

Rebellion of the indignant. Notes from Barcelona's Tahrir Square

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Contents

- [Indignant](#)
- [The spirit of anti-globalizati](#)
- [Towards the future](#)

There is no doubt about it. The wind that has electrified the Arab world in recent months, the spirit of the repeated protests in Greece or the student struggles in Britain and Italy, the mobilizations against Sarkozy in France... has come to the Spanish State.

These are not then days of "business as usual". The comfortable routines of our "market democracy" and its electoral and media rituals have been abruptly altered by the unforeseen emergence in the street and public space of citizen mobilization. This "rebellion of the indignant" worries the political elites who are always discomfited when the people take democracy seriously... and decide to start practicing it for themselves.

Two years ago, when the crisis which broke out in September 2008 took on historic proportions, the "masters of the world" experienced a brief moment of panic, alarmed by the magnitude of a crisis they had not anticipated, through their lack of theoretical instruments with which to understand it, and feared a strong social reaction. Then came the empty claims of a "refoundation of capitalism" and false mea culpas that little by little evaporated, once the financial system was underpinned and in the absence of a social explosion.

The social reaction has been slow in coming. Since the outbreak of the crisis, social resistance has been weak. There has been a very large gap between the discrediting of the current economic model and its translation into collective action. Several factors explain this, in particular, fear, resignation before the current situation, scepticism with regard to trade unions, the absence of political and social reference points, and the penetration among wage earners of individualistic and consumerist values.

The current outbreak did not, however, start from scratch. Years of work on a small scale of alternative networks and movements, initiatives and resistance of more limited impact had kept the flame of contestation alive in this difficult period. The general strike of September 29m 2010 also opened a first breach, although the subsequent demobilization by the leaderships of the CCOO and UGT and the signing of the social pact closed the path of trade union mobilisation and furthered if possible, the discredit and lack of prestige of the biggest unions among combative youth and those who have launched the camps initiative.

Indignant

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“Indignation” so much the fashion through the pamphlet by Hessel [the former French resistance fighter Stéphane Hessel], is one of the ideas that define the protests which have started. Here there reappears in another form, the “Ya Basta!” of the Zapatistas in their uprising of January 1, 1994, then the first revolt against the “new world order” proclaimed by George Bush senior after the first Gulf War, the disintegration of the USSR and the fall of the Berlin wall.

“Indignation is a start. One is outraged, rises up and then one sees” said Daniel Bensaïd. Gradually, however, we have passed from discomfort to outrage and from that to this mobilization. We have a true “mobilized indignation”. From the earthquake of crisis, the tsunami of social mobilization develops.

To fight more than unease and indignation is required, we must also believe in the usefulness of collective action, that it is possible to overcome and that all that has gone before is not lost. For years the social movements in the Spanish State have essentially known defeats. The lack of victories which show the usefulness of social mobilization and increase the expectations of the possible weighed like a heavy slab on the slow initial reaction to the crisis.

Precisely at this point the great contribution of the revolutions in the Arab world to the ongoing protests has registered. They show that collective action is useful, that “Yes we can”. That is why they, as well as the less covered victory against the bankers and the political class in Iceland, have been a reference point from the beginning for the protesters and activists.

Along with the belief that “this is possible”, that things can be changed, loss of fear, in a time of crisis and difficulties, is another key factor. “Without fear” is precisely one of the slogans most heard these days. Fear still grips a large majority of workers and popular sectors and leads to passivity or xenophobic and unsympathetic reactions. But the 15M mobilization and the camps expanding like an oil slick are a powerful antidote to fear that threatens to dismantle the schemes of a ruling elite at the forefront of an increasingly delegitimized system.

The 15M movement and the camps have an important generational component. Each time a new cycle of struggles breaks out, a new generation of activists emerges, and “youth” as such acquire visibility and prominence. While this generational and youth component is essential, and is also expressed in some of the organized movements that have been visible lately like “Youth without future”, it must be noted that the ongoing protest is not a generational movement. It is a movement of criticism of the current economic model and attempts to make workers pay for the crisis which is fundamentally weighted towards youth. The challenge is precisely that, as on so many occasions, the youth protest acts as a triggering factor and catalyst for a broader cycle of social struggles.

