Street Politics in the Age of Austerity
Nez, Pascale, Dufour, Pascale, Ancelovici, Marcos

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Nez, Pascale, et al.
Street Politics in the Age of Austerity: From the Indignados to Occupy.
Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66548.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66548

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2361901
Part 2
The Practical and Spatial Dimensions of Activism
The movement of the Indignados in Spain began on 15 May 2011 – hence the name ‘15M movement’ – following a demonstration organized by several collective bodies united under the Real Democracy Now platform. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in several Spanish cities to denounce the social consequences of the economic crisis and the way in which their government was managing that crisis. What also mobilized the Indignados into action was their indignation over the failures of the representative political system and of the capitalist economic model. At the end of the demonstration, a group of young people stayed and camped on the Puerta del Sol, a symbolic square in the center of Madrid (itself the center of Spain). The group stayed for almost one month as a self-managed encampment that organized public assemblies. The movement then branched out into other neighborhoods of Madrid, eventually expanding to a national scale with encampments multiplying on the squares of numerous city centers.

This chapter is about the articulation of the different scales of action – local, national, and international – within that mobilization. Even if the Indignados’ claims mainly concerned a national framework, their critique was also directed at the global level: their protests often included denunciations of the excesses of global finance and neoliberal capitalism. They therefore rapidly sought to internationalize their action. At the same time, they decentralized their assemblies to the scale of the neighborhoods and gradually narrowed down their activities to concrete and local issues. To sustain their mobilization for the long term, the Indignados then developed decentralized forms of organization as well as territory-oriented concrete actions, following the example of the struggles against home foreclosures. As they rejected the electoral avenue to bring about political change, they had to find places of action that would allow them to beef up their mobilization.

I wish to thank Marcos Ancelovici, Sophie Béroud, Pascale Dufour, and Albert Ogien for their comments. This chapter was translated from the French by Patrice Cochet-Balmet with funding from CITERES.
and to record first victories. The context of social emergency surrounding the nascent mobilization also meant that they had to achieve solid results so as to be credible and to continue the fight, since “the organisations of social movement fighting against precariousness must prove their usefulness to be able to rally the sympathy, let alone the commitment, of those whose cause they claim to defend” (Mathieu 2007: 248).

This process of locating collective action has often been neglected by sociologists studying social movements, who generally focus on the relationship between the activists and the state – in a context where its role was growing – or on the transnational character of contestation (Voss and Williams 2012). It has, however, been the subject of recent analyses regarding in particular the global justice movement and the collective action in Latin America. Merklen and Pleyers write that “numerous local movements and actors have placed their hopes in transforming at the local level, seeing there an appropriate framework to improving their life conditions and the quality of the social connections” (2011: 25). Voss and Williams also look at “how social movements have shifted their repertoire of practices from large mass events aimed at marking demands on the national state to local-level capacity building that seeks to democratize the local state and create parallel democratic spaces” (2012: 354). This renewed interest in local issues can be attributed to the recent shifts that have taken place in social movements, especially from the national scale towards more targeted action and from the working world towards other, more diversified social issues. Merklen (2008) has detailed how, since the 1980s and increasingly since the economic crisis of 2001, the neighborhood in Argentina has become a privileged location for building solidarity and cooperation in the face of weakening union affiliation and reoriented social policies. And Pleyers (2011) demonstrated how the failure of the indigenous movements in Mexico to negotiate with the government and have an alternative candidate elected prompted them, from 2001, to focus on the construction of alternative societies on a local scale. Can we see a similar evolution in the case of the Spanish Indignados and if so, what are the factors behind it? How do social movements actually shift from collective action on national and global claims towards more concrete and local modes of action? What debates are fuelled by that location of mobilization among the participants, and what consequences does this have on their representations of policy and collective action?

My analysis is based on field research conducted in Madrid since the end of May 2011. I observed firsthand the dynamics of the encampment, the general assemblies, and the committees and working groups meetings set up by the Indignados in not only Puerta del Sol but also several
neighborhoods (more than seventy meetings in total). I also took part in some ten demonstrations and other activities organized by the Indignados: cultural events, conferences, and direct and/or symbolic actions against home foreclosures and in banks. I mingled with the crowd during major gatherings, jotting down notes and shooting the scenes I was observing. Some of the smaller groups sometimes enticed me to take the floor and commit myself as an activist. In an ethnographic approach, I integrated mutual knowledge networks in a Madrid neighborhood (Carabanchel) and a town of the south suburb of Madrid (Parla). For this chapter, I have relied on my observations during the movement’s activities combined with informal and semi-directive interviews with some fifty Indignados. I also used photography as a memorization medium on a par with the field diary (Conord 2007). My analysis is finally based on my documentation work on the written, photographic, and audiovisual productions of the movement.

A chronology of the Indignados movement will enable us to understand how the movement has transformed with the passing of time. The idea is to decipher the modes of action and the commitment logics underlying both main watchwords: ‘Toma la plaza’ (‘Take the square’) and ‘Toma los barrios’ (‘Take the neighborhoods’). The movement’s first step involved large-scale national demonstrations, encampments on public squares, and assemblies with thousands of participants in the town centers. From the beginning, the Indignados have demonstrated a strong will to internationalize their mobilization. The second step was the decentralization of the movement to the level of the neighborhoods and the shift towards local and concrete issues, which enabled the Indignados to record their first victories but which also revealed the limits of localized action. One year later, due to the declining participation of the neighborhood assemblies, the Indignados began developing new strategies at the national level which emphasized the complementarity between the different levels of intervention.

