Street Politics in the Age of Austerity
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How do instances of popular protest spread across borders? This question, which has eluded social scientists for decades, appears to have become more salient than ever in the wake of the mass protests that rocked the world in the wake of the Arab Spring in early 2011. In this chapter, we look at the diffusion of anti-austerity protests from Spain to Greece to the United States, focusing in particular on the claims and organizational forms behind these mobilizations. We note that, despite clear local varieties between them, the 15M movement in Spain, the Movement of the Squares in Greece, and the Occupy movement in the United States have a number of basic elements in common, most notably their critique of representation, their insistence on autonomy from political parties and the state, and their commitment to a prefigurative politics based on horizontality, direct democracy, and self-organization.

So how did this critique of representation and these alternative organizational models spread so rapidly across such widely divergent and geographically distant contexts? In approaching questions like these, social movement scholars have historically drawn on the concept of diffusion. In this chapter, we problematize some of the core assumptions behind classical diffusion theory and argue that its conceptual framework may be too linear to account for the local and transnational dimensions behind these protests. Instead of posing a clear-cut distinction between a ‘transmitter’ movement and an ‘adopter’ movement, we identify multiple sources of inspiration that simultaneously fed into each particular mobilization. We argue that – much more than simply mimicking the claims and organizational
models of movements elsewhere – each of the aforementioned mobilizations drew upon extensive local movement experience and pre-existing activist networks to develop its own autonomous and horizontal forms of self-organization. Rather than mindlessly copying models from elsewhere, activists drew inspiration from other movements to activate latent potentialities for mobilization back home. We refer to this process as a pattern of resonance.

Finally, we hypothesize that the claims and tactics of the movements resonated due to the shared background against which they occurred: the dramatic deepening of a ‘crisis of representation’ in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown and the consequent First World debt crisis. We also note that this crisis of representation – expressed in a dramatic fall of public trust in political representatives and democratic institutions – has been particularly deep in Spain and Greece, while it was also very pronounced in the United States. For our research, we draw on extensive participant observation in the occupations of Puerta del Sol in Madrid and Syntagma Square in Greece, as well as several return trips to both Greece and Spain for the shooting of two documentaries. We also rely on dozens of informal conversations held with fellow activists in both countries; independent research for the activist blog ROAR Magazine, of which we are the editors; and participation in Take the Square, the international commission of 15M in Spain, of which one of us was an organizer. Through Take the Square, we were actively involved in the transnational coordination of two days of global action (17 September 2011, the day Occupy Wall Street began, and 15 October 2011, when protests took place in over 1,000 cities in 80 countries on all inhabited continents).

This chapter is divided into four parts: the first briefly discusses the theory of diffusion and introduces the concept of resonance; the second deals with the occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid; the third looks at the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens; and the fourth deals with the occupation of Wall Street in New York. In the conclusion we briefly
discuss our findings and propose that the mobilizations in Greece, Spain, and the United States were about more than just austerity – they were part of a transnational cycle of struggles for *real* democracy.

**Our Argument: Not Diffusion but Resonance**

The concept of diffusion has long been used by social scientists to describe the process by which certain ideas or practices are disseminated within or between countries. In his original formulation, Katz (1968: 178) described diffusion as “the acceptance of some specific item, over time, by adopting units – individuals, groups, communities – that are linked both to external channels of communications and to each other by means of both a structure of social relations and a system of value, or culture”. Building on this formulation, social movement scholars have identified a number of elements that are essential to the process, namely: (1) a ‘transmitter’; (2) an ‘adopter’; (3) an ‘item’; and (4) a ‘channel’ through which the item reaches the adopter from the transmitter. Most of the academic debate on diffusion has focused on what channels for diffusion matter more: the direct channel, by which diffusion occurs through pre-existing contacts between the transmitting and adopting movements (a process also referred to as *relational diffusion*); the indirect channel, through non-personal links like the mass media, social media, or word of mouth (*non-relational diffusion*); or a combination or interplay of the two (McAdam and Rucht 1993). Tarrow (2005) has further noted that diffusion can also be *mediated* by a third party fulfilling the role of a broker.

As this brief discussion reveals, the concept of diffusion hinges fundamentally upon a clear-cut distinction between the transmitter and the adopter, and assumes a linear relationship running from the former to the latter. In this chapter, we argue that these assumptions fail to capture the complexity of the pattern by which recent protest movements actually spread across such radically different contexts. Instead, we suggest that each of the national movements drew on a combination of: (1) shared indignation with the structural conditions of a deepening crisis of representation, and (2) pre-existing autonomous activist networks and extensive local movement experience with horizontal modes of self-organization. The occupations of public squares in Madrid, Athens, and New York took off thanks to the inspiration provided by multiple movements in other countries, whose perceived successes motivated protesters back home to translate their common grievances and local movement experience into action. Instead
of assuming the adopter’s mindless imitation of a ‘transmitter’ movement, we therefore switch our focus to the conscious process whereby endogenous potentialities for mobilization – which already lay dormant in each of the national contexts – are *actualized* through the inspiration drawn from successful movements elsewhere.

