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Debunking Spontaneity: Spain's 15-M/*Indignados* as Autonomous Movement

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Abstract

The Spanish 15-M/Indignados have drawn global attention for the strength and longevity of their anti-austerity mobilizations. Two features have been highlighted as particularly noteworthy: (1) Their refusal to allow institutional left actors to participate in or represent the movement, framed as a movement of 'ordinary citizens' and (2) their insistence on the use of deliberative democratic practices in large public assemblies as a central organizing principle. As with many emergent cycles of protest, many scholars, observers and participants attribute the mobilizations with spontaneity and 'newness'. I argue that the ability of the 15-M/Indignados to sustain mobilization based on deliberative democratic practices is not spontaneous, but the result of the evolution of an autonomous collective identity predicated on deliberative movement culture in Spain since the early 1980s. My discussion contributes to the literature on social movement continuity and highlights the need for historically grounded analyses

that pay close attention to the maintenance and evolution of collective identities and movement cultures in periods of latency or abeyance in order to better understand the rapid mobilization of networks in new episodes of contention.

Keywords::

Anti-austerity protests global justice movement Indignados/15-M Spain deliberative democracy

collective identity autonomous movements spontaneity movement continuity movement culture

genealogy

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Notes

- ¹. Indignados is a term used by mass media and by which the movement is known outside Spain; activists refer to themselves as 15-M, arguing both that ‘indignant’ does not even begin to describe their anger, and that it overlooks other emotional responses, such as hope and solidarity. I therefore use Indignados initially as a descriptor before reverting to 15-M.
- ². Other characterizations of this cleavage in the political science literature have used the terms left-libertarian versus left-authoritarian.
- ³. This disillusionment was widespread in European autonomous movements, leading to the creation of alternative autonomous parrallel ESFs, again illustrating the autonomous/institutional left cleavage in the European social movement landscape.
- ⁴. The focus of her argument rests on the strong similarities between the practices she witnessed in Barcelona and those she experienced elsewhere. However, the peculiarities of local practices are downplayed although they emerge in the narrative – the particular emphasis on the need for ‘consensus’ for example which has long been a

feature of movement culture but much less salient in Madrid than in some other contexts.

- ⁵. Movimiento de Resistencia Global or Movement of Global Resistance.
- ⁶. But is typical of activist narratives in the Spanish context which are often marked by a sense of inferiority with respect to other contexts, stemming from the fact that Spain 'missed' many of the social movement experiences of the 1960s and 1970s due to the dictatorship. It is true that this hampered the absorption of deliberative practices that flourished elsewhere during this period, but only strengthens the importance of local and national deliberative traditions in the Spanish context in the post-transition period.
- ⁷. Assembly practices can be traced farther back, to anarchist practices before Franco, for example although continuity is harder to prove.
- ⁸. A 2001 book on methods of asamblearismo practice states that the turno de palabra can be modified to favour those who either have not spoken or have not intervened in a long time, and to allow people to respond if they have been 'alluded to' (Lorenzo Vila & Martínez López, [2001](#), p. 57). Despite the availability of the book at social movement events, its recommendations were not widely adopted at the time.
- ⁹. 20-21 December 2003 Ciudad Real (La Mancha).
- ¹⁰. Autonomous assemblies are in principle open to all, but as individuals, not as members or representatives of parties or unions.
- ¹¹. Interview with 'Txema' in Madrid 2002.
- ¹². The two first points of the manifesto produced by the (15-M/DRY) general assembly in the Puerta del Sol on 20 May 2011 were a change in the Electoral Law to open lists and a one person one vote system, and that the fundamental rights stipulated in the Spanish Constitution be upheld: the right to a decent home, to universal and free healthcare, to free circulation of people, and to a public and non-religious education. Acampada Sol ([2011b](#)).
- ¹³. See 15-Mpedia http://wiki.15m.cc/wiki/Lista_de_pol%C3%ADticos_imputados for those charged; see http://wiki.15m.cc/wiki/Lista_de_pol%C3%ADticos_condenados for those found guilty. 15-Mpedia is an activist-run project with excellent sources.
- ¹⁴. Citizen network for the abolition of foreign debt.

- ¹⁵. The idea of a consulta with questions generated from the grassroots is also the basis of a recent 15-M project called the autoconsulta:
<http://autoconsulta.org/mutaciones.php>.
- ¹⁶. Indeed the chants of the 15-M crowd with their hands in the air of ‘These are our weapons’ (Estas son nuestras armas) is a common one at mass protests in Spain, signifying non-violence.
- ¹⁷. Translation from Spanish by author.
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Additional information

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