Encampments in the City Center and Large-Scale Demonstrations

The first phase of the Indignados movement, which received the most media attention, only lasted from May to June 2011. Following the example of Puerta del Sol, encampments multiplied on the central squares of several Spanish cities. The Madrid encampment itself did not last more than one month. Established on the evening of 15 May, it was disbanded on the initiative of the Indignados on 12 June after fierce debates in the
Puerta del Sol general assembly. In spite of their relatively short duration, these encampments had a considerable influence on the 15 May movement, more specifically on its forms of organization and internal democracy. In this first phase of the movement, participation was the most large-scale and the most heterogeneous, bringing together people who were already militants (mainly organized young people, especially in the autonomous movements, who decided to set up camp on the first evening) and others belonging to older activist generations or those still not accustomed to collective action, who joined the encampment in massive numbers in the following days. To explain the different facets of the first phase of the mobilization, I first analyze the claims of the demonstrators and discuss the democratic practices set up during the encampment before turning to the internationalization strategy of the movement.

Demonstrating Against a Faulty Political and Economic System

The 15 May demonstration, the starting point of the Spanish Indignados, was not initiated by conventional organizations such as trade unions or political parties but rather by collective bodies formed on the Internet (as well as certain older groups such as Attac-Spain) and who transmitted the call to action through social networks. In their first press release on 1 March 2011, they described themselves as “representatives and militants of several groups, blogs and platforms [...] united under the common designation ‘Platform of coordination of groups for citizen mobilisation’”.2 The call to action emphasized the global dimension of contestation (“To be able to show, as in many other countries around us, social discontent on the increase”) and linked the claims to the national context by denouncing the perverse economic and political system at the origin of the crisis in Spain:

After several years of crisis and absolute inanity of the Spanish political class, [...] a multitude of movements organised by citizens finally took shape with a basic point in common: to denounce the severe deficiencies and the injustices of the current economic and governmental system, and to demand a real democracy.

---

The motto of the 15 May demonstration – “Real democracy NOW. We are not commodities in the hands of the politicians and bankers” – underlined the responsibility of the “political and economic powers” to address “the hardship befalling the citizens”. The initial claims of the movement thus addressed two levels – mainly national but also international – and highlighted the responsibilities of the political system as well as the economic model in the social crisis affecting Spain. At the political level and in the national context, the ‘they’ in the motto “They do not represent us” referred to several organizations. The main targets were the government and the party in power (the Socialist Party or PSOE), which were deemed unable to provide satisfactory responses to the economic crisis, as well as the right-wing opposition (the Popular Party or PP) which promoted the same austerity policies. Both these entities were generally grouped under the expression “mainstream parties” and contemptuously dismissed in the quip ‘PPSOE’. The Indignados also denounced the two-party system as well as the electoral laws that promote bipartism in Spain. The position of the Indignados as regards the smaller parties such as Izquierda Unida (‘the United Left’) was more ambivalent: some considered them a genuine alternative, whereas others failed to distinguish between these smaller parties’ local management and the political agreements they made with the mainstream parties. The parties were not the only ones to be accused; individual political officials were also denounced on account of numerous cases of corruption linked to real estate speculation. The manifesto of ‘Real Democracy NOW!', which called on Spanish citizens to demonstrate on 15 May, denounced the role of elected officials in the economic crisis:

In this case, most of the political class does not even listen to us. They should aim to carry our voice to the institutions, [...] not to get rich and to succeed with us, solely by obeying the dictates of the major economic powers and clinging to power.3

The mainstream trade unions – the Workers’ Commissions (CCOO) and the General Union of Workers (UGT) – were also targeted in the motto “They do not represent us”. Their credibility had been heavily damaged when they negotiated a controversial agreement on pension reform with the government earlier that year. In the public assemblies, however, the Indignados’ position on the unions was far more ambiguous than their stance towards the political parties, since several participants were union activists (Calle

and Candón 2013). A differentiation was thus quickly established between the “basic” or “combative” unions and the mainstream unions.

The denunciation of any form of political representation also extended to the neighborhood associations, albeit to a lesser degree, once the movement began decentralizing in Madrid. I thus observed fierce debates in neighborhood assemblies regarding their role in the 15M movement and their alleged distance from the people (Nez 2012). These criticisms should be understood in historical context: having acted as strongholds of the political contestation under the Franco dictatorship, they became the main interlocutors of the local public authorities with the return of democracy, and their action has gradually become institutionalized (Navarro 1999; Alguacil 2013).