We refer to this process as a pattern of *resonance*. The concept of resonance is not new. In their 2008 pamphlet, *The Coming Insurrection*, the Invisible Committee already noted that “revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination, but by resonance. Something that is constituted here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something constituted over there” (p. 6). Seen in this light, protest movements are “not like a plague or forest fire – a linear process which spreads from place to place after an initial spark”, but rather take the shape of sound waves, which, “though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythms of their own vibrations, always taking on more density” (ibid). Rather than a series of copycat movements that simply imitate the ideas and practices of some more innovative ‘vanguard’ movement elsewhere, we see shared structural conditions between – and historical continuities within – each of the local contexts. The combination of these shared structural conditions and pre-existing activist networks and local movement experience shapes the potentialities for mobilization, which can in turn be actualized through the inspiration provided by successful movements elsewhere. Note that ‘successful’ here does not necessarily refer to a particular movement achieving its declared objectives but rather to its immediate success in mobilizing a large segment of the population behind a common cause.

Holloway (2005) has described the phenomenon of resonance in similar terms in connection with the Zapatistas’ influence on the global justice movement, arguing that “there is no linear progression here. It is not the spread of an organisation that we are speaking of [...] Neither is it really a question of the spread of an influence from Chiapas [...] It is rather a question of resonance and inspiration”. Selbin (2009), meanwhile, has explained the spread of revolutionary movements through a comparable concept of *mimesis*, which, as opposed to mimicry, emphasizes how the struggle of a group in one place can provide revolutionaries elsewhere with the inspiration to start or intensify their own struggles back home. As Selbin notes, the process by which one movement inspires another is really quite simple, and was captured in a statement by a Nicaraguan Sandinista on the Cuban revolution: “if they can do it there, we can do it here.” Knight describes essentially the same process when he speaks of a ‘demonstration effect’:
The formula seems simple enough: in one place or more, people who perceive themselves oppressed learn of others who they can identify with who have sought to change the material and ideological conditions of their everyday lives; duly inspired, they too seek to make such fundamental and transformational changes. Again, it is worth noting that these may be their own ancestors, their contemporaries, or people in other places, perhaps nearby but at times far distant – one need look no farther than the great swath cut by the Paris Commune or the incredible resonance of the Cuban Revolution. (cited in Selbin 2009: 72)

As Knight points out, the resonance of this demonstration effect works not only through space but also through time. In fact, social movements may very well draw on inspiration provided by movements that preceded them within their own countries, as well as the immediate inspiration provided by ongoing mobilizations elsewhere. All of this goes to show how the linear concept of diffusion, running from the transmitter of an item to its adopter, may overlook a very basic affective process by which movements are simply inspired to take action by the (perceived) successes of another movement, while always building on local experience and networks to mobilize large groups of people.

#15M: “No-one Expects the Spanish Revolution”

In trying to uncover the pattern of resonance behind recent anti-austerity protests, our story begins in Spain on 15 May 2011, when an independent and decentralized citizen platform called Democracia Real YA (DRY), constituted by a loose coalition of over 200 social groups and civil society associations, organized a large march in Madrid and 57 other cities throughout the country. Their aim was to protest the handling of the country’s devastating financial crisis, the corrupting power of private banks over government, and the unwillingness of political representatives – and the inability of the political system more generally – to respond to the needs of the people. Under the slogan “We are not goods in the hands of bankers and politicians”, up to 130,000 people took to the streets and made their voices heard in the single biggest protest march since the start of the crisis in 2007-2008 (Castells 2012). Deliberately unaligned with any political party, DRY effectively functioned as an organizing platform for a leaderless convergence of pre-established movements aimed at coordinating a broad-based citizen mobilization in defiance of the political and financial establishment.
Up until that moment, the people of Spain had already suffered tremendous hardship as a result of the deflation of a massive housing bubble. More than one in five Spaniards and almost half of the country’s young people were out of work, over 11 million people were at risk of falling into poverty, and hundreds of thousands of families had been evicted from their homes. Meanwhile, bank executives enjoyed impunity as their banks or cajas were bailed out by the government after years of reckless speculation in the housing market. A little before, in mid-2010, the socialist government of Prime Minister Zapatero had made a U-turn in its economic policies, shifting from a ‘heterodox’ stimulus package to an orthodox austerity budget, putting further stress on the already embattled lower and middle classes. With a nominally socialist government now pursuing essentially conservative economic policies, the conditions for widespread indignation were in place: the market-imposed shift towards austerity took away the last remaining grounds on which people could distinguish between the two mainstream parties – socialists and conservatives – thus undermining the appeal of electoral politics and making other forms of political intervention necessary.

As a number of recent surveys clearly illustrate, levels of public trust in the political system have fallen to historic lows since the start of the global financial crisis in 2008, and in particular the onset of the European debt crisis in 2010. A Eurobarometer survey found that, while it fell across the EU, public confidence in European institutions fell most dramatically in Spain: from 65 per cent in 2007 to 20 per cent in 2013, while mistrust was up from 23 per cent to 72 per cent (Traynor 2013). Another survey finds that, “compounding their doubts about the Brussels-based European Union, Europeans are losing faith in the capacity of their own national leaders to cope with the economy’s woes” (Pew Research 2013). Similarly, the European Social Survey of April 2013 argues that sky-rocketing unemployment and a pervasive sense of social insecurity are responsible for “overall levels of political trust and satisfaction with democracy declining across much of Europe”, noting that the trend is “particularly notable” in Spain and has reached “truly alarming proportions” in Greece (Economic and Social Research Council 2013: 16). In response to these findings, José Ignacio Torreblanca, an analyst for the European Council of Foreign Relations, remarked that “both debtor and creditor countries basically feel that they lost control of what they are doing” (Naumann 2013). He concludes that most Europeans “now think that their national democracy is being subverted by the way the euro crisis is conducted,” providing evidence for a deepening crisis of representation (Traynor 2013).
This is the structural background against which the initial DRY demonstration occurred on 15 May 2011. Following the official march, some clashes broke out between protesters and police during a sit-in in Gran Vía, after which a group of around 100 protesters marched on the city’s iconic central square, the Puerta del Sol. Once there, around 20 of them formed a circle to discuss what to do next (conversation with Take the Square organizer in May 2012). At some point, one of the DRY organizers suggested to his companions that they should act like the Egyptians and camp out in the square that night (Elola 2011). Deciding that a coordinated march was not enough, the group accepted his proposal, which some later said could have been made by anyone else in the group, as it just seemed to be a logical evolution to the day’s events (Take the Square organizer). That night, some 30 protesters camped out in Sol, and the next day, on 16 May the first official assembly was held (El País 2011). As the #spanishrevolution hashtag went viral on Twitter, word reached Barcelona, where another group of protesters decided to occupy Plaça Catalunya.

