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Input

VII. Revolts of the youth: Challenges and perspectives

by Ramón Espinar Merino¹²
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain)

Reframing democracy, re-politicizing policies: the political demands of the youth in the 15-M Movement

My contribution to this meeting stems from a double experience in the Spanish social struggles of the last crisis period. On the one hand, I am developing a research agenda on the 15-M Movement, focusing on the urban discourse and its connection with housing rights, public spaces and squatting practices deployed by the Movement. On the other hand, since the outbreak of the protests I have participated as an activist in the platform “Juventud Sin Futuro”, which draws together young activists aware of our ever-increasing precarious living conditions. This contribution will thus be based on both experiences, offering an overview of the phenomenon according to the chairman’s request, rather than addressing these issues from a tight scholarly perspective.

To begin with, it should be admitted that, in the Southern European political context, we have so far no explanation on the political behaviour of the youth *vis-à-vis* the so-called financial crisis; that is, no explanation that can be de-linked from the analysis of the social and economic situation. As far as the Spanish case is concerned – and the Spanish is not far from other Southern European experiences –, a generational perspective is needed in order to understand the particular context in which youth-based social movements have emerged as political actors that substantially affect political agendas. This generational perspective offers a particular framing of the political crisis, since from at least 2008 the reasonable welfare and prosperity expectations on behalf of the young people belonging to the middle classes have been unmatched with real opportunities. The promises of the European Welfare State model, based on a tacit social agreement consisting of the idea that “as long as young people do their homework (basically attaining a university degree and learning one or several foreign languages), opportunities to have a prosper future will open up”, have been broken up by economic facts on a daily basis. Unemployment rates have increased over 25% – and over

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Ramón Espinar is developing his PhD thesis at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain). Contact: ramon.espinar@uam.es

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50% for young people –, emigration due to the economic predicament has boosted, mini-jobs have proliferated, and the Troika austerity measures offer everything but a flattering future. As a result of this framing of the social context, collective action phenomena, such as the 15-M Movement, emerged all over the country. As I sustain in my contribution, the events and actions gathered under the label *#spanishrevolution* indicate that this social movement has put on the table a political operation of re-naming and re-framing the financial crisis around three key-issues: (i) the engagement towards a reconstruction of the meaning of contemporary democracy, (ii) the rejection of the current crisis management as *unavoidable*, and (iii) the re-appropriation of urban space as part of the political sphere. These key issues put forward a general picture of the nodal idea of this presentation: this last generation of collective action experiences in Southern Europe, and mainly in Spain, is constructing a “political moment” in Jacques Rancière’s terms. Concomitantly, the far-reaching economic crisis is coupled by a breaking up of the social bases, which, in the last decades, had sustained the political regimes of our so-called Welfare States. The current collapse process of these Welfare regimes produces dramatic social outcomes but, on the other hand, it is opening up the political sphere to discussions and redefinitions, absent in the last decades, and breaking up the Neoliberal Governance/ Post-political Consensus dyad. Against this backdrop, the political action of the social movement (15-M) is a key fact that must be taken into account in the interpretations of future meanings and contents of the concepts of Democracy and Citizenship.

Key words

Democracy – Citizenship – Collective Action – 15-M Movement – Neoliberalism – Post politics

1. Contextualizing the protests.

Since May 15 2011, upon the emergence of the 15-M Movement, Spain has witnessed an ever-increasing mobilization and social protests against the management of the economic crisis, which started in 2008. This contribution is set out to briefly illustrate the participation of certain social groups – particularly the youth – in the cycle of protests, as well as to offer some insights into the relation between protests and the concepts of Democracy and Citizenship.

The mobilizations related to the economic crisis, which have swept Southern Europe in the last years, can hardly be explained strictly in terms of political agency. Taking into account, no matter how restrictedly, the social context, i.e. the Structure of Political Opportunities (Tarrow, 2008), in which the protests broke out, is indispensable. In this sense, our approach must be double, and the analysis must be undertaken both from the perspective of the economic crisis and the strictly political crisis that opened up as a result of the first, and the framing which social movements that participated in the mobilizations –especially the 15-M Movement–, have made thereof.