The spirit of anti-globalization returns

The dynamism, the spontaneity and the thrust of the current protests are the strongest since the emergence of the anti-globalization movement more than a decade ago. Emerging internationally in November 1999 at the protests in Seattle during the WTO Summit (although its antecedents go back to the Zapatista Chiapas uprising in 1994), the anti-globalization wave quickly came to the Spanish state. The consultation for the abolition of the foreign debt in March 2000 (held the same day as the general elections and banned in several cities by the Electoral Board) and the big mobilization for

the summit in Prague in September 2000 against the World Bank and the IMF were the first signs of this, particularly in Catalonia. But the mass movement really arrived with the demonstrations against the World Bank Summit in Barcelona on June 22 and 24, 2001. Just ten years later we are witnessing the birth of a movement whose energy, enthusiasm and collective strength has not been seen since then. It will not, therefore, be a nostalgic tenth anniversary. Quite the contrary. We are going to celebrate it with the birth of a new movement.

The assemblies now in Plaza Catalunya (and, indeed, all the camps around the state beginning with that at Sol in Madrid) have given us priceless moments. The 15M and the camps are authentic "foundational struggles" and clear signs that we are witnessing a change in cycle and that the wind of rebellion is blowing again. Finally. A true "Tahrir generation" emerges, as did before a "Seattle generation" or a "Genoa generation".

Through the "anti-globalization" impulse across the planet, following the official summits in Washington, Prague, Quebec, Goteborg, Genoa and Barcelona, thousands of people identified with these protests and a wide range of groups from around the globe had the feeling of being part of a movement, of the same "people", the "people of Seattle" or "Genoa", sharing common objectives and feeling part of the same struggle.

The current movement is also inspired by the most recent and important international reference points of struggle and victory. It can be situated in the wake of movements as diverse as the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia and the victory in Iceland, placing their mobilization in a general struggle against global capitalism and the servile political elite. In the Spanish state, the 15 M demonstrations and now the camps, in a simultaneous example of decentralization and coordination, generate a shared identity and symbolic membership of a community.

The anti-globalization movement had the international institutions, WTO, World Bank and IMF and multinational companies in its line of fire. Later, with the start of the "global war on terror" proclaimed by Bush junior, criticism of war and imperialist domination acquired centrality. The current movement places as its axis the criticism of a political class, whose complicity and servitude to the economic powers has been more exposed than ever. "We are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers" read one of the main slogans of 15M. There is criticism of the political class and professional politics and criticism, not always well articulated and consistent, of the current economic model and financial powers. "Capitalism? Game over".

Towards the future

The future of the 15M initiated movement is unpredictable. In the short term the first challenge is to continue to build on the existing camps, set them up in cities where they do not yet exist and ensure they continue at least until Sunday May 22. May 21, the day of reflection, and May 22, election day, will be decisive. In these two days building the camps at a mass level is essential.

It is necessary to also consider new dates for mobilization, in the wake of 15M, to maintain the rhythm. The main challenge is to maintain this simultaneous dynamic of expansion and radicalization of the protest which we have experienced in the last few days. And in the case of Catalonia, look for synergies between the radicalism and desire for a change in the system expressed in 15M and the camps, with struggles against public expenditure cuts, particularly in health and education. The camp in Plaza Catalunya has already become a meeting point, a powerful magnet, for all the more dynamic sectors in struggle. It has become a meeting point for resistance and struggle, for building bridges, facilitating dialogue, and propelling future demonstrations. Establishing alliances between the protests under way among unorganized activists, and the alternative trade unionism, the

neighbourhood movement, neighbourhood groups and so on, is the great challenge of the next few days.

“The revolution starts here...” was the claim yesterday at Plaza Catalunya. Well, at least a new cycle of struggles is beginning. So there is no doubt already that, more than a decade after the rise of the anti-globalization movement and two years after the outbreak of the crisis, social protest has come back to stay.

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