In the early hours of 17 May, however, the authorities of Madrid made what turned out to be a fateful mistake: they tried to remove the protesters – whose numbers had swelled to 200 – from the square (Hernández and Arroyo 2011). The attempted forceful eviction, during which two people were arrested and one was injured, immediately backfired. Independently from DRY, the protesters who had camped out in Sol disseminated a viral call to action via Facebook, Twitter, and SMS: to gather in Sol at 8pm that evening in defiance of the authorities and in anticipation of an indefinite occupation. That evening, thousands of people gathered in Sol, some of whom organized into an impromptu assembly in which the decision was made to set up camp and occupy the square (Cortés 2011; Take the Square organizer). As the protest grew, Twitter and Facebook were abuzz with a straightforward imperative: ¡Toma la Plaza! (‘Take the Square!’) That night, the assembly set up its different working groups and committees, appointing a communication team which quickly established links with the 30 other cities in which occupations were already under way. Again, hundreds of people stayed the night as a large tarp canopy was set up marking the start of a Tahrir-style tent camp. Acampada Sol was born. As one sign proclaimed: “No-one expects the Spanish revolution!”

Another sign, held up by a teacher, summed up everything that needed to be known about the movement’s stance on traditional representative politics: “The young took to the streets and suddenly all the political parties got old”. According to a reporter for El País who was embedded in the protest camp at Sol from the very beginning, 17 May “revealed the magic
of spontaneity. The miracle of communication. The power of spreading the message through social networks. The strength of a new generation.” (Elola 2011) “Tuesday the 17th was magical,” the El País reporter went on: “magical because nothing had been prepared. Fed by social networks, a spontaneous demonstration bloomed into existence. The 15M protests, by contrast, had been the fruit of conscious and conscientious labor. Three months of preparation. Tuesday was something else. Something new. Something different.”

So where did this sudden rush towards “spontaneous” mass mobilization come from? Numerous commentators and activists have rightly stressed the precedent of the Egyptian revolution and the occupation of Tahrir Square. As one of our friends in Take the Square – who wishes to remain anonymous – put it, “Of course Egypt inspired us! The Egyptians showed us that it was possible to have a revolution without leaders. That it was possible to overthrow a regime through a non-violent occupation of a square. Of course that inspired us.” (conversation in January 2013). But while Tahrir clearly played a seminal role in inspiring the decision to occupy Puerta del Sol, the idea that the 15M movement was therefore ‘diffused’ from Egypt and simply imitated the Egyptian revolutionaries seems overly simplistic. After all, the practice of occupying public space was not new to all the early participants in Acampada Sol, some of whom came out of the city’s thriving Okupa (‘squatters’) movement (Flesher Fominaya 2013). Squats like Patio Maravillas, which describes itself as an “autonomously governed space” and which contains a “HackLab” that was seminal in building up the movement’s communications resources, have been experimenting with the occupation of public spaces for decades. These hubs played a key role in providing experience and resources for the occupation of Sol.

Similarly, the idea of autogestión – or self-management – is well-established in Madrid and in Spain more generally. Apart from the country’s well-known anarchist tradition of the 1930s, which continues to live on today in the anarcho-syndicalist union CNT (but which may not have had a very direct impact on the 15M movement), the 1960s witnessed the blossoming of a strong movement of neighborhood associations in Madrid. Although these associations have since lost most of their radical flavor, the idea of neighborhood assemblies survived and was later reincorporated by the 15M movement following the voluntary disbanding of the protest camp at Sol. The consensus model of decision-making thus did not arrive at Sol out of a vacuum, nor was it adopted from abroad. Rather, it was endogenous to local movement experience and already institutionalized at an early stage in the decision-making model of the DRY platform as well
as the movements and collectives that constituted the platform. One of the core groups in DRY, Juventud Sin Futuro (JSF, ‘Youth Without Future’), was created in February 2011 and brought together dozens of movements and associations that had been involved in the student resistance against the Bologna process in 2008-2009. Many of these groups had been organizing through assemblies for years.