In the economic terrain, the crisis started in 2008 and the meltdown of specifically the financial and building sectors, both former pillars of the Spanish economy (López and Rodríguez, 2012; Méndez, 2012), has yielded a particular grim picture of the economic situation: after two decades of “Spanish economic miracle”, in which the GDP *per capita* raised from 11.400 Euros in 1991 to 23.900 in 2008 (OECD, 2012), the Spanish economy hits the highest unemployment rates in the EU – 25,02 % in the third term of 2012 (EPA3, 2012) – especially as refers to youth unemployment – which was close to 50 % in the same period (EPA, 2012). This situation, together with public expenditure reduction, especially dramatic as refers to social services expenditure allocations, not only in the State general budget but also at local and regional levels in the last 4 years (COSCE Report, 2012),

³ The *Encuesta de Población Activa* (Economically Active Population Survey) is a survey conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE) on a quarterly basis. It targets households and its main goal is to obtain data on the labor force (categorized as employed and unemployed) and on the people outside the labor market.

university fee rise, the suppression of state rental assistance and, generally speaking, the whole set of imposed “austerity” measures have torn into pieces the future expectations of the youth in Spain.

The antecedents of the current Political System in Spain and the stability that had reigned in the country in the transition period from dictatorship to parliamentary monarchy (Martínez, 2012; Taibo, 2012) make it difficult to understand why the situation has changed overnight. From a predictable public sphere safe from explicit conflicts, except for the nationalist demands that several territories pose to the State, to the point of turning into a scenario of processes of political action led by increasingly disenchanting citizens (*indignados*) whose discourse anchors around two fundamental issues:

- The questioning of a model of democracy presented as insufficient in terms of legitimacy and participation. That democracy is perceived by the “*indignados*” as bi-partisan, thus hardly representative of social diversity, frequently sparked with corruption scandals, with very reduced (plus ironclad) mechanisms of popular participation, and a political system highly marked by the overrepresentation of political elites.
- The contesting of a model of economic growth viewed as weak as far as social cohesion is concerned, especially when compared to other countries in the European Union. This model is heavily rooted on outsourcing and financing, with a labour market based on the increasingly precarious situation of certain population sectors, which suffer low salaries, high prices and temporality, whereas other social sectors enjoy an ongoing enriching process, far beyond reasonable limits.

2. The democratic framing of the 15-M Movement.

Many recent publications (Abellán, Sequera, Janoschka 2012; Bonet, 2012; Errejón, 2011; Espinar y Abellán, 2012; Sevilla, Fernández y Urbán, 2012; Taibo, 2011; Torres, 2011; Viejo, 2011) have pointed at the 15-M Movement as the origin of the cycle of protest in Spain. Likewise, these works have advanced some of the fundamental framings around which the movement’s repertoires (Tilly, 2010) and discourses will revolve.

The strategy and development of a discourse about “democracy” does not stem from a deep and structured reflection process, but rather from a latent social discourse that gathers form in the mobilizations around the motto “We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers”. This discourse, beyond an abstract feeling of disappointment, sediments and is articulated on two levels: On the one hand, it reveals people’s rejection of political and economic elites and their management of the economic crisis; on the other hand, it starts to articulate a We-They dichotomy that places the elites pitted against the political community. That rejection of elites, which has deployed its great potential to gather people around its main topics and demands expressed on the demonstrations (CIS, 2012), represents, for the 15-M Movement discourse, a ‘diagnosis frame’ (Bonet, 2012).

This ‘diagnosis frame’ is sustained by the formation of a budding identity seen as “popular”, belonging to “*los de abajo*”⁴ or the “99 %” and in stark contrast with the political elites. This is complemented by a strategy consisting of the development of specific meanings to “floating signifiers” which own social prestige, but lack a well-delineated content. Therefore, concepts such as Democracy and Citizenship start to be reframed and to provide themselves with an antagonist content, *polemical*, in so far as it represents “the contrary to what exists”, which is perceived as unfair. In other words, if the Democracy-signifier owns a scarcely defined meaning, but with positive overtones, the political order represented as unfair cannot possibly incarnate those meanings and, therefore, cannot be “democratic”.

My interest here lies, therefore, not in tracking back the origins of a certain conception of democracy or whether this is rightly or wrongly used by the 15-M, but the fact that the Movement brings to the fore a struggle for the meaning of the concept of Democracy.

⁴ This is an impossible-to-translate sentence. Literally it means “the people from below”.

According to Agamben (2011) in contemporary Western societies, rather than in a specific regime, the word Democracy constitutes a sort of battlefield in which its meaning is disputed. It almost goes without saying that the concept entails a set of rules. However, when almost all members of the political community agree on the label “democrat” not being a distinctive trait, but the common denominator that encompasses *everybody*, then the Democracy-signifier is devoid of a unique content and the struggle to fill it in with meaning, over its content’s hegemony, turns into the decisive element in contemporary political struggles. The term “democracy” thus turns into a “floating signifier” (Laclau, 2000: 305). It is precisely in the struggle for the social construction of its meaning where the 15-M Movement has posed its challenge to the current state of affairs, both in terms of discourse and in its spatial practices. In this same vein, one of the most celebrated and repeated ideas in the early days of the Movement was that, “The immorality of million-winning companies firing their employees is not a discussion that we should address from left- or right-wing positions, but from a democracy standpoint”. Constant allusions to Democracy, reinforcing it in terms of diffuse legitimacy (Montero y Morlino, 1995: 11-12), but concretely pointing at the erosion of political elites, does not *per se* provide empirically evidence, but allows us to situate the analysis of the Movement in a context of struggle to fill in the Democracy-signifier with content.

