

Indignados Movement (15M) (Spain)

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The Indignados movement was a protest movement that emerged in Spain in May 2011 as part of an extensive cycle of contention against austerity policies, the corruption of political authorities, and the democratic deficiencies of the Spanish political system. In turn, the mobilization of the Spanish Indignados was set in the context of a transnational wave of protest against austerity and for democracy, in which diffusion they played an important role. The massive mobilization of the Indignados attracted international attention and their demands obtained overwhelming public support. The movement consequences have been important at different levels. The rise of the Indignados caused a change in the domestic field of social movements with the emergence of new contentious actors and the strengthening of existing ones. Participation in the movement contributed to the spreading of values linked to deliberative democracy among the citizenry. Mobilization also contributed to a symbolic reframing of the causes and consequences of the economic crisis. The emergence over time of new political parties linked in some way to the movement has led to an important change in the Spanish party system.

The Spanish Indignados are also known as the 15M movement because of the protest marches that marked their origin, organized simultaneously in various cities on 15 May 2011. The protest was organized by an online platform called Real Democracy Now which was created ad hoc on the occasion of the local and regional elections to be held a week later. In Madrid, some of the protesters decided to continue the march by blocking traffic in the center of the city with a sit-in. After confrontations with the police, which ended with numerous arrests, a group of 40 people remained in the city center square of Puerta del Sol for, among other reasons, solidarity with those who had been arrested. From this gathering, an assembly arose with the idea of creating and maintaining a permanent camp, which started to grow around the emergence of various committees dedicated to maintaining the camp and the logistics of the assembly process, as well as various working groups dedicated to generating discourse related to the emerging mobilization. Support for the protest grew both on the internet and at Puerta del Sol and other squares in Spain, where other camps were being set up. The camp in Madrid was disbanded a month later, following internal discussions and pressure from the authorities.

Crises and opportunities

The 15M movement emerged in the context of a deep economic and political crisis. The social impact of the Great Recession was heightened by austerity measures that many citizens believed to be wrong. The socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero first denied the very existence of the economic crisis, and then implemented moderate countercyclical fiscal stimulus measures against it. In May 2010, the government changed strategy in order to adopt a number of severe and unpopular neoliberal policies, including cuts in the pension system, civil servants' salaries, assistance to people with disabilities, and the state's public investment.

The Spanish government adopted these and other austerity measures under pressure from market speculators and electorally unaccountable institutions, such as the European Central Bank. The process of structural adjustment was strongly contested on the streets. The online platform Real Democracy Now took the opportunity offered by the local and regional elections of May 2011 to express on the streets the citizens' dissatisfaction with the political authorities, criticized for their inability to address the economic crisis while at the same time being immersed in major corruption scandals. Distrust of the political parties extended to other political institutions at the local, national, and supranational levels, as reflected in public opinion polls. A large proportion of the Spanish population perceived the democratic system as deficient and demanded a change to allow citizens to become more involved in decision-making processes. The lack of confidence in the political system did not result in a widespread attitude of apathy and political alienation. In fact, interest in politics and trust in politicians followed opposite trends: institutional disaffection increased, but the detachment of citizens from politics did not, as shown by the massive political participation in street politics.

Frames and identities

The slogan of the protest marches on 15 May 2011 (“We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers: Real Democracy Now”) identified a social problem (the commodification of citizens) and those responsible for this problem (political and economic elites, in coalition to defend their own interests), while pointing out a possible solution (more participatory democracy). The protesters' calls included a number of basic citizenship rights – access to housing, employment, culture, health, education, political participation, among others – that political elites had neglected while they were prioritizing the interests of powerful economic actors. The messages on the placards carried by the Indignados in this and subsequent protests largely reproduced this frame while underlining the context of crisis, which was not only an economic crisis but also a political one, of an institutional system that facilitated corruption and hindered the emergence and development of alternatives to neoliberal policies.

The Indignados demanded more efficient political participation and channels of deliberation. These claims were also related to the degree of control that economic structures exercise over political decision-making. Slogans such as “they don't represent us” or “they call it a democracy, but it isn't” were used to criticize the democratic model established during the Transition as a “low-intensity democracy” (Arribas 2015): a system whereby elites fight to safeguard the privileged position of the main political parties and trade unions while limiting the participation channels of civil society.

