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Beyond the Square: The Legacy of the 15-M Movement

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One of the most significant social movements of recent times, Spain's "Indignados" or "15-M" movement took to the streets in 2011 to reclaim the country's democracy and politics from bankers and self-interested politicians. In her book, *Democracy Reloaded: Inside Spain's Political Laboratory from 15-M to Podemos* (Oxford University Press 2020), Cristina Flesher Fominaya tells the story of the movement. Here she discusses why it was so successful in building connections and networks, and how it revitalised democracy in Spain and infused a new generation with the desire to shape their politics.

Green European Journal: How can we summarise the core aspiration of the 15-M movement that activists rallied around and where it led to?

15-M demanded "real democracy now", as our current forms of government were not working. That slogan set in motion a process of experimentation around what real democracy should look like, such as democratic imaginaries and democratic innovation repertoires. They gathered thousands of proposals from citizens, many of whom were probably thinking about the issue for the first time in their lives. What is more, in their narrative, the democratic deficits were linked explicitly to austerity politics. They were pointing out that the ways in which the management of the economic crisis was based on political decisions, it was not the abstract, automatic, economic happening it was sold as. They were emphasising that you cannot bail out private banks with public money and then leave the people whose money that is to starve, lose their homes, or commit suicide.

The movement managed to shift the narrative of austerity politics away from blaming individuals for overspending and put the blame on the lack of political oversight and regulation of financial organisations, the easy credit, and the ridiculously lax conditions under which people were given loans. It developed a huge amount of social capital within Spain, revitalised pre-existing movements, and created and generated numerous new connections, movements and alliances. The movement also transformed the electoral landscape and created space and opportunity for the progressive Podemos to emerge – a party which is now a junior partner in government. In that sense, it also had an enormous influence on other movements all over the world. And I must admit that those movements were not always the ones we would sympathise with. For example, it opened space for some right-wing movements to rejuvenate and revitalise – but obviously that is an unintended consequence of the movement that it cannot be blamed for.

How defining were the economic and political circumstances of the early 2010s in the rise of the 15-M movement and the way that it developed subsequently?

I think there would not have been a 15-M movement had there not been a global crash and the incredible impact that had on people's lives. This made people receptive to the movement's messages. Having said that, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the movement to emerge. Crises are happening all over the world all the time, without the emergence of sustained mobilisations against them. That takes a huge amount of energy, skill, and organisational resources.

When I talk about organisational resources I mean the resources of autonomous movements – social movement networks that contain within them a tremendous amount of experience, knowledge, and capital. In the Spanish case, these movements had already been mobilising for decades against global capitalist organisations, decisions, and logics. They were able to repurpose that in the context of a major crisis and mobilise a lot of those resources and practices, but also the thinking and imaginaries, in a new way, and to attract many young people in doing so.

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What would you say were the defining features of the movement?

The movement was based on a tradition that is known as *asamblearismo*, or assembly-based movement organising which is the hallmark of all autonomous movements in Spain. It encompasses movements working on a wide range of issues – including feminist, environmentalist, non-violent and anti-militarist movements, as well as conscientious objectors, anarchists, squatting collectives, and so on. Over time, all movements of this kind developed a practice of horizontal, non-hierarchical organising that favours direct action. The occupation of space was crucial to the 15M movement developing in the way that it did.

This co-existence and co-experimentation around the central problematic of democracy were crucial elements for new connections to be made between people. In addition, the occupation of urban space also served as a site of collective learning. A lot of people fail to understand the amount of pedagogical work that went on in that square. When people first arrived, they just saw what looked to them like chaos but there were information points they could go to and then they would be integrated and shown how to participate in an assembly. I had an interview with an activist in his 70s who described to me the process of going down to the square and being introduced to all these ideas after a lifetime of staying on the margins of politics. He later became a leader and spokesperson of one of the older people's groups. When women in the square were coming up against a lot of sexist attitudes, they also got together and engaged in a lot of pedagogical work around feminism and explained why it must be at the core of any democracy.

Can you describe the process by which the movement extended its momentum beyond what was happening in the squares?

The plan for after "the squares" was how to keep a horizontal movement going even if people were no longer physically occupying the centre of Madrid, Barcelona, or other cities. In the case of Madrid, there was a lot of debate about how that should be organised. There was a fallback to some of the ways of organising in the global justice movement and there were some tensions between different models of how that organisational infrastructure should happen and which forms it should take. The attempt to organise more along institutional left-wing assembly politics was not as successful in sustaining itself.

What was more successful was a more organic revitalisation of pre-existing networks that were fragmented before 15-M but subsequently became more consolidated and operated with the same

assembly-style logic. They were trying to organise the movement in a very “organisational” way – in terms of a model of organisation with defined relationships between organisations and committees. This worked for a while.

Then, there were more autonomous, horizontal types of organisations that were using the squats and occupied social centres of Madrid to organise – as they always had done but now with a lot more energy, connections, and experience as a result of the learning experience in the squares. That is a whole process that continues and carries over into unions, into different so-called “citizen tides”, such as the public health sector or the educational sector. They fought against precariousness, privatisation of water, and many other austerity measures. That was really powerful and that was also a way for the movement to permeate the institutions – but not electorally.

Does this development also relate to the emergence of Podemos?

In my book *Democracy Reloaded,* I say Podemos is in a way a precursor to 15-M, not just an outcome of it, because the people who were involved – such as Juan Carlos Monedero and Pablo Iglesias but also many others who were involved in the origins of the movement – really laid the groundwork for 15-M in terms of the public debate. They were already raising consciousness and producing very strong counterhegemonic narratives about the crisis and about austerity and democracy before 15-M ever happened.

