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New Protest Movements and Social Networks: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution – the Spanish Situation

In Spain we have experienced a great increase of new protest movements since the ‘Spanish Revolution’ of May 2011. Here, I would like to summarise why this movement emerged, its characteristics and evolution. Moreover, I will focus on the main protest groups today and the main principles they apply to influence government policies and to be a solution to our society’s problems.

Tired of austerity measures and social cutbacks, people in Spain rose up on May 15th with a great demonstration previous to local elections expressing a feeling of outrage against our political leaders’ incapacity to find a solution to the ongoing crisis experienced in Spain since 2008. One hundred thirty thousand people took to the streets all around Spain and many peaceful protesters decided spontaneously to camp overnight in the famous Plaza del Sol (nearby Plaza Mayor, where our politicians were having a “relaxing cup of café con leche”). The ‘@Acampadasol spirit’ blossomed that day after the police violently evicted the protesters earlier that morning. Camps spread all over the country as a wave of civil unrest independently from the original organizers “Real Democracy Now”. This new protest movement brought together more than five hundred social associations. Social networks played an essential role in such a large support and had a huge impact on Spanish and international society.

The Spanish Revolution instigated by the so-called “Indignant ones” enjoyed wide support from Spaniards in many European cities like London, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Paris or Berlin. Afterwards, this international support movement became native as European protest groups realised that the Spaniards complaints and demands were applicable to their own countries and affecting the whole European Union.

15M was the main protest movement in Spain and catalyst for citizens to take part in demonstrations and get involved in political issues when they never did before. I would like to explain the specific characteristic of this movement and its participants.

- **Why did 15M and their camps emerge in Spain?** The 15M movement exploded in an atmosphere of deep social discontent in the context of a serious economic crisis, which had resulted in strong disaffection with politics. Its supporters believed that traditional political parties responded to private interests instead of to those of citizens. In fact, the political establishment is considered the second biggest problem after unemployment by the Spanish people. People participating in 15M were tired, fed up and outraged for many different reasons: a 21% unemployment rate (the highest in the European Union), precarious jobs, mortgages issues, restrictive access to credit for small and medium companies, cuts in education and healthcare systems, austerity, decline of democracy and corruption). We can assure that 15M camps were inspired by the “Arab Spring” mobilisations, especially by the peaceful camp at Tahrir Square in Cairo. These camp movements were mainly driven by emotion; the feeling of taking part in something entirely new encouraged participants to work together to organise camps and meetings.

- **Who did take part in 15M?** The “Indignados” was a diverse and heterogeneous movement, but what we all had in common was that we were tired of the political establishment’s incompetence to find solutions for the crisis, to defend the welfare state and its inherent social rights as well as the environment and the state of democracy. One of 15M’s key achievements was to bring together individuals spontaneously: we did not have a common objective neither a clear agenda nor leadership. It is worthwhile mentioning that the majority of participants was not used to actively take part in social or political movements. Many people attended to show their support or just out of curiosity. The protesters had an average age of 30 (though there was a wide range of age groups with a strong presence of people between 45 and 55 years) The majority of people were employed and highly educated. 15M movement brought together a diverse range of ideologies but it never wanted to be identified with any them nor any political party.

- **15M lessons:**

- 1.- 15M consolidated a great capacity for coordinated mobilisation and some of its demands got to the core of the political agenda at that moment.
- 2.- 15M made it clear that the state had to change its rhetoric of powerlessness: The government justified the adopted measures as an unavoidable requirement from the markets, EU partners and other economic international organisations. This fact erodes the state's legitimacy and its representative system.
- 3.- 15M revealed the need for social movements, political parties and trade unions to make changes change in their practice and strategies in order to encourage social participation and represent the citizens.
- 4.- 15M emphasised the key role of emotions and creativity in the creation of collective processes, however, we can question the capacity of these movements to provide political answers.

Social networks in protest movements:

The social networks play a catalyst, dynamising and liberating role as a place for freedom and social autonomy outside from markets control. (On the other hand, however, this virtual way of protest makes people to act at home rather than take to the streets protesting collectively.) The camps of the Indignados gradually dissolved and 15M meetings moved to neighbourhoods but slowly the intensity decreased, leading to the creation of new civil protest associations and platforms that became stronger and more popular.

As a consequence of these new protest movements citizens internalised a sense of community and solidarity regarding any type of social injustice, like the evictions that many people in Spain are suffering. People do not feel alone, a civil assistance is acting together to be stronger and reach more targets. People are fighting against the individualism that neo-liberalism promulgates.

Finally, I would like to sum up the current main protest movements in Spain, their characteristics and achievements:

- **Affected By Mortgage Platforms and Stop Evictions:** These platforms are active all over Spain against evictions: volunteers congregate in front of the house of an evicted family and occupy bank branches to obtain payment in kind.
- **Tides/waves:** Social services have created tides with different colours, white for Healthcare or green for Education as a way to express their protest against social cutbacks. They are organising several ways of protest: occupy hospitals, strikes, demonstrations, flash mobs, etc.
- **Anti-fracking and explorations movements:** Spain is suffering waves of fracking and oil explorations projects. Affected populations are working together in order to achieve their community to be declared "free of fracking".
- **Platform for a new energy model:** The current Spanish government is implementing abusive electricity taxes and blocking renewable energies. This platform's latest success is the European Commission's appeal against the legitimacy of a new law that sets a self-consumption toll.
- **Neighbourhood associations:** they are increasing their field of action and becoming a cohesive tool for the neighbours.

Today, there is a trend towards the creation of a unified platform for the different protest movements including social associations, trade unions, minor political parties and citizens in general, like the so-called Critical Block and Citizen Tide. The intention is to work together to achieve a stronger social pressure. Unfortunately, unification is not possible because of the wide range of ideologies, instability of emotions, mistrust and internal fights between political parties and trade unions, etc. The inability to reach a common understanding makes it difficult to generate the changes in our institutions, parties and democracy which are necessary to improve the crisis situation and social distress in Spain.

Conclusions

After explaining the current situation on the protest movements since the origin of 15M in Spain, I would like to propose several principles, which these movements should apply in order to be able put real pressure on authorities and a useful tool in the hands of people in order to regenerate the present system:

1. The movements need to have a clear goal and use realistic methods. Their lack of realism discredits these movements, as people may feel that they are wasting their time and the initial excitement could gradually evaporate. (My last participation in 15M Granada consisted of a debate at midnight on whether we should decide to abrogate the Spanish Constitution or not).
2. Citizens and associations have to use all participation tools available; politicians are not going to change their ways easily, so we have to force them by working together and getting involved ourselves in politics could be a useful way.
3. Protest movements should be unified to be able to create a social majority that fights together for a common objective. Social movements need to show leadership in order to organise a non-divided and multitudinous demonstration as this would have more social and international impact. In fact, organisations in EU Member States should work together because many are suffering under austerity policies, especially Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.
- 4.-Social networks are one of the main tools we have today, so it is necessary to use them properly. We have direct access to information and it is a perfect way to get a massive demonstration.

To sum it all up, the 'Spanish Revolution' or 15M woke Spaniards up making them aware that the power of change lies in our hands, if we are capable of working together and setting clear goals. The feeling of belonging to a community has increased leading to the expansion of co-operativism. More and more citizens are organising themselves cooperatively such as consumer groups and groups working on ethical banking or energy. I am convinced that if we stick to these principles we could create a social majority that could provide a solution to the problems that southern democracies are suffering from and create a more united and citizen-based society.

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