The claims of the Indignados were not only part of a political context specific to post-dictatorship Spain, they could also be placed within an international framework. The outbreak of the real estate crisis in September 2008⁴ led to social consequences that were particularly painful in Spain. By the first trimester of 2011, the unemployment rate had skyrocketed to 21 per cent of the labor force, which amounted to nearly five million people. More than 45 per cent of those between the ages of 16 and 25 were unemployed – double the average in the European Union.⁵ Home foreclosures multiplied: 32,000 households were affected by foreclosure procedures between January and June 2011, i.e. an average of 175 per day.⁶ Given the brutality of this social crisis, the assemblies of the Indignados often denounced the responsible economic actors – banks, international rating agencies, financial markets: “I would like to talk about bankers, [...] they mortgaged our lives, they control everything, they successfully made us dependent on them. It was the most important problem in this country, together with the privileges of the politicians, we should get rid of all that!”⁷ The banks were thus targeted because during the years of real estate speculation they had sold overrated real estate and offered risky credit to numerous households who then became insolvent with the crisis. They also jeopardized the national economy to the point where the government had to step in and use taxpayers’ money to ‘save’ them. The bank rescue packages and the ensuing budget cuts were imposed or advocated by international institutions such as the European Union, the IMF, and the World Bank, which were also included in the motto

⁴ For an analysis of the economic crisis, see Ross’s chapter in this volume.
⁵ Data of the National Institute of Statistics.
⁶ Data of the General Council of the Judicial Power.
⁷ Observation at the general assembly of Carabanchel, on 28 May 2011.
“They do not represent us”. The Indignados denounced these measures, decrying the fact that they were adversely affected by them even though they had not voted for them.

In addition to the economic actors and the international institutions, the Indignados also focused their criticism on the capitalist model itself, as explained in their call to demonstrate:

The obsolete and anti-natural economic model in force blocks the social machine in a self-destructive spiral by enriching a few and plunging all the others into poverty and scarcity. [...] An ethical revolution was necessary. We have placed money above human beings, and we must put it back in our service. We are people, not market products.

The criticism against capitalism thus played a significant role in the Indignados’ discourse and in the emerging mobilization, a fact that has generally been neglected in the literature on social movements (Hetland and Goodwin 2013). However, surveys conducted in several Spanish cities (Calvo et al. 2011; Arellano et al. 2012; Likki 2012) demonstrated that the Indignados did not necessarily belong to the social categories most affected by the economic crisis: although students and the unemployed took part in the demonstrations, most participants had a job and a high level of education. Nor did the majority of the demonstrators belong to the most socially and politically excluded: only a few Indignados were involved in social or political organizations, but they voted more often than the average citizen.

**Camping and Getting Organized to Claim Another Democracy**

The rejection of conventional forms of political representation was a defining feature of the Indignados. The manifesto of the general assembly of Puerta del Sol stated that they were “free and voluntary people [...]. We do not represent any party or association.” One of the first messages of the Real Democracy NOW platform, published on the Kaosenlared.net site on 7 March 2011, already defined the movement as a group of individuals rather than a group of organizations: “We are calling upon all of you, as citizens, to take to the streets on 15 May [...]. We entice you to join us without the symbol of any organization”. Handwritten signs created by individuals multiplied on the encampment, whereas banners furnished by organizations were

---

8 See the introduction of this volume.
systematically withheld. This demonstrates that an individual aggregation rationale rather than a network rationale was at work here (Juris 2012). Some of these banners made references to the Spanish Civil War (see Photo 5.1: “We’re doing it for you, grandfather”; “Welcome to the Independent Republic of our square”). These references to the recent history of Spain illustrate that the contestation was originally part of a national context, even if it also entailed a more global denunciation of capitalism and international finance.

Photo 5.1  Memories of the Spanish Civil War

Skepticism of the representative political system went hand in hand with the Indignados’ claim to be implementing ‘another democracy’, a ‘real democracy’ based on the principles of self-management, deliberation, and participation open to all. The prominence given to the practices of internal democracy makes this movement stand out from other movements (Adell 2011; Nez and Gauza Forthcoming). The idea was admittedly not new, since the practice of horizontality and consensus had already been incorporated first by the anarchist and libertarian movements (Graeber 2009), then by the ‘new social movements’ of the 1960s-70s (Polletta 2002), before becoming one of the standard bearers of the alterglobalist movement in the late 1990s (Della Porta 2009). In Spain, the deliberative techniques used by the Indignados originated especially from the Okupa (‘squatters’) movement, who experienced them in the ‘self-managed occupied social
centers’ during the 1980s (Martínez and García 2012) and in the movement against the military intervention in Iraq in 2003 and after (Flesher Fominaya 2010). However, in the case of the Indignados, internal democracy was at the center of most debates and had acquired a new dimension: consensus was sought not only within relatively homogeneous activist microspheres or between organizations and movements that had to make compromises (as in social forums) but also between heterogeneous individuals seeking to produce common positions (Aguiton and Haeringer 2012; Nez and Ganuza 2015). As emphasized by Romanos: “The 15M promoted the transfer of the deliberative practices from more or less limited enclosures (for instance, the encampments, social forums or self-managed centers) towards the squares, and it seemed to constitute a significant difference” (2011: 9). At Puerta del Sol, the decisions were made in general assemblies, since the work was prepared upstream in more restricted groups: the committees dealt with the practical problems of that self-managed space (infrastructure, food, health, etc.), and the working groups (on economics, politics, education, etc.) prepared projects and propositions to change society. Common rules were gradually formalized, such as horizontality among groups, rotation of the speakers, functions in the assembly (moderating, taking turns to talk, and writing minutes), and consensus-based decision process.10