The struggle for hegemony in the ascription of meaning to Democracy is open. On the one hand, the Movement strategically uses the condition of “floating signifier” in order to make it sway towards a re-modelling of Democracy distinct from the existent model. On the other hand, a crucial distinction is put forward: between a public sphere inaccessible to citizens – “privatized” in this sense – and a public space which stands not only as the scenario in which the Movement deploys its activity, but as a substantial content for the Movement. The recovery of the city and the construction of public spaces where the demands and practices of representation of the antagonistic Movement can be developed are landmarks for the Movement.

Accordingly, in a second stage within the protests development, two practices that fill in the concept with meaning emerge. Firstly, mobilizations – such as September 6 2012 themed “Merkel go home” – put forward the necessity to bind democracy to sovereignty. The loss of State sovereignty is asserted in two ways: vis-à-vis the European Union and private entities, indicating the lack of accountability on behalf of actors who make crucial decisions for people’s lives. Secondly, pre-figurative political experiences touching upon housing rights – squatting, demonstrations against evictions – or the development of assemblies in public spaces emerge as crucial repertoires of collective action for the Movement.

3. Democracy in Action: Post-politics’ breakdown

Both pre-figurative strategies and the hegemonic strategy of questioning “floating signifiers” have thus configured a new model of relation with a specific kind of Democracy. The 15-M Movement does not demand the current Political System to provide answers to the current social unrest but, and here is where the Movement’s radicalism stems from, points at the weariness of the economic cycle and the structural impossibility to get out of the crisis of neoliberalism *via* neoliberal policies. This requires (i) re-politicizing society, and (ii) recovering for the public sphere the public debate of certain issues that had been left aside.

This diagnosis coincides with an understanding of the mode of organization of the public sphere that has run parallel to the neoliberal model – from different perspectives it has been called “post-politics” or “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2002, Rancière, 2012; Swingedouw, 2011; Žižek, 2006). Broadly speaking, it consists of the disappearance from public debate of the issues that fundamentally concern the organization of the political community. These having undergone a process of naturalization and restricted to specialists’ and technicians’ criteria – especially paradigmatic is the case of economic policies – are governed by an “epochal common sense” (Gramsci, 1980), which, in this case, corresponds to the neoliberal framing.

It is not random that the demands from “end-of-the-neoliberal-cycle” political movements have

drawn together, despite their strong economic component, around the concept of Democracy, and the overcoming of the current state of affairs in terms of the deepening into central issues of political life in public debates. The breakdown of the future prosperity expectations in Welfare Systems for a whole generation allows us to think of a profound legitimacy crisis of political regimes which derives, precisely, of their incapacity to provide answers and to satisfy welfare demands. The fact that these demands are not being directed through the traditional participation channels and that these do not necessarily point at the satisfaction of material needs, but the reconfiguration of the political regime (which is no longer able to generate confidence or future expectations), paves the way for a an opportunity-open scenario, which is essentially democratic.

Ranci ere (2012) calls “political moments” to those moments in which the naturalization of the existent order breaks down, and contestation processes open up. These modify, in an all-encompassing way, the values and behaviours of the majority in the community around the demands of one or several social groups “excluded” from decisional processes. This stands in stark contrast to the “police” logic in which politics takes place through the established channels, which are accepted generally and where social conflicts, remain latent.

Far from suggesting “the necessity for these movements to adopt democratic participatory means”, what this cycle of protest asserts is the real democratic participation, which implies the revision of the fundamentals upon which life in the community is built. Therefore, the *polemical* nature (Mouffe, 2008) of the demands of those who frame their structural situation around a shared identity based on their exclusion from decisional processes does not at all undermine democratic participation, but rather reinforces it. It is also unnecessary to regulate or intervene in the exercise of citizenship on behalf of the youth. They have opened up a cycle in which the political regime is being questioned and, ultimately, have provided the means for inclusive deliberative processes that guarantee the exercise of citizenship.

The economic crisis has brought along appalling social consequences, but has also put forward the possibility for a whole generation to be included in the community *via* political participation, no matter whether it is considered formal or informal. This inclusion ultimately represents the exercise of citizenship and democracy in action.

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