Furthermore, to think that Egypt was the sole source of inspiration for the movement would be a mistake. First of all, the protesters derived their name – the Indignados – from a short pamphlet by French resistance hero Stéphane Hessel entitled Indignez-Vous! (2010). Even if the media initially made the connection, the protesters themselves also adopted the name. Second, Fabio Gándara, the 26-year-old lawyer who set up the digital DRY platform with two friends, has claimed that he looked to Iceland’s so-called “kitchenware revolution” for inspiration, as did two of the key organizers with Take the Square. After all, in 2009, after Iceland’s banking sector collapsed, the small country experienced the largest protests in its history, leading eventually to the fall of its government, a re-writing of its constitution, and the prosecution of banks and politicians held to be responsible for the crisis. Does that mean that the 15M movement diffused from Iceland, and that Spain merely adopted Icelandic ideas or imitated Icelandic practices? Clearly such an assertion makes little sense. Rather, just like Egypt’s leaderless struggle for democracy resonated with indignant Spaniards, so did Iceland’s popular protests against the bankers and politicians. Others similarly took inspiration from Greece, where the resistance to austerity had been firing up with a number of general strikes, mass marches, and widely broadcast riots ever since May 2010. Tellingly, despite an unspoken ban on political symbols, the only flags visible at Sol were the Greek, Icelandic, and Spanish Republican flags – the latter indicating a degree of historical resonance with the anti-fascist resistance during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

The Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH, ‘platform of mortgage victims’) is another example of the multiple sources of inspiration that fed into the 15M movement. In late 2010, the platform started one of its most visible campaigns – Stop Desahucios – which was aimed at stopping or paralyzing foreclosures through direct action. This form of direct action, often involving occupations of properties about to be evicted, preceded the occupation of the public squares in 2011. Interestingly, the Madrid charter of the PAH emerged in close cooperation with CONADEE – the National Coordination of Ecuadorians in Spain – which struggles for the rights of Ecuadorian migrants. It is worth observing in this respect that Ecuador had
a major financial crisis of its own in the late 1990s and early 2000s, feeding a wave of migration to Spain, where many Ecuadorians took up jobs in the booming construction sector. While the number of Ecuadorians in Spain stood at only 10,000 in 1998, it climbed to 200,000 in 2002 and hit 500,000 in 2005 (Weismantel 2008). When the Spanish housing bubble finally began to deflate in 2007-2008, many of these Ecuadorians lost their jobs and could no longer afford to pay their mortgages or rent. Since they were heavily affected by the crisis, and since they were well organized through CONADEE, and since they had already fled from one major debt crisis and could not afford to flee from another, the Ecuadorians proved to be a formidable force for mobilization in Madrid's social movement landscape.

In an interview with the authors, Aïda Quinatoa – spokeswoman for CONADEE, a key organizer in PAH Madrid, and an active participant in the 15M movement – recounted that she helped set up PAH Madrid on the basis of what she describes as indigenous Andean values: a communitarian ethos revolving around consensus decision-making. The PAH joined DRY two months before 15M, because, as PAH spokesman Chema Ruiz recounted, they found in DRY a group of people loyal to the same horizontal and autonomous processes as their own – a group that organized through popular assemblies just like they had been doing for years. And, as would become clear later on, PAH and the DRY were far from the only ones.

#25M: “Be Quiet, or You’ll Wake up the Greeks!”

Our story continues in Greece, where on 23 February 2011 – months before the occupation of Puerta del Sol – yet another general strike took place, and yet another demonstration reached its final destination at Syntagma Square in front of parliament. As is common with such demonstrations, it began to dismantle after a short clash with riot police and the usual tear gas bombs, stun grenades, and Molotov cocktails.

At this point, Greece was still at the beginning of her self-destructive dance with the Troika of foreign lenders, made up of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. The start of this dance had been signalled by Prime Minister Giorgos Papandreou’s simple televised message from Kastelorizo island on 23 April 2010, and the second step was taken on 5 May 2010 with the signing of the first memorandum of understanding between Greece and the Troika. On that day, Athens and other major Greek cities witnessed large-scale protests
that ended with the tragic burning down of the Marfin Bank in Stadiou Street, Athens, where three employees were burnt alive.

The demonstrations, riots, and general strikes continued throughout 2010 and 2011 as the Troika kept demanding ever-tighter austerity measures. At the demonstration and general strike of 23 February 2011, however, there was something different in the air. Inspired by the example of the occupation of Tahrir Square that had led to the overthrow of Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak just 12 days before, a group of people from a newly established small extra-parliamentary leftist party (MAA, or the Solidarity and Overthrow Front, which split off from the Coalition of the Radical Left, or Syriza), started encouraging protesters to “stay in the square like the Egyptians”. The call, however, failed to build up momentum and was ultimately unsuccessful – not least because the sectarian nature of those calling for the occupation failed to resonate with the wider population. Still, anti-austerity protests continued, and another general strike took place just days before the Spanish occupied Puerta del Sol on 15 May 2011.

After 15 May, the news about the occupation of squares across Spain spread to Greece, initially through social media and later through the mainstream media as well. From the very first days, a number of Greeks who had been involved in the global justice movement and the December Uprising of 2008, and others who had personal contacts with people in Spain, started following the Spanish mobilizations, and the idea of something similar occurring in Greece slowly began to appear – first as a distant prospect, later as a serious possibility. “If they did it in Egypt and Spain, why can’t we do it here?” the Greeks now seemed to think, inspired by their neighbors on the other side of the Mediterranean. From that moment onwards, discussions started taking place among activists and previously apolitical citizens, not necessarily to ‘imitate’ the Spaniards but rather to address a widespread feeling that the structural conditions in Greece were even worse, and that a massive reaction of the people was an absolute necessity. After all, as we saw before, the decline of “overall levels of political trust and satisfaction with democracy” had reached “truly alarming proportions in Greece” (Economic and Social Research Council 2013: 16).