The themes addressed in the assemblies of the encampment were quite various, as reflected in the multitude of thematic working groups. From the onset, the participants tried to reach a ‘consensus on the fundamentals’ in order to respond in particular to the media denouncing their lack of program and propositions. Numerous debates addressed the vital necessity of such a consensus, which nonetheless eluded the movement for several reasons. The particularity of the movement lay in the absence of a program and a leader, and the internal divergences were significant due to the heterogeneity of the participants. One of the most acute conflicts addressed the movement’s relation to the political sphere. The working group on politics was from the onset split in two subgroups – one focusing on short-term policies and the other on long-term policies – which met on the same day at the same time on two different squares. The group on short-term policies sought to weigh in on public policies being considered at the national level. The members agreed on four propositions to try and improve the current system:

10 In addition, I have developed an ethnography of the deliberation and consensus at Puerta del Sol (Nez 2012). For a comparison with the practices of the North-American Occupiers, see Ancelovici’s chapter in this volume.
1) Reform of the electoral law for a more representative democracy, really proportional and developing effective mechanisms of citizen participation; 2) fighting against corruption through standards aiming to provide total political transparency; 3) effective separation of the three powers (executive, legislative, and judicial); 4) creation of citizen control mechanisms to demand real political responsibility.\footnote{Retrieved January 15, 2013 from http://madrid.tomalaplaza.net/2011/05/26/acampada-sol-consensua-cuatro-lineas-de-debate/comment-page-16/}

During this time, the group dealing with long-term policies focused on the mode of political organization to be achieved based on self-management and public assemblies as practised in the Puerta del Sol encampment. This group believed that there was no point in trying to influence the current political system and that to change it was the only way forward. Still, such a change could not involve the electoral avenue but instead would entail the promotion of local experimentations, such as the occupancy of buildings or the creation of cooperatives with the aim of developing an alternative economic model to the capitalist system. In an autonomous and libertarian vein, the objective was to construct a counter-culture opposing the dominant culture and to form ‘pockets of resistance’. The tension between the two groups was particularly acute on the issue of electoral participation: the first group believed it was possible to establish a series of propositions and to hold political candidates accountable on that basis; for the latter group, the idea was not to toe the line of a particular electoral program but to follow one’s own fighting program. A participant in the first social Indignados forum on 25 July 2011 proposed a middle way: “The 15M movement is so variegated that it could never become a political movement with a political program, but political allies can be contemplated who, using the institutions, might defend what the 15M stands for.” However, in the runup to the legislative elections of 20 November 2011, the Indignados not only refused to adopt a political program and to designate leaders, they also withheld from backing candidates or political organizations.

This rejection of the electoral path was confirmed during the general assembly at Puerta del Sol held on election day. The moderation and sound system team arrived at the square at 5.40 pm, ten minutes after the meeting was summoned, whereas the polling stations had not yet closed. After a quick negotiation with the police, the meeting was allowed to take place provided that no political party or candidate was mentioned by the
participants. The moderator opened the session by clarifying the position of the assembly: “As every Sunday, we celebrate democracy here. Today is election day and of course, no speaker will advocate voting for any party. We are taking care of our own business, as every Sunday, to change the world, for a fairer society” (field notes). The working group on the 20 November elections was the first to take the floor: “We shall continue after 20 November to give information, so that everybody understands the elections, the types of votes, and the electoral law. Not to tell whom to vote for, but to fill this information gap” (field notes). This working group, which had been meeting regularly since the summer, was having difficulty defining the movement’s position on the elections, as one of its active members was telling me at an assembly of the group which, two days before the ballot took place, was attended by more journalists than participants. No consensus could be reached; the only thing that could be agreed on was an informative role aimed at discouraging electors from returning a blank ballot (since that would strengthen the mainstream parties to the detriment of the smaller parties) and at advising them to either abstain, cast an invalid vote, or vote for the minority party of their choice. Individual initiatives sent a clearer message to the population, with several Indignados displaying, a few days before the ballot in Puerta del Sol, a photo of their face showing the sign of silence, with the following caption: “Vote and be quiet. They lie, they squeeze the budget, they steal. Unfair electoral law. Invalid or minority vote” (Photo 5.2).

**Seeking to Internationalize the Movement**

During this first phase, the movement’s global dimension was blatant and was expressed in two ways. First, the Indignados gathered at Puerta del Sol claimed to have been inspired by external modes of mobilization, mainly the Arab revolutions (to start with the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo) but also the more recent protests in Greece and Iceland. The signs installed on the square bore witness to these international sources of inspiration: the word ‘revolution’ inscribed in Arabic (Photo 5.3), a comic strip recalling the different steps of the mobilization in Iceland, and copies of a newspaper article entitled “Iceland is judging the first political official in charge for poor management of the crisis” (Photo 5.4). In the general assemblies at Puerta del Sol, the participants often referred to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, to the referendum by which the Icelanders refused to pay for the mistakes of the bankers, or to the demonstrations in France against pension reform in the autumn of 2010.
Photo 5.2 “Vote and be quiet”
Photos 5.3 and 5.4  International References to the Encampment

The Indignados immediately granted paramount importance to the international diffusion of their movement. An ‘international extension’ commission was set up during the first days of the encampment. Its role was to “connect Madrid with the other cities of the world” by diffusing the ‘model’ of the Puerta del Sol encampment throughout the world. This was achieved through the Internet, social networks, and direct contacts – via the Spanish diaspora and activists travelling – to New York, for instance (Romanos 2013a). This international diffusion of the model also involved translating the documents prepared by the general assembly at Puerta del Sol into twenty languages. In the general assemblies, the ‘international extension’ commission systematically gave news about encampments in other countries, even if this meant interrupting the discussions in progress.

