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PROTESTS IN SPAIN: Indignados, one year on

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The 15M movement (named after its start day, May 15, 2011), which became known in the international press as Indignados (Outraged), has been an outstanding Spanish contribution to global political debates. Its eruption, one year ago, prompted vast international attention --coming, as it did, right after the Arab uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt-- and became known as the Spanish Revolution. A few months later, as the movement started to weaken and lose its public presence in Spain, Occupy Wall Street hit the news and took the center of the global protest stage. Celebrations for the 15-M's first anniversary (over the May 12 week-end) were held in a large number of cities in Spain, coinciding with the second (and less successful than the October 15, 2011 call) Global Protest Day around the world, convened under a simple heading: 12M-15M --no slogans required: everyone knows.

Starting Saturday May 12, tens of thousands gathered for five days in squares and public spaces throughout the country, and bore witness to its continuing appeal to a wide, all-age, ideologically diverse social base. This comes to prove, some analysts say, the lasting impact of the ideas, concepts and messages that inspired the movement in the first place in May 2011, in a political-economic context marked by the austerity policies on an already embattled population trying to cope with an unprecedented economic downturn. The success is also proof, according to some, of the good health of the movement, now far more busy at grass-root level action than in making big headlines.

True, a sense of *déjà vu* was in the air, and the enthusiasm fuelled by the political effects of the Arab Spring has been fading away somehow as consciousness of the fact that the "revolution" is likely to take some time has gradually set in. True, the large assembly meetings with their endless and ineffective decision-making have shown their limits. But according to an opinion poll conducted in Spain after the anniversary celebrations and published on May 20 by *El País*, 68% of the Spanish population --and 75% of the Spanish youth-- is "sympathetic" to the movement (up two percentage points from last year). The movement may be relatively small, but its message seems to have struck a chord with the general population.

May 15 2011 (15-M: the label was probably inspired by the Egyptian January 25 Revolution) took everyone by surprise. A fringe protest against rising unemployment ended up with several activists arrested in Madrid, and the ensuing demon-

stration against police repression escalated. The demonstration was called for by a little known, mostly web-based group by the name of Democracia Real Ya (Real Democracy Now), to be held in Spain's main provincial capitals and, although it did not rally large numbers (an estimated 130.000 in the whole of Spain, and about 20.000 in the largest demonstration, in Madrid), its novel format and demands caught the immediate attention of Spanish and even international media, bang in the middle of an election campaign for local and regional elections. Numbers soon snowballed when word got out over the internet and was relayed by traditional media outlets: what began as a group of fewer than 500 activists reached an estimated 50.000 protesters in Madrid only within less than a week.

The protesters whose arrests had sparked the original demonstration were released and immediately joined the others in the square. By the time they arrived, the demonstration had turned into a sit-in and it was no longer just about their treatment by the police, but about (among others) government corruption, lack of media pluralism, bank bailouts, unemployment, home evictions, mortgage conditions, austerity measures and privatization. Squares in Madrid, Barcelona, and 60 other cities throughout Spain filled with protesters of all ages and conditions carrying placards and banners with slogans such as "They don't represent us" (meaning the politicians) and "Defend your dreams".

Puerta del Sol in Madrid and Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona became tent cities, with smaller and shorter-lived versions in a few dozen other cities. Its dwellers and visitors were a heterogeneous group of people, attracted by the Indignados' appeal (they were so named before Stéphane Hessel's pamphlet *Indignez-vous* became a best-seller in Spain), their expressions and creativity, their organizing abilities and their undeniable communication skills (particularly through social networks). Importantly, they were united on three basic issues: rejection of political parties, opposition to the diktats of the economic power, and rejection of employment precariousness for the sake of competitiveness. Some Arab Spring inspiration was also definitely there: of the 3 spaces of the Barcelona tent city, for instance, one bore the name 'Tahrir' and another 'Palestine' (the third space was 'Iceland'). Everywhere you looked, there were banners calling for change and "real democracy". The squares were thick with a sense of hope, which was all the more striking considering the effects the prescribed economic remedies were having on South-European countries. It was a nuanced sense of hope, though, for it was based on a sober estimate of the sheer size of the problem: "We want a new society: this one does not work anymore".

The strong intuition, one year ago, that this was not just another crisis has now become a certainty. The double-dip pattern of the economic downturn in Europe has been confirmed as an increasing number of EU economies plunge, one after the other, into their second recession in two years. In January, on the eve of Davos 2012, the *Financial Times* launched a series on "rethinking capitalism", whose first piece (published on January 8), by John Plender, perfectly summarized the trouble: "Greedy bankers, overpaid executives, anemic growth, stubbornly high unemployment –these are just a few of the things that have lately driven protesters on to the streets and caused the wider public in the developed world to become disgruntled about capitalism. The system, in all its different varieties, is widely perceived to be failing to deliver." Today it should come to no surprise that more and more people in the West feel that politicians –and political parties– are the product of a system that has ended up by not delivering at all. To the extent that slogans manage to encapsulate widely shared feelings, the following –heard last year in Puerta del Sol, Madrid– is certainly paradigmatic: "It's not that we don't like the system. It's the system that doesn't like us".

One year ago, and even more so today, there is a growing and widespread sense of injustice among citizens who just cannot understand why governments bail out

banks, but not people --and widespread indignation too, at the apparent impunity of those who have --so blatantly, in some cases-- mismanaged the economy. Justice and equality being the basic elements of the social contract, the prevailing feeling is that something has gone awfully wrong. To come out of this *Great Recession* will certainly take much longer than expected, and as inequality and global economic imbalances take their local toll --exceedingly high in some places like Southern Europe--, movements such as Indignados may well have a larger role to play.

Some analysts point to the resilience of the Indignados, who successfully extended their occupation of public spaces last year far longer than anyone thought, as one of the key factors to understand the movement then and now. The fact that 15-M was more a sum of local internet-coordinated mobilizations than a centralized movement meant that when the Indignados were eventually evicted from Puerta del Sol and Plaça Catalunya, the movement was able to carry on. And it has done so in two main directions: grass-root action in city quarters and neighborhoods and focus on a few clear issues, to-the-point messages and practical, down-to-earth campaigns on matters which are relevant to the everyday life of citizens --such as the fight against home evictions, in which they have scored a fair amount of victories, thus strengthening their social backing.

How has this affected the *Res Publica*? Not in voting behavior --at least, apparently, not yet: as predicted by the polls, Zapatero's Socialists lost to Rajoy's People's Party at the November 2011 general elections, and non-voters did not sky-rocket, as some had forecast. No waves at the surface. Somewhere deeper, though, the Indignados may have kick-started something which, in due course, could grow into one big wave and eventually come to shore: they have introduced many --particularly the young-- to critical thinking and political debate. Considering the obvious failure of mainstream political ideas in facing the challenges of today, it may well be them who will end up having to rethink capitalism.