While news about the Spanish Indignados continued to spread through social media, and while the mass media also slowly started making references to the protests in Spain, a group of Spanish expats living in Greece – mainly students but also workers who had not directly participated in 15M but whose friends and relatives had – organized the first demonstrations in solidarity with their compatriots outside the Spanish embassy in Athens. In Athens, as elsewhere, the call to action was made through Facebook, and
the first to join the solidarity protests were some Greeks who happened to be in the Spanish community networks (students, friends, and co-workers), and some activists from the anarchist groups of Athens. The first action took place on 20 May 2011 and soon moved to a nearby area in Thisio. There, the Spanish-Greek assembly was set up and the protesters divided into thematic groups. Some of the participants also brought their tents and spent the night, forming a small acampada. The big issue was how to attract more people and achieve a scale shift towards mass mobilization. With that aim in mind, the group decided to set up a website, discussed the best domain name, and ended up picking real-democracy.gr. The website was set up within a day and immediately attracted 6,000 visitors in its first 24 hours.

Around the same time, a ‘rumor bomb’ began to circulate on social media networks: one of the banners or slogans of the Indignados was rumored to have urged protesters in Spain to “be quiet, or else you’ll wake up the Greeks”. No photograph or any other form of proof of this claim ever appeared anywhere, but the mass media in Greece soon picked up on the story and reproduced the news. It worked. After a group of people from Thessaloniki created a Facebook page for the occupation of Lefkos Pyrgos and another one for Syntagma and other squares throughout the country (Indignants at Syntagma – Αγανακτισμένοι στο Σύνταγμα), their call went viral. A few days later, on 25 May, a peaceful anti-austerity demonstration ended at Syntagma and occupied the square. The occupation of Syntagma was to last for 72 days and nights, from 25 May until 30 July 2011. Indicating how the movement’s deliberate and self-conscious autonomy from the political system directly arose from the deepening crisis of representation, Dimitris – a mathematics tutor and playwright who would later evolve into a respected facilitator of the Syntagma Popular Assembly – told us that: “because it wasn’t a call from a political party or from a union, I thought here there might be something happening from the people. That’s why I participated.” (interview in March 2012).

The Greek movement of the squares is often referred to as the aganaktismenoi, or the Greek Indignados. It should be mentioned that this name was coined by the media, which saw Syntagma as a copy of Sol. The movement itself never really accepted this term. While the Facebook page calling for the occupation was called ‘Indignants at Syntagma’, the people who made the call were not the ones who actually occupied the square. For that reason, following a suggestion at the Syntagma Popular Assembly on 31 May 2011 (Syntagma Popular Assembly, 2011), a huge banner was unfurled over the square reading: “We are not indignant, we are determined!” The banner remained there for the duration of the occupation, highlighting the Greeks’ self-conscious refusal to simply ‘emulate’ their Spanish counterparts.
So how did the occupation adopt its autonomous, horizontal, and direct democratic model of decision-making? Dimitris was unequivocal about the movement’s sources of inspiration: “what happened in Egypt, what happened in Spain – it’s not irrelevant for what happened here in Greece. Or what’s happening now. Or what’s going to happen.” Like Niki, a young activist who participated in both the 15M movement in Spain and the movement of the squares in Greece, Dimitris similarly stressed how the struggle of the Egyptians and Spaniards resonated with the revolutionary desires of many Greeks. At the same time, however, to claim that the movement was therefore diffused from Spain or Egypt would again be overly simplistic. For one, Greece’s social movements themselves have extensive experience with direct democracy and self-organization, and Athens had a well-formed pre-existing network of autonomous activist collectives, ranging from the city’s well-known anti-authoritarian movement centered around the anarchist neighborhood of Exarchia to the various offshoots of the global justice movement – including the No Border Camps and other migrant rights movements and civil society organizations – many of which have been organizing through assemblies for years.

After Syntagma was occupied, a large banner was unfurled outside the Spanish Embassy – and later in front of parliament – reading: ¡Estamos despiertos! ¿Qué hora es? ¡Ya es hora de que se vayan! (‘We are awake! What time is it? Time for them to go!’). The reference was not only to Spain, but also to the famous slogan of protesters in Buenos Aires during the Argentine crisis of 2001-2002: ¡que se vayan todos! (‘Away with them all!’). Another very popular slogan at the square was “One magical night, just like in Argentina, let’s see who will get on the helicopter first!”, referring to the escape of President De la Rua from the Presidential Palace following the spontaneous popular uprising of 19 and 20 December 2001 in Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, the crowd-funded Greek documentary Debtocracy was being screened in the square, detailing the experience of Ecuador and how the pressure of social movements there helped the country to repudiate its odious debt. During protests, slogans like “Bread, Education, Freedom!” – borrowed from the occupation of the Athens Polytechnic in 1973 which marked the beginning of the end of the dictatorship of the colonels – were regularly chanted by the protesters, indicating the historical resonance of past grassroots struggles for democracy. In a word, multiple sources of inspiration simultaneously converged upon the square.