At a general assembly on 29 May 2011, while debating whether to maintain the encampment at Puerta del Sol or not, the participants followed the evolution of the movement in Paris hour by hour. At the beginning of the assembly (8.30 pm), a spokesman joyfully announced that “the Bastille has been taken!” At 9.30 pm, a direct communication established by mobile phone indicated that the demonstrators were peacefully resisting the police forces’ attempts to disband them. Thousands of participants began singing: “Paris resist, Madrid is with you!” At 9.40 pm, a minute of silence was observed to support the Parisians subjected to police repression. In the evening, the ‘international extension’ commission also reported a large-scale demonstration in Athens as well as several support demonstrations by the Spanish and Latin-American communities in Brussels and in several German cities.

12 Intervention of a spokeswoman of that commission at the general assembly of Puerta del Sol, on 28 May 2011.
This determination to serve as a “symbol for numerous peoples in Spain and in Europe”\textsuperscript{13} explains why the encampment lasted close to one month at Puerta del Sol, even though some had suggested bringing it to an end after two weeks. The aim of prolonging the encampment was to support the other encampments that were being subject to repression, as expressed by one participant: “Good reasons have been put forward to lift the camp, all of them are reasonable. I have one only: 200,000 people in Athens, 20,000 in the Bastille [overestimated figures] who, at this very moment, are being arrested, and we should leave?!”.\textsuperscript{14} After the encampment was discontinued, the general assembly of Puerta del Sol continued to disseminate information about the international dimension of the mobilization by regularly giving the floor to foreign activists, for example from Morocco, Tunisia, Mexico (‘Yo soy 132’), or the United States (Occupy).

Decentralizing and Refocusing Collective Action on Concrete Issues

Another strategy was conducted in parallel to the internationalization of the movement: the tactic of decentralizing down to the level of the neighborhoods, carried out by the ‘neighborhoods’ commission. Although disagreements still remained among a portion of the campers, the most precarious who ordinarily slept on the street or in squares, the vast majority of the Indignados interpreted their abandonment of the Puerta del Sol encampment on 12 June 2011 as a change of strategy. “Nos vemos en los barrios” (“Let us meet in the neighborhoods”) was written on the large sign displayed that day on the entrance to the underground at the Puerta del Sol – a clear reference to the expression “Nos vemos en la plaza” (“Let us meet on the square”) used by the Indignados during the weeks of the Puerta del Sol encampment. The participants thus began singing the motto “Que no nos vamos, nos extendemos!” (“We are not going, we are growing!”). The idea was to anchor the mobilization at the local level so that it did not lose its momentum and to ensure the continuation of the movement by cutting it off from the necessarily temporary future of the encampment, as recalled by the moderator at the general assembly on 29 May: “The object of the assembly is to know what we are going to do with the encampment. One thing is clear: the movement continues, regardless whether the encampment continues or not!”

\textsuperscript{13} Observation at the general assembly at Puerta del Sol, on 29 May 2011.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
The Movement’s Decentralization

The first neighborhood assemblies were organized on 28 May 2011, after preparation by the ‘neighborhoods’ commission. This commission was adamant about making the extent of the movement’s decentralization visible at the Puerta del Sol encampment by indicating the neighborhoods and cities that had held their first assembly on a signpost (Photo 5.5). The Sol general assembly had earlier provided a methodological proposition to the neighborhoods in order to define common rules: “The object will be to promote in all the assemblies of the movement a horizontal, transparent operation, enabling everybody to take part on an equal basis.” The system of assemblies set up at Puerta del Sol was thus transferred to the neighborhoods and suburbs of Madrid. During the first neighborhood assemblies, the turnout was massive. According to the ‘Toma los barrios’ site, they were organized in more than 140 neighborhoods and suburb towns, drawing more than 28,000 participants in total.\(^\text{15}\) The first popular assembly in Madrid (APM), held on 29 May 2011, reflected these dynamics. The spokesman of each neighborhood was invited to sum up in two minutes the assembly of the previous night, but this meant that five hours were necessary for all the neighborhoods to take the floor. These physical encounters – as well as the madrid.tomalaplaza.net website, a common working platform (https://n-1.cc/), and the Facebook or Twitter social networks – ensured that the actions taken by the different neighborhoods and peripheral towns were all coordinated and harmonized.

