration of democracy and massive social participation. And this also requires a radical transformation of the society of consumption, capital, and people’s ways of living. A general abstract of the Dussel-Holloway debate can be seen at: <http://gacetahumanidades.blogspot.com.es/2012/03/dialogo-entre-el-john-holloway-y.html>.

10. *Class* is not a *static category* of analysis; it has to be understood as a *historical and social process* constructed by *agents* and different kinds of *pressures or conditions*: mainly economic and political but at the same time ideological and cultural too. Conflict between people and social pressures creates class in the truest sense, that is to say, in a political and cultural way. Consider, for example, that sources of income, salaries, types of occupations, or inequalities in access to consumption are not the best elements to define class. Class, as Karl Marx said, is rooted in the mode of production, in the way surplus value is produced and distributed inside the society. The division of labor is, at the same time, the social division between owners and exploited people, a schism of inequality that gives birth to the first features of class. But this means that only class *an sich*—in itself—exists, not class *für sich*—for itself. Class, in a concrete sense, links the position of the productive force in the mode of production with the political and social organization of the workers, with their subjective dynamics and strategies to understand social conflicts and act through them. The common consciousness of these conflicts and the customs, ideologies, discourses, and cultural symbols of recognition create class, but only when they are embodied in practice by workers against capital. If we understand class as a concrete relationship between agents and conditions, and if we understand it as a process, not as a reified subject—with more or less willpower—or a static structural field, we can pass from an *abstract* concept of class to a more *concrete* definition. This means to *historicize* class and understand it as an overdetermined web of agency in the process of social reproduction and social struggle. For a selection of different positions in this classic debate, see Lukács (1971), Althusser (2005), and Thompson (1991).

understand class only in the ways different groups are positioned inside the productive sphere of society. We have to relate these positions to concrete struggles and warring subjectivities if we want to truly understand what is happening in society.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the 15M, heterogeneity created the movement, and this plurality of antagonisms is the true identity of the Indignados. Because of this, we ought rather to think of the 15M as a “mode of articulation” of different antagonisms that owes itself to a common methodology of political participation: the assembly.<sup>12</sup> The construction of a plural consciousness and the criticism of liberal democracy and capitalism have been elaborated in common by means of the tensions and differences among the several collectives that form the 15M, but finally arrive at a coherent program. It is true that social democrats and libertarian communists would not construct a consensus between them because of their different political approaches to capitalism. However, the assemblies have produced a shared program of criticism and objectives about which they agree. And the same happens with other factions of the movement.

A proposal like “adequate housing for everyone,” “free public education,” or “limits to financial capital” would be subscribed to by all the groups, be they social

11. For example, seminal Western Marxists such as Louis Althusser, whose contributions played a major role in the reformulation of Marxist epistemologies in the midsixties of the twentieth century, have assimilated the concept of classes to the more general concept of “productive forces.” In *Pour Marx, Sur la Reproduction*, and other texts, Althusser defines the concept of productive forces as the “sum” of the *means of production* (an object of work and the means of work) and *working forces* or *agents*. He suggests that the division of classes is rooted, as Marx said, inside the process of production and the process of work: the division of labor is not a problem of the technical division of work, but it is fundamentally a matter of class division. This is true, but in trying to understand what class is, this seems to be a very limited perspective. Althusser tends to “jump” from his structural definition of the productive forces inside capitalist production relations—agents here are only *träger*s of a process by their position in the mode of production—to the political field without a serious consideration of power, organization, or the culture of classes. And when Althusser tried to do something like this, he produced a semifunctionalist theory of reproduction and subjectivity. His theory of ideology cannot explain agency, political action, or revolution; only subjection and social reproduction are the focus. Maybe this is a handicap inherited from French structuralism and its *anéantissement* of the modern subject, but its effects are very profound in his theory. Class is not only a “structural effect,” but it is also a process of action, consciousness, and conflict. Nicos Poulantzas, who is with Étienne Balibar the best thinker of Althusser’s school, criticized in *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales de l’état capitaliste* the “economic” point of view in the understanding of social classes. Nevertheless, he thinks that class is a “structural global effect” of all the spheres of the mode of production, not only the economic one, and although he tried to focus on the political foundations of class, he fails to understand agency and subjectivity because he thinks about them only as an “anthropological” or “functionalist” problem. Class, as we have commented in another note, is an agency process involving history, cultural ideology, and political positions. Above all there is an organization of dissent and indignation through conflict, which is at the same time economic, political, and cultural. Without the embodiment of class in actions, organization, and consciousness, it would only exist in theory or *an sich*. See Althusser (1995) and Poulantzas (1982, 1978). See also, in a critical way, and near our own point of view, Meiksins Wood (1982).

12. To see different but complementary perspectives on this matter, see Cano (2012), Sainz Pezonaga (2012), and Moreno-Pestaña (2012).

democrats or communists. The first step for the movement is to arrive at some common ground about rights, demands, proposals, and perspectives (as an example: free public education). Later, this consensus will be discussed and materialized through the different actors and ideologies, taking finally a more concrete form that can be legitimized by all. Maybe dissent will arrive into some part of the process, but this is the way an assembly acts, and this is also the way to create class consciousness from a dynamic and participatory perspective. In other words, the unification of the proposal—the common program—cannot destroy the differences of the groups, and the program is always open to dialogue in an inclusive way. Thus, people do not need to assume a global identity or abandon their personal or collective dissensions; they can reopen dialogues to expose their opinions in the assemblies.