The construction of easily identifiable actors responsible for particular grievances combined in the Indignados' mobilizing message with an inclusive “we,” made up of “personas” instead of “activists” or “*militantes*” – terms usually associated with the “old way of doing politics” that was based on ideological or partisan affiliations (Perugorría and Tejerina 2013) and the auto-referential dynamics of traditional social movements. Inclusiveness was a fundamental value for the Indignados, who exercised it in a somewhat novel way in their networks and actions. Firstly, the inclusiveness that they promoted was not targeted at those who were already part of the movement – in order to establish mechanisms that would ensure their inclusion in the decision-making process – but rather at potential participants. Secondly, the Indignados developed a less rational, more affective sense of inclusiveness – one that was not so much oriented to the decision-making process, but rather to the transformation of public spaces into

an arena that is also open to empathy. This expanded sense of inclusiveness then spread to other movements, such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States.

Forms of action and organization

The profile of the Indignados was heterogeneous, although more women, the unemployed, and young people participated than in previous protests (Anduiza, Cristancho, and Sabucedo 2014). They employed a wide repertoire of protest methods with massive assemblies and relatively long *acampadas* (encampments) in city centers at the core of their actions. While protest encampments are a well-known tactic in Spanish contention (Adell 2011), the Indignados' innovation lay in placing them in the center of the cities as well as in their (massive) size. They also organized huge marches characterized by the absence of flags and symbols related to political parties, unions, or other organizations, thus reproducing a common practice of local autonomous social movements (Flesher Fominaya 2014). In addition, they called for frequent mass gatherings, often in seats of government and political parties. These sometimes turned into impromptu marches. Albeit less frequently, the 15M movement also used other forms of action, both conventional and confrontational. Conventional actions included: petitions on issues ranging from the refusal of government decrees to limiting privileges for political elites or support to activists under arrest; legal actions in defense of detainees and against politicians and bankers accused of corruption; and the creation of cooperatives and consumer groups. Confrontational protests included: the occupation of buildings to create housing and social centers; sit-ins in banks and government offices; and disruptions in bank branches, which activists accessed by posing as customers and where, once inside, they organized creative and humorous performances. Indeed, the Indignados' repertoire included dramatized actions with a strong expressive component. While nonviolence was one of the pillars of the Indignados, activists occasionally participated in clashes with the police after some marches, mass gatherings, and blockades.

The assemblies organized by the Indignados in the *acampadas* and elsewhere follow the model of "empowered deliberative democracy" practiced by the global justice movement (della Porta 2013). Over time, the assemblies moved from the central square of the cities to the neighborhoods. The so-called Neighborhood Assemblies reproduced the model of *acampadasol*, forming working groups and committees. These assemblies varied widely, and little coordination existed between them. With decentralization, the number of participants progressively dwindled.

The Indignados movement in a transnational perspective

The Spanish Indignados found inspiration in the Arab Spring that since the end of 2010 had been shaking a number of regimes across the Mediterranean. They had clear evidence of the efficacy of the collective action carried out by the Arab protestors, especially in Egypt. The diffusion of this agency component of collective action frames took place through the publicity the protest received in the media and online networks. Diffusion from Egypt to Spain also included forms of action: the Spanish activists replicated the general form of the protest in Egypt, occupying the main square of the city with the aim of achieving a certain permanence.

In turn, the Indignados were a source of inspiration for protests in other countries (Baumgarten and Díez García 2017). In particular, they had a significant impact on Occupy Wall Street's understanding of itself as an expansive, inclusive, and empathic phenomenon (Romanos 2016). A group of Spanish residents in New York City created a network which connected with local activists and joined them in a series of mobilizations which prepared and anticipated the Occupy Wall Street movement, including the New York City General Assembly. Local activists regarded the Spanish immigrants as the representatives of a powerful mass movement, which facilitated the dialogical diffusion of innovations for the organization of a similar movement in the United States. Spanish immigrants focused on helping the diffusion of a broad and affective concept of inclusiveness aimed at achieving the participation of the vast majority of the population. Once the occupation took place, they helped to spread the methods of supporting and giving meaning to the occupation, that is, the way of organizing deliberation and activity in the camp so that it was an operative space capable of attracting potential followers and maintaining active participants in the creation of networks and projects. They did this through their participation in the assemblies and the elaboration of mobilizing frames as well as the translation and dissemination of materials elaborated by the Indignados in Spain.