The first assemblies focused on debating about their internal organization (setting the location, dates, and times of the meetings; defining working groups) and turning the global claims of the Indignados into action on the local scale. For instance, at the first assembly of the popular neighborhood of Carabanchel, in the south of the city, several lines of work emerged: housing, employment, immigration, education, and health. Concrete propositions were formulated with respect to each neighborhood’s specific situation: setting up picket lines at each redundancy scheme by a local company, opposing any home foreclosures, reclaiming available plots to create housing and social facilities, seeing to it that hospitals benefit the inhabitants of the neighborhood, fighting to prevent the closure of a public school, etc. The process of decentralization of the assemblies was also debated. The object was to articulate global ideas with concrete propositions on the ground so as to implement the maxim ‘Think global, act local’ which had already proved

\(^{15}\) Retrieved 08 October 2011 from http://madrid.tomalosbarrios.net/.
itself in the global justice movement. The Indignados thus found legitimacy
for pursuing their action. Participants, however, emphasized the limits of
that territorialized approach, for example in Carabanchel: “The problems
we have in the neighborhoods are common to all the neighborhoods. The
problem is the world in which we live. I believe that Spain and not only this
neighborhood should find solutions to its problems in this assembly”. Many
participants in these first assemblies felt there was a risk that the movement
would be confined to the local, thereby raising the issue of the relevancy
of a territorial organization to cope with problems whose origins are more
global than local, even if the repercussions were being felt on all levels.

This decentralization and implementation of action at the level of
the neighborhoods did not mean that the Indignados had given up on
their national and global strategy. First of all, the local actions, even
if they were specific to a territory, often corresponded to more global
issues. Focusing on the local scale did not mean restricting the move-
ment’s scope to the neighborhoods. The APM, for instance, strove to
have the neighborhood assemblies switch their actions to a larger scale.
As noted by Merklen and Pleyers: “The local anchorage of actors and of
mobilisations is absolutely incompatible neither with the national politi-
cal link nor with a projection of citizenship beyond the frontiers of the
state-nation. Besides, a local mobilisation does not always target a local
adversary” (2011: 31). Moreover, it does not exclude taking action at other
levels. The Indignados still wanted to claim international recognition,
as confirmed when they convened a global demonstration on 15 October
2011. The website dedicated to the event, translated into 18 languages,
specifies that the appeal was echoed in 1,040 cities in 90 countries.16 This
globalization of the movement was proudly displayed on the square in
the center of Madrid (Photo 5.6).

Another point is that even after the encampment was brought to an
end, the general assemblies were still held at Puerta del Sol, even if they
no longer took place daily but were held weekly. However, conflicts of
legitimacy emerged as soon as July 2011 between the neighborhoods and
the national organization of the movement, with participants’ loyalties
being pulled towards both sides. This tension was made apparent in the
first neighborhood assemblies, for example by this participant: “I cannot
be on the street everyday! We must prevent the dispersion from reducing
the dynamics of the movement. We still have many things to do at the

local level; we should not limit ourselves to major demonstrations.” It was reflected in the growing conflict between the general assembly of Puerta del Sol (originating from the encampment) and the APM (which co-ordinates the activities of the neighborhood assemblies). The former, which enjoyed significant media attention, continued to pass on major action watchwords to the neighborhoods, whereas the latter believed that the principle of horizontality and autonomy meant that the general assembly of Puerta del Sol should not be conferred more legitimacy than any other neighborhood assembly (Nez 2012). This conflict was also apparent in spatial terms: whereas both assemblies initially met at Puerta del Sol at flexible hours, the APM moved to Plaza del Carmen “because it was stealing the show from the general assembly of the Puerta del Sol” which held its assembly at the same time, according to a participant in an informal interview.

Photos 5.5 and 5.6  Showing the decentralization and the internationalization of the movement

Concrete and Local Mobilization Issues

The risk of demobilization as a result of these conflicts was partially curbed by the first victories recorded by the movement – victories that were made possible by decentralization. On 4 June 2011, at the end of the general assembly of Carabanchel, the 200 participants who stayed to talk on the square were tipped off that the police were conducting ethnic profiling at the Oporto metro station. By showing up in large numbers at the control location, the Indignados in effect caused the police officers to leave. The news of this ‘roundup’ of immigrants rapidly spread in the working class areas of Madrid, which proposed to repeat the experiment. Four days later,
a press release was issued by the Alucha neighborhood entitled ‘Message to the 15M: A small major victory in Carabanchel’:

That time, we were not alone, isolated, and defenceless. There were many of us, aware of being part of something bigger, of a still-growing movement, capable of large mobilizations and small gestures, such as that of Saturday, with a taste for victory.18

The Indignados thus put an end to several ethnic profiling practices being carried out in Madrid’s metro stations. The ‘effect of demonstration’ was also quite powerful when they prevented a home foreclosure on 15 June 2011: an appeal launched by the assembly of Tetuán, a working class neighborhood in the north of the city, was indeed echoed by Indignados from all over Madrid. From then on, appeals multiplied to prevent home foreclosures in every corner of the capital city. Connections were rapidly established between the different neighborhood assemblies and existing social organizations (such as the human rights defence brigades or the mortgage victims’ platform [PAH]) so as to take direct action against the main social consequences of the economic crisis: home foreclosures, ethnic profiling practices, closing of social services, layoffs, etc. Even if they did not change the political and economic system, these concrete actions guaranteed the continuation of the movement, as expressed by a sixty-year-old man at the general assembly of Carabanchel on 11 June 2011 in referring to the occupation of a home for the disabled that had recently been closed in his neighborhood: “We must register a victory, however small, to continue fighting.”