Within days, the nightly protests in front of parliament swelled to over 100,000 protesters for several nights on end. Although the exact numbers remain very difficult to calculate, it is estimated that as many as 2.6 million
people either ‘occupied’ or ‘passed by’ – but in any case experienced – Syntagma Square in those days, constituting half of the population of Attica, the administrative region to which Athens belongs (Sotiris 2011 cited in Leontidou 2012). From the very first day of the occupation at Syntagma, a general assembly was organized in the square. The group that had previously set up camp in Thisio, having the experience and the equipment of the previous days, provided the microphone set-up and the first facilitators. The anarchists of Exarchia, who were initially reluctant to join the protests because of their seemingly ‘apolitical’ character, later did join in and brought a better sound system to facilitate the assemblies and live concerts. In Athens, the anarchists’ influence on the occupations appeared to be stronger than in Madrid – something that was illustrated in the refusal of the Greeks to embrace the “real democracy now” slogan, which many argued could be wrongly construed as a liberal argument for a properly functioning representative democracy. Instead, the Greeks embraced the more explicitly anarchist-inspired slogan “direct democracy now” (Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013).

The General Assembly of Syntagma and its thematic working groups summarized their demands in two claims: (a) cancel the memorandum of understanding and prevent the vote on the mid-term agreement of 29 June 2011; and (b) ‘real, direct democracy’ in the country, since the representative parliamentary system was seen as having become submissive to local and foreign financial interests. Although the first demand was restricted to the Greek political reality of the time, the second transcended national borders. Of course, the General Assembly of Syntagma Square was not fully aware of what direct democracy exactly was, how it could be achieved, whether it could be practised on a large scale – beyond a small village or a square – and so on; but what the protesters did know was that the current system simply did not represent them, and that some kind of alternative had to be devised. And so, in their quest for real democracy – and in between other initiatives directed towards the more urgent first demand – the square embarked on a journey to “discover and explore” a new model, directly experimenting with consensus decision-making in the assemblies and organizing educational initiatives detailing the experiences of other autonomous movements. In the spring and summer of 2011, Syntagma essentially reflected Holloway’s summary (1996) of the Zapatista motto: preguntando caminamos (‘asking we walk’).

One such initiative was organized on 17 June 2011, the “Day of Popular Information and Discussion on Direct Democracy”. Apart from the academics invited to speak on the issue, there were also two speakers who had some
practical experience with direct democratic experiments: WWII resistance hero Manolis Glezos, who had practised direct democracy in his village on Naxos island while he was mayor there, and Professor Stavros Stavridis, who had come across the Zapatista reality while involved in the ‘School for Chiapas’ campaign – highlighting the existence of both local experience and inspiration from abroad. The Zapatista experience was discussed at least once more at Syntagma, on 8 July 2011, with the main speaker (via Skype) being the well-known Mexican activist Gustavo Esteva. Given this recurrent interest in living examples of direct democracy, the Greek movement of the square – like its counterpart in Spain – went far beyond being a mere anti-austerity protest: it began to actively explore alternatives to liberal democracy, openly experimenting with autonomous and horizontal modes of self-organization.

#27S: “America’s Tahrir Moment”

At some point in early July 2011, while we were embedded in the Multimedia Team at Syntagma Square writing daily reports for ROAR Magazine and assisting in the coordination of transnational actions – like the upcoming global day of action of 15 October – and the dissemination of information to other movements elsewhere, we received an email on the Take the Square account. It was Micah White, senior editor of the Canadian activist magazine Adbusters. Micah had an important piece of information to share with us: together with editor Kalle Lasn, he was about to launch a ‘tactical briefing’ to the 90,000-strong Adbusters network calling for the occupation of Wall Street. Kalle and Micah now wanted advice from European activists on how to bring about the kind of scale shift required for such an occupation.

As with the occupations of Sol and Syntagma, the call to Occupy Wall Street did not arise out of a vacuum. Just as in Europe, there has been a long-term trend in the United States of declining levels of public trust in political leaders and institutions – a trend that was gravely intensified by the handling of the 2008 financial crisis. At the time of writing, Gallup’s most recent annual trust poll found that only 19 per cent of Americans trust the government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time”, while 81 per cent trust the government to do what is right only “some of the time” or “never” (Gallup 2013). The same numbers stood at 32 per cent and 67 per cent, respectively, during George W. Bush’s second term. Going back even further, to 1960, 73 per cent of Americans still believed their government would do the right thing “just about always/most of the time”.
Less than half the American population now trusts the federal government to handle international and domestic problems, marking a 25-point decline since Gallup first asked the question in 1972, while 66 per cent are convinced that legislators “never” or only “some of the time” do the right thing – marking an inversion from 2002, when public trust in legislators stood at 67 per cent. Two leading pollsters for former Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter remark that “this harrowing lack of trust in confidence in politicians and institutions today has been a long time coming [...] As it stands, our system only serves the elite, not the mass public. And the American people know it.” (Schoen and Caddell 2013: online).

As in Greece and Spain, part of the Americans’ frustration with the Democratic government may reside in the fact that a nominally progressive or center-left government ended up following an essentially conservative neoliberal policy package, thus leaving little to no room for distinction between the dominant political parties. President Obama, who had mobilized a large contingent of grassroots liberal activists to support him in his first election campaign, in fact reproduced and intensified many of the policies of the Bush era, most notably the massive Wall Street bailouts and the failure to bring about meaningful financial reform, thus leaving the economic problems of most Americans largely unaddressed, condemning millions to unbearable levels of student, mortgage, credit card, and medical debt. Even though the federal government and the Federal Reserve remained committed to a mild form of fiscal and monetary stimulus, at the municipal and state level, austerity budgets were already starting to bite. This trend first came to light in California in 2009, where budget cuts in education at the state level and large losses in university endowments following the Wall Street meltdown forced the University of California Board of Regents to announce a 32 per cent rise in tuition fees, sparking a wave of student protests and campus occupations across the state. An influential text written by the Research and Destroy collective at UC Santa Cruz, *Communiqué from an Absent Future*, resonated widely among America’s “graduates without a future” (Mason 2013).