When we talk about “plural and horizontal leadership,” we try to point to the internal dynamics of the assemblies, their participatory articulation. There are only three different posts in the assemblies, and who fills them may shift from one assembly calling to another; anyone can perform them. One person gives the word to those people who want to talk, another records the matters of the assembly, and another coordinates and synthesizes the different opinions and discussions as moderator. Those who fill these posts are elected by the assembly as a whole, and the candidature and the dynamics of participation in the different matters of the assembly are free. Each one who speaks has to articulate in a reflexive way his or her proposal, observation, or opinion, sharing it with all the assembly. Every matter is dealt with in the same way: exposition, discussion, and consensus by deliberative democracy. This *modus operandi* allows people to take positions on the matter from a reflective perspective, reducing exclusion and fragmentation. There are no leaders but a radical collective democracy with a common production of decisions.

As we have said, the assembly and the movement are the “political subjects” of the 15M, and the ways they offer to participate in the political and social life of Spain are very different. The assembly brings cohesion and proposals, but the forms the results of the assemblies take range from legal reformism (proposing a new electoral law or a law for adequate housing by the collecting of signatures) to civil disobedience or collective demonstrations and other forms of social pressure. For example, there is a collective called PAH (Platform of People Affected by Mortgages) that opposes the seizure of housing properties. People unite in front of the home and do not allow the bank’s seizure, even if the police came to the property. This strategy of civil disobedience has been very effective, and the seizing of many properties has been stopped. Many people are working for a new law to prevent sequestrations and create a space of greater equality for families with debts and economic problems.

The assemblies have a different range of influence and act on a different scale: there are local (towns, districts) and big city assemblies as, for example, the Sol assembly of Madrid. There is no hierarchy: all the assemblies coordinate themselves with autonomy while seeking common objectives. Dissent is allowed and, as I have said above, it is the source of the movement. However, all the assemblies have participated in the national demonstrations, understanding that it is necessary to have a strong front to achieve common objectives. Some of these objectives are securing public education for all people, establishing a public healthcare system, reform of the electoral laws, the application of the Laws of Historical Memory,

formation of a true secular state, establishing a participatory democracy, recovery of privatized companies and services, reduction of the power of the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Spain, and adding strong limits to financial capital; all of these would be in the program of a social-democratic party, but the way the different collectives understand the sense of “participatory democracy” allows them to create a productive tension, going beyond the classical institutions of the state.

### Conclusion: Limits and Challenges of the Spanish Revolt

As Marx said, talking about Spanish institutions in the time of Bonaparte, it seems that the Spanish state, involved with capital and indebted, is dead while the multitude is alive on the streets “overflowing with powers of resistance.” The emergence of the Indignados in these times of crisis has suggested a hope for the majority of the Spanish people and the possibility of a democratic regeneration of the country. The actual acceptance of the 15M as a part of Spanish society is very significant, having increased since the beginning of the movement. Even so, there are many conflicts and contradictions inside the 15M, and some of these could be a problem for the future. I will talk about these contradictions, challenges, and possible difficulties at my own risk, knowing that maybe I do not have enough reflective distance to do it.

I will divide my schematic observations among three different spaces: limits, challenges, and perspectives. First, limits: until now, the demands of the movement have followed a very reformist path. This has been a good strategy to create cohesion among many social groups on the Left but is insufficient to overcome the roots of the Spanish crisis: capital and liberal democracy. While the dynamics of immediate democracy within the movement are a way to transcend the formal limits of Spanish political institutions, until now we have not seen alternative institutions that can compete with actual state apparatuses. The assemblies need increased popular support and participation to create a shift in power relations; fortunately, it seems that people are reacting.

Another limit of the 15M movement has to do with the term “political.” Obviously, the Indignados have a political project, but their unwillingness to participate in classical representative ways is at the same time an advantage and a handicap. We have seen the advantages mentioned by their radical critics, but the movement is handicapped, for example, in its ability to be traditionally legitimized by the people and to have a known discourse in Spanish society, and thus in its ability to lead in towns, cities, or the country. Likewise, parties and trade unions (although many of them are corrupted) have powerful organizations, and if the movement is politically blind to them, it will be a serious problem to create a strong front of struggle. The difficulty here is in achieving common ground because these institutions have been criticized from the first day by the movement, and there are inevitable suspicions. But this effort has to be made or there will be insurmountable limits.

As I have mentioned before, one of the main challenges is the creation of a hegemonic bloc with parties that support 15M’s objectives, a support that will be conditioned by pacts, elections, and maybe concessions in the radicalism of the

movement. This last element might be problematic because concessions and “cohesion programs” to congregate the multitude could lend themselves to forgetting the roots of the crisis, and the strong criticism put forth by the movement could perish, absorbed by the bureaucratized parties. Still, many “party people” believe this has to happen at the end: a regeneration of institutionalized democracy. We will see. Maybe political radicalism will triumph over traditional institutions.

If I turn to perspectives, the only thing I can say is that we will experience a rise in social conflict in the next years because of the conditions of the Spanish debt and the neoliberal politics of the PP government. The 15M is a good way to articulate protests, but the movement is in need of allies to generate a powerful opposition to capital. Pacts—not concessions—with several parties could be one answer, but we have to know that many of these pacts will be poisoned, like democracy in Spain. A new hegemonic bloc has to be created on the left; the problem is how to do this? Reform or revolution?

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