In all the neighborhoods, we also found concrete practices of social solidarity, like the organization of soup kitchens helping destitute and homeless people or the creation of barter exchange networks, mutual assistance networks, and time banks – whose aims were to exchange goods or free services in the surrounding environment. As analyzed by Ibarra:

This tendency of the movement to convert to a self-managed community – which rather characterises certain Latin-American social movements, whereas the ‘westerners’ only focused on the claim dimension confronting the public authorities – started to play a vital role in the 15M movement. (2013: 13-14)

The idea was not only to offer solutions to people particularly affected by the economic crisis but also to show that other exchanges were possible outside the market economy. This was the case with the small number of thirty-year-olds involved in the ‘action’ Parla commission who in February 2012 submitted their proposal of extending the barter trade network that they had initiated locally. They initially offered the possibility of participating in the barter trade network to those who were penniless or unemployed – in other words, to those for whom bartering was a necessity. Soon after, they turned this experiment into a “population awareness” project to demonstrate that “another type of economy” was possible. One of the members highlighted the problems raised by the creation of social money: “We must find a way of oxidizing the social money to avoid repeating past mistakes of the capitalist economic system. How can we prevent people from accumulating money, to the extent that again some would have a lot and others a little?” The solution selected by the group was to rule out the use of social money and to rely instead on a barter system that would not be based on the material value of each good and that would establish trusting relationships among participants. As in the Argentine case – which had, incidentally, caught the interest of the commission that was gathering information on different barter trade systems in the world –, analyzed by Merken (2008) further to the crisis of 2001, the neighborhood became a privileged location for the organization of acts of solidarity and cooperative efforts. To borrow the terms of Auyero (2005), the decentralization of the 15M movement was simultaneously the product of ‘the situated space’, whereas the collective action was part of the fabric of social connections and of daily pursuits, and of the ‘attribute space’. The neighborhood in Spain had become a symbolic location of mobilization ever since the consolidation of the neighborhood associations at the end of the Franco dictatorship. Along with other neighborhood assemblies in Madrid, the assembly of Parla was at the origin of the creation of an ‘urban vegetable garden’ aimed at promoting another model of production and consumption. The Indignados thus focused on local and concrete actions that produced visible results, without losing the meaning and the global scope of their action.

The movement also turned to more radical action such as occupying vacant buildings. These buildings were used to rehouse families expelled from their lodgings as well as to provide a place to organize the movement’s activities during the winter. For example, the disused premises of the ‘Madrid Hotel’, a stone’s throw from Puerta del Sol, were occupied after the global demonstration of 15 October 2011. Many similar initiatives were undertaken in the neighborhoods of Madrid (on a par with the Eko in Carabanchel) as
in other towns in Spain, giving a renewed energy to the Okupa movement (Martínez and García 2012). In view of these developments, some Indignados noted in informal discussions that “the group on long-term politics won with respect to the group on short-term politics”, referring to one of the main conflicts within the movement. The Indignados’ rejection of the electoral path indeed led them to seek solutions to concrete problems in order to show the efficiency of their action at the local scale, due to their inability to influence policies at the national and international level. Looking at the indigenous movements in Mexico (Pleyers 2011), we can identify two factors at work in the location strategy of their collective action: the failure of the government to take the movements’ claims into account and the redeployment of a political culture that sought to bring about social change at the local level. A similar attitude can indeed be found in the Indignados group ‘on long-term politics’, which believed that strengthening social connections anchored in daily life would not only improve social conditions but also offer alternatives to the dominant way of doing things (Pleyers 2010).

On National and Transversal Actions

However, these dynamics at the neighborhood level gradually petered out as the months went by, and participation in local assemblies plummeted. In Carabanchel, more than 500 people had occupied the Oporto square on 28 May 2011, but two weeks later this number was halved. By July, the number of participants had dropped to fewer than one hundred and then to just a few. Home foreclosures continued to mobilize the population to take action, and certain workgroups that were focused on very concrete issues such as housing attracted more participants than general assemblies in the neighborhoods. But demonstrators asked to join the movement rarely embarked on a long-term commitment. This can be explained by their precarious everyday lives, which made it difficult for them to commit to regular participation (Mathieu 2007). In addition, the way in which the assemblies operated – on the basis of consensus, which involves debating and speaking in public – tended to exclude those individuals least accustomed to collective action (Nez 2012). Paradoxically, and counter to the movement’s intentions, the assemblies of the Indignados gradually turned

19 The local dimension is not necessarily the main source of the demobilization in the neighborhood assemblies, which can also be explained by militant fatigue and the form of commitment in this type of activism, more pregnant than in an organization with relays and supports.
into ‘assemblies of activists’, to borrow the term of Castells. This issue was discussed by the commission on ‘international extension’ of the Puerta del Sol general assembly, which decided in mid-December 2011 to call a ‘strike on activism’. By repeating the motto of Occupy Wall Street (“We are the 99%”), this commission blew the whistle on the activist drift of the movement:

Perhaps that in addition [...] to calling structure on what is bureaucracy, associating the sovereignty of the assembly to what is dispersion and division; instead of all that, we might wonder why we are more invisible each time, why we are each time more disconnected from the people.