The California student protests of 2009 were not the only anti-austerity mobilizations in the US to precede Occupy. In June 2011, a coalition of NGOs and movement organizations called New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts made a call to action to set up a protest camp – nicknamed ‘Bloombergville’ in reference to New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg – in City Hall Park, New York, vowing “to stay till Bloomberg’s budget is defeated” (NYABC 2011). The Bloombergville initiative, in turn, was inspired by the Walkerville occupation that had been staged by workers in Wisconsin earlier in June.
Wisconsin was itself emerging from the 100,000-strong labor union protests that had taken place in February following Governor Walker’s move to abolish collective bargaining rights as part of a radical new austerity budget. The occupation of Wisconsin’s State Capitol occurred around the same time as the Egyptian revolution and strongly resonated with it. And in July 2011, a coalition of social movements and organizations called Anticut organized a series of anti-austerity marches in the San Francisco Bay Area. A group of explicitly anti-capitalist activists in Oakland – called ‘Bay of Rage’, in reference to Egypt’s Day of Rage – released a communiqué stating the following:

Now, finally, the money is gone. The world has run out of future, used it up, wasted it on the grotesque fantasies of the rich, on technologies of death and alienation, on dead cities. Everywhere the same refrain, the same banners and headlines: there is nothing left for you. From the US to Greece, from Chile to Spain, whatever human face the State might have had: gone. The State is no longer a provider of education or care, jobs or housing. It is just a police force, a prison system, a bureaucracy with guns. (Bay of Rage 2011)

On 9 June, a month before Micah White contacted Take the Square and launched the call to Occupy Wall Street, Adbusters had already emailed its followers arguing that “America now needs its own Tahrir”. Greece, Spain, and Egypt thus had a clear influence on activists on the other side of the Atlantic. Indeed, according to Micah White and Kalle Lasn, “the spirit of this fresh tactic, a fusion of Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain” was captured in a quote by professor and Barcelona-based activist Raimundo Viejo: “The anti-globalization movement was the first step on the road. Back then our model was to attack the system like a pack of wolves. There was an alpha male, a wolf who led the pack, and those who followed behind. Now the model has evolved. Today we are one big swarm of people” (Adbusters 2011). Meanwhile, Micah and Kalle deliberately distanced themselves from the organizing process in New York so as to avoid being seen as leaders: “our role [...] could only be [...] to get the meme out there and hope that local activists would empower themselves to make the event a reality,” Micah White told David Graeber (2013: 36). In a way, Adbusters simply fulfilled the same function as the group of Thessaloniki activists who set up the Facebook page with the call to occupy Syntagma Square.

David Graeber (2011a, online) has recounted in great detail the process that led up to the actual occupation of Zuccotti Park. In the early days, on
2 August, Graeber responded to an invitation by a Greek anarchist to join a ‘General Assembly’ at Bowling Green, where a discussion was to be held on how to respond to Adbusters’ call to action and organize for the Wall Street protest on 17 September. Once he arrived there, however, he found a meeting that had been ‘hijacked’ by a group of veteran protesters associated with the Worker’s World Party (WWP). Far from being interested in a genuine leaderless assembly, the group imposed its own hierarchical structures and demands on those assembled. Speech after speech was held dictating to participants the rules and terms of the protest that was to be held. Fed up, Graeber and a number of friends he recognized from his time in the global justice movement decided to break away and form their own circle at the margins of the meeting and hold an assembly:

We realized we had an almost entirely horizontal crowd: not only Wobblies and Zapatista solidarity folk, but several Spaniards who had been active with the Indignados in Madrid, a couple of insurrectionist anarchists who had been involved in the occupations at Berkeley a few years before, a smattering of bemused onlookers who had just come to see the rally, maybe four or five, or an equal number of WWP (not including anyone from the central committee) who reluctantly came over to monitor our activities... (Graeber 2013: 36)

Eventually, this group of ‘horizontals’ managed to draw most participants in the meeting away from the WWP, with its hierarchical and centralized leadership, and organized itself into the New York General Assembly (NYGA), which was to become the key decision-making platform for Occupy Wall Street. The assembly quickly made a couple of key decisions that were to determine much of the movement’s nature and course over the months to come. During the NYGA’s regular meetings in Tompkins Square Park, which featured “a smattering of activists who had been connected to the global justice movement” and a large group of younger participants “who had cut their activist teeth on the Bloombergville encampment” earlier that summer, it was decided that “what we really wanted to do was something like had already been accomplished in Athens, Barcelona, or Madrid: occupy a public space to create a New York General Assembly, a body that could act as a model of genuine, direct democracy to counterpose to the corrupt charade presented to us as ‘democracy’ by the US government” (Graeber 2011a).

As a result of this rejection of representative institutions, numerous participants and observers have noted the anarchist roots of the Occupy
movement, as well as its continuities with the similarly anarchist-inspired global justice movement (Graeber 2011b, 2011c, 2002). It may be noted that these anarchist roots were both organizational, reflected in the movement’s direct democratic principles and practices, and personal, arising from the presence of anarchists and anarchist-inspired activists among the core group of organizers. Sociologist Williams (2012) thus notes that “the most immediate inspiration for Occupy is anarchism” and even goes so far as to claim that anarchism forms the very “DNA” of the movement. Similarly, taking note of the somewhat curious nature of the “We are the 99%” slogan, Paolo Gerbaudo has identified the ideology of contemporary movements like Occupy and the Indignados in a non-pejorative sense as “anarcho-populism” (2013). Anarchism, then, with its long history of revolutionary struggle against both capital and the state, and with its embrace of autonomy and horizontality as key organizational principles, can be understood as an increasingly dominant trend within contemporary anti-capitalist movements, not least the ones in Spain, Greece, and the United States discussed in this chapter.