Already in 2010, they were producing videos and running political talk shows. They had a local TV station and were also very present on the internet. Many people began to watch them and download their content. So they were highly influential even before they had a plan to try to establish any kind of a party. Once they saw how powerful the citizen mobilisation was, they decided to take advantage of this opportunity.

How did the counterhegemonic narrative reach the wider population?

The narratives were developed on multiple channels. There were, for example, some groups like *Juventud Sin Futuro* [Youth Without Future] who were very strategic about their language and really thought a lot about their campaigns, their slogans, and ways of communicating. Then, there were lots of other people who were just part of the zeitgeist and who were absorbing and generating this sense of outrage. They were also picking it up from beyond Spain: at the time, the Arab Spring and the Icelandic Pots and Pans Revolution were all extremely influential, as was WikiLeaks.

In any time of great mobilisation there are always people who are particularly talented at articulating these counter narratives. Ada Colau was extremely powerful. She went to testify in the parliament and called the person who was testifying on behalf of the banks a criminal. It went viral. Millions of people watched that video. Then, someone like Pablo Iglesias is an extremely talented orator – he is very successful at making his point. He was getting invited onto many political talk shows, even mainstream and right-wing talk shows, and people were noticing and watching. He kept getting invited back thanks to the logic of capitalism, because the audience share would go up when he was on. That leap to mass media is also a quantum leap in terms of the number of people a movement can reach with its narratives.

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What is your assessment of Podemos today?

There are two different elements that we could evaluate the party on. One would be on its internal democracy – which they did not manage well. So many people who put their energy and love into the project at the beginning were lost as a result. Maybe that is inevitable with a project of that nature, but certainly I think they could have handled internal divisions much better. In the book, I discuss the internal critiques from the movement to the party as the party developed and made a series of decisions that ended up consolidating a particular leadership and an organisational permanence but at the cost of a lot of people leaving the party along the way. Of course, when you lose those people you also lose their support, their resources, a certain amount of plurality and expertise….

Having said that, it is also true that there has never been a party in Spain, maybe anywhere, that has been so relentlessly attacked by media, by the judiciary, by politicised, spurious lawsuits, lies, defamation and pressure. Every other party was so wrapped up in being terrified of this new threat that during some elections the only campaigning message the other parties had was “not Podemos.” They had nothing to offer the Spanish citizenship other than to label this new party a dangerous bogeyman. The fact that Podemos managed to withstand these attacks for as long as they did and still tried to engage with movements, to fight for so many of the demands of those squares, is still remarkable.

It is also remarkable how they managed to create a party with so little in the first place. It started with very few people and so they had to convince others to come on board this project. It was a lengthy process because it is a horizontal movement and it is also an anti-partisan movement. People often say it’s anti-politics but it has never been an anti-political movement. It’s profoundly political but it’s anti-partisan which is totally different and has long been a hallmark of autonomous movement organising. Autonomous spaces have always welcomed people from different parties as long as they leave their affiliations at the door and regard themselves first and foremost as members of the assembly. To go beyond this, they had to do a lot of discursive work and networking, and they did that really effectively.

How do you see the future of progressive politics in Spain? Today the political atmosphere feels very different, yet there are also new faces appearing on the Left who seem promising as unifying forces.

For me it is impossible to predict what is going to happen. There is a lot of enthusiasm about Yolanda Díaz. She wants to leave Podemos behind, reinvent the movement, but I would question what is genuinely new in her programme. She has done important things in the past, but it’s uncertain whether she could offer a project that is going to mobilise or bring together the Left.

I am not optimistic about Podemos either. They have done some really good things as part of the government which I think has been really crucial for Spain and for people’s welfare; and now the party has a new leadership with some really good people, but still I do not think that they necessarily have the charisma that the media requires for contemporary politics to carry the day electorally. I also think people are quite burned out.

Overall, how do you assess the long-term impact of 15M on politics in Spain?

I think one of the most important ideas from the movement was this idea that citizens should participate in politics and that they should be consulted. As a result, all the political parties – even the most

conservative political parties – began consulting their militants, opening up, and becoming more participatory.

Another area where 15-M has had a big impact is on municipal politics. We had movement-related figures and coalitions governing the major cities of Spain from the elections in 2015. I think that was a tremendous influence. How long-lasting that will be, I do not know, but there was a period where they showed things could be done differently. They showed that it is possible to take care of people, have strong social welfare and cleaner cities and all without huge budget deficits – in fact they reduced them drastically in Madrid. It shows that efficient allocation of resources and debt reduction is compatible with a strong social welfare agenda. I think, any time you show that things can be done differently and better – that is always a good legacy to leave behind. That is undoubtedly the legacy of the movement because none of those people would have been elected or even thought of going into politics without the mobilisation of 15-M. But the most important legacy is an entire generation of new activists who were politicised in the squares.

Cristina Flesher Fominaya is Professor of Global Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark, where she heads up the Deminova Lab for democratic innovation and social movements. She is Editor in Chief of the journal *Social Movement Studies*, and co-founder of the open access social movements journal *Interface*. Her three most recent books are Democracy Reloaded: Inside Spain's Political Laboratory from 15-M to Podemos (Oxford University Press 2020); Social Movements in a Globalized World 2nd Edition (Palgrave Macmillan/ Red Globe 2020) and The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary European Social Movements: Protest in Turbulent Times (2020).

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