One year after the encampment at Puerta del Sol and the decentralization of the movement to the neighborhoods, initiatives on the national scale were springing up regularly. Since the announcement of the bank rescue packages in the spring of 2012, many demonstrations against the banks and bankers were organized. On 14 June 2012, the Indignados filed a lawsuit against Bankia’s board of directors in the name of thirteen small stockholders who had lost their savings, claiming falsified accounts and other fraud charges. The people incriminated included the former president of Bankia, Rodrigo Rato, who had also held the positions of economics minister and IMF managing director in the past. The Indignados thus sought to denounce corruption, the lack of transparency, and the collusion between economic and political elites during the years of real estate speculation. They drew on the example of Iceland, where the former prime minister was put on trial for his responsibility in the financial crisis. The movement’s aim was to go beyond claims directed at banks and international financial institutions and directly target national officials responsible for the crisis. It was also the strategy followed in 2013 by the Mortgage Victims’ Platform (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, PAH) and the assemblies ‘on housing’. The ‘escraches’ aimed to put pressure on members of parliament to support their ‘popular legislative initiative’ for alternative policies on housing (Romanos 2013b).

The actions and demonstrations were hence not limited to the scale of the neighborhoods but also continued on a national scale. The ‘Rodea el Congreso’ (‘Surround the Congress’) demonstration on 25 September

20 ‘¿Adónde van los “indignados”?’; La Vanguardia, 21 January 2012.
22 This form of demonstration, which emerged in Argentina, aimed to publicly condemn those responsible for an injustice by confronting them at their place of abode or their workplace.
2012 to protest against the government’s austerity policies attracted many people and unleashed unprecedented police repression. The Indignados also contributed to the emergence of movements beyond the local scale by organizing across sectors of public services affected by budget cuts. These were the ‘waves’ whose color referred to the T-shirts worn by the demonstrators – like the green wave for education or the white wave for public health – and whose mode of organization and internal democracy were inspired by the Indignados (Calle and Candón 2013). Thus, a transversal rationale governed the location strategy of collective action. This meant that more local action did not always displace national or global action – these different scales of action could also be complementary.

** * * * **

Since embarking on a decentralization of their movement (just two weeks after the emergence of the 15M movement), the Indignados in Madrid have articulated their actions at the local, national, and international levels. There was a certain tension in determining which level would be the most effective in asserting their claims. The movement’s decentralization to the neighborhood level, which asserted itself as a strategic choice after the period of encampments, massive assemblies, and demonstrations of a national scope, can be explained by the search for a capacity of action. But what quickly became apparent was the limits of local action in the face of political, economic, and social policies, which arose on the national and international scales. Does the location strategy of collective action not boil down to a confession of helplessness from a social movement that refused to turn to the political arena to effect change? We agree with Pleyers’ assessment of the location strategy of autonomous movements: “By shifting the fight from the political sphere towards that of the local space of the daily life, did these movements not leave the field to their adversaries as regards the influence they exerted on the government authorities and resorting to the institutions?” (2011: 51). The general elections of November 2011 thus resulted in the right-wing party winning an absolute majority in Congress. It was able to do so without significantly widening its electoral base, for the voters’ rejection of the PSOE benefited the smaller parties, and abstention as well as spoiled or blank ballots increased.23 These results in part reflect

---

23 See, for example, the electoral analysis of the NGO Ecologistas en Acción, which puts into perspective the idea of a ‘tsunami’ of the right-wing party. Retrieved 4 December 2013 from http://www.ecologistasenaccion.org/article21804.html.
the discourse used by the Indignados during the campaign, which called on voters to abstain, to submit invalid votes, or to vote for smaller parties. The ‘Partido X’ was launched in January 2013 with the aim of creating “a 15M in the electoral space”. Podemos (which translates as “We can”) is another political party that emerged as part of a continuation of the 15M movement in the political sphere, even if these initiatives came far short of encapsulating such a heterogeneous movement (Nez 2015). Podemos candidates won five seats in the European Parliament elections of 25 May 2014. Since the 2015 municipal, regional and legislative elections, Podemos is well established in the political game.

The location strategy of collective action highlights the difficulties encountered by present-day social movements in identifying ‘the enemy’ that people must fight against. Hessel writes: “Truly so, the reasons for outrage may seem today less clear or the world too complex. Who controls, who decides? It is not always easy to distinguish among all the currents who govern us” (2011: 14). This elusive feature of the enemy, which is an essential component of a social movement (Neveu 2002), highlights one of the keys to understanding why the Indignados swung between different scales of action. This evolution is probably similar to other mobilizations emerging in the wake of the Indignados, such as the Occupy movement in the United States. Aguiton and Haeringer have noted that “In New York, the occupiers recently struck an alliance with Occupy Our Homes, a collective for the right to housing and opened habitation squats for the poorly housed, reminding one of the practices of the Spanish activists” (2012: 9). Voss and Williams (2012) demonstrate that the focus of such movements came to lie in the construction of new collective capacities through the democratic practices implemented at the local scale rather than obtaining concessions from the state.

Bibliography