The claim that Occupy Wall Street was somehow diffused from a single transmitting movement like the Spanish Indignados therefore seems to overlook the multiple sources of inspiration that simultaneously converged upon New York’s activist community as well as the latent potentialities for mobilization that already lay dormant within the US context. To be sure, there was a degree of relational diffusion here, as Spanish expats who participated in the occupation of Puerta del Sol were also actively involved in the core group of Occupy organizers (Romanos 2013). But there were also Greek anarchists involved as well as Zapatista-inspired autonomists, ex-occupiers from Bloombergville, and former alter-globalization veterans. The convergence of these multiple sources of inspiration, combined with the existence of pre-established autonomous activist networks and local horizontal movement experience, produced an interesting blend of ideas and tactics that appears to defy the somewhat simplistic linearity of classical diffusion theory.

And so, during a global day of action against the banks on 17 September 2011 – coordinated internationally by Take the Square, Global Revolution, and several other activist collectives – 5,000 protesters stormed into Lower Manhattan and set up camp in Zuccotti Park. As OccupyWallSt.org, the unofficial website for the New York-based movement, later put it, OWS sought to “[fight] back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest
recession in generations”. Two days after the occupation at Zuccotti took off, Lasn and White (2011) wrote an op-ed for The Guardian with a title that said it all: “The call to Occupy Wall Street resonates around the world.”

A Lesson in Democracy

Several important conceptual and theoretical questions arise from this empirical discussion that seem to challenge the capacity of classical diffusion theory to explain the way in which anti-austerity protests spread across Europe and the United States. If the activists in Spain, Greece, and the US all claim that they were inspired by several other movements from within their own countries as well as from abroad, to what extent is it still justified to continue speaking of a linear relationship between a single transmitter and a series of imitating adopters? If, as the linear conceptualization of diffusion would have it, the occupation of Puerta del Sol diffused from the occupation of Tahrir Square; Syntagma from Sol; and Zuccotti from Syntagma (or was it Sol?), then where did the protests and occupations in over 1,000 cities and 80 countries on 15 October 2011 diffuse from? If the movements we examined above drew inspiration from multiple sources and arose in a shared structural context that instils in all a shared sense of indignation with ruling elites and political institutions, and if these movements in turn helped to inspire others elsewhere, performing both the role of the transmitter and adopter, to what extent does it make sense to pose a stark division between the two? How far, in other words, can classical diffusion theory really take us?

In order to overcome these conceptual and theoretical challenges, we propose – at least in the case of the post-2011 cycle of struggles – to move beyond the linear view of diffusion in favor of the non-linear concept of resonance. As we theorized in this chapter, and as our empirical discussion further illustrated, the transnational resonance of social mobilization is closely connected to the existence of shared structural conditions that connect grievances and ease the mutual identification between geographically and historically distant struggles. It also depends on the existence of local horizontal movement experience and pre-formed autonomous activist networks that can activate their own latent potentialities for mobilization by harnessing the ‘shock wave’ emitted by movements elsewhere, translating shared indignation into concrete action. Drawing on both a local dimension highlighting the latent potentialities for mobilization and a transnational dimension highlighting shared structural conditions and foreign sources
of inspiration, the concept of resonance may help overcome some of the rigidities of a purely linear account.

All of this, however, still leaves us with a bigger question: if the movements we discussed here all claim that political and corporate elites do not and cannot represent them – that capitalist democracy is in fact not really democratic at all – then is it really justified to merely speak of a series of ‘anti-austerity protests’, or can we identify something more substantive in these mobilizations? In our empirical discussion, we briefly tried to show that the occupations in Madrid, Athens, and New York each contained both a negative and a positive element: they were at once a rebellion against austerity and a mobilization for autonomy and real, direct democracy. Whether a lasting transnational movement will emerge out of these mobilizations is another question, but what seems clear is that citizens in these three countries were asking themselves the same questions at roughly the same time: if austerity erases our future, and capitalism is inherently anti-democratic, then what is real democracy? And how can we mobilize and organize ourselves in order to bring such real democracy about, even if only temporarily in prefigurative form?

Some have noted that the general assemblies at Sol, Syntagma, and Zuccotti Park – marking a sort of return to the old Athenian model of the polis – may be a seedling of real democracy. More recently, these experiments in horizontality have been joined by the neighborhood forums in Istanbul, the assemblies in Brazil, and the ‘plenums’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina. So is that real democracy? We asked Manolis Glezos, the respected 91-year-old WWII resistance hero, direct democracy advocate, and anti-austerity campaigner, who is now an MP for the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) in Greece. To our initial surprise, Glezos’s stern reply was: “No. This is not democracy. How can a few thousand people assembled in a square claim to speak on behalf of the millions that live in the region?” But, Glezos continued, “it is a lesson in democracy. If this movement is to survive, its direct democratic models will need to spread to the neighborhoods and the working places”. For real democracy to stand a chance, in other words, the movements will have to do a lot more than occupy a square: they will have to revolutionize productive social relations and the material basis of everyday life. In this sense, 2011 was really only just a beginning.
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