The dialogue established between Indignados and Occupiers was a transnational process of diffusion in which the Spanish immigrants mediated between different activist cultures. The practices being diffused from Spain to New York City were part of a long-standing movement culture drawing from diverse movements' legacies within a local activist tradition. Learning these practices in a social context as different as the United States was a complex process. The Spaniards engaged in an uneasy dialogue with local activists that allowed the adoption of innovations in the new settings. The diffusion process amplified the original collective action from the creation of a new mobilizing frame that went beyond the domestic context of action to be shared by other movements in other countries.

Consequences

The Indignados' mobilization provoked an important change in the domestic field of social movements. The movement's local assemblies moved from major cities to smaller neighborhoods and towns, and with them proliferated collective self-management initiatives such as consumer cooperatives and food banks. The period of intense mobilization initiated in May 2011 also facilitated the recruitment of a large number of people into the activities and organizational structure of previously active social movement organizations such as Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH; "the platform of those affected by mortgages"). The Indignados movement adopted the protests against evictions as its own and used its networks to give visibility to calls for action over the housing problem. Over time, other actors emerged, such as citizens' monitoring platforms for the scrutiny of institutions, elected representatives, and economic elites (Feenstra and Keane 2014), and the different "tides" against policies of privatization of public services, especially health and education.

These more specific actors managed to maintain high standards of mobilization until mid-2013 (Portos 2016), when a decline in protest began, coinciding with the emergence of new political parties which are, in one way or another, related to the movement. The exhaustion produced by the lack of results led some activists to reconsider the possibility of participating in the institutions, and in 2014 new political parties emerged driven by some of

these activists. Taking advantage of the opportunity structure offered by the delegitimization of the traditional bipartisanship, Podemos burst onto the scene in the European elections of 2014 and, a year later, various council platforms such as *Ahora Madrid* and *Barcelona en Común* took over the mayors' offices of the main Spanish cities. While in the case of Podemos (as with Syriza in Greece), the party imitated or incorporated organizational aspects of the movements, the local platforms were the transformation of the social movement in the form of movement institutionalization (Martín 2015). Among other measures, the new councils implemented open government systems which, designed by or in collaboration with “tech activists,” involved in the Indignados movement, were based on participatory and deliberative concepts of democracy in which citizens can raise and discuss proposals (Romanos and Sádaba 2016).

The Indignados' mobilization did not provoke major material transformations in Spain's political economy, although it contributed to a symbolic reframing of the crisis and its effects. In particular, mobilization politicized various economic-political issues that remained outside the public agenda or were considered technical issues. This repoliticization of the political economy has revitalized public debate around the causes of and solutions to problems such as housing, inequality, or debt, presenting them as what they effectively are: distributive conflicts. At the national and regional levels, the most relevant outcomes may be the incorporation of social inequality and poverty into the public agenda, which is perhaps a modest indirect effect of mobilization. Activists who became popular candidates and were able to gain access to positions of political power after elections made an important effort to remunicipalize privatized services (water, garbage collection, and funeral homes, among others). However, the result of these attempts – fiercely fought by affected companies and right-wing parties – has been modest and in no case has provoked a profound alteration of strategic economic sectors.

The Indignados' mobilization also had unintended consequences. Despite the fact that law and order were not among the main public concerns (as reflected in public opinion polls) and that the increase in the number of protests did not result in violence, in March 2015 the conservative government passed a new internal security law and a new criminal code extending the range of punishable behavior in the context of demonstrations, increasing the severity of the punishments and reducing the procedural guarantees. It was not only human rights organizations that criticized this criminalization of protest. Police trade unions joined them, denouncing the vulnerability of both the citizens and the police officers, who lacked judicial support and the training to apply the new norms adequately.

SEE ALSO: Anti-eviction Mobilizations (Spain); Arab Spring; Democracy and Social Movements; Diffusion and Scale Shift; Movement Parties; Occupy Wall Street Movement; Political Economy and Social Movements; Protest Cycles and Waves.

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