

## **Report from Spain: On the May 15<sup>th</sup> Movement**

(Editor/translator's note: The following is a brief account of the culmination of the "May 15<sup>th</sup> movement" in Barcelona. The movement had begun in Madrid with the occupation of the central Plaza del Sol by tens of thousands of young people, on the model of Tahrir Square in Cairo and other similar mass gatherings of the past six months. After an early (and failed) attempt to clear the Plaza del Sol by police, the movement spread, with occupations of public space in 50 other Spanish cities. The account (and critique) that follow applies generally to the Spanish movement as a whole.

Two problems of translation presented themselves. The first was of the Spanish word "ciudadano", or "citizen", with the overtones of the ideology of the affirmation of "civil society" that spread over the previous three decades with the collapse of the older paradigm based on variants of Marxian, or pseudo-Marxian, class struggle. The use of this term of self-identification by the movement went hand in hand with its initial overwhelming rejection of political parties, unions, violence and explicit politics of any kind, as well as its affirmation of a "real" democracy with, presumably, everyone as "citizens". The word "citizen" in English does not carry quite the same set of associations (outside of similarly ideological and largely academic circles), but nothing better presented itself.

The second translation difficulty was the account's play on the words "indignos", (i.e. contemptible), identifying the political class as a whole, and "indignados" (angry, enraged), as the rank-and-file of the movement called themselves. Since no comparable play on words presents itself in English, the Spanish words are indicated in parentheses where they occur).

To the Editors:

The meeting called at the Barcelona encampment, intending to block access of the professional politicians to the Catalan Parliament, showed two distinct aspects in the course of the morning and early afternoon of Wednesday June 15<sup>th</sup>, and seemed to mark the beginning of the end of the movement, which had begun a month earlier.

June 15<sup>th</sup> was chosen for protest because, on that day, the Catalan parliament was scheduled to approve budgets with radical cuts in health care and education, and was also scheduled to implement mechanisms of privatization and to make shifts from public to private firms (insurance companies, private clinics, etc.), the effects of which had already been felt in previous months in (among other things) the elimination of services and ever-longer waiting lists in hospitals.

Various neighborhood assemblies converged on the park of the Ciutadella. The camp was set up during the night, around the fence of the park where the Parliament is located, and starting at 7 AM on the 15<sup>th</sup>, it was swelling with people arriving at every park entrance. On neither the 14<sup>th</sup> nor the 15<sup>th</sup>, however, did the crowd reach the numbers seen on Friday May 27<sup>th</sup>... Were the much-touted "alternative" media not working? Were the very people

who had called the demo themselves frightened, since disrupting parliamentary activity is a felony, with prison sentences of several years?

Whatever the case, the demonstrators (3,000?) were numerous enough to force the MPs to enter the park, huddled behind lines of police and jeered by the crowd, while the President of the Generalitat, the Minister of Interior, and more than thirty MPs had to arrive by a makeshift helicopter airlift.

Naturally, this made this contemptible grouping (“ los indignos”) indignant in turn. After all, people accustomed to making their own personal use of public assets and to making instrumental use of democracy in the defense of their caste interests, could not swallow this humiliation. On this point, there was unanimity among fascists, xenophobes, apologists for the central government in Madrid, Catalan nationalists of different shades, leftists, environmentalists and parvenus of every stripe, ensconced one and all in Parliament. The unanimous statement they issued showed democracy to be explicitly the alibi of people who are conscious accomplices of the ongoing kleptocratic degeneration of the administration of public life. The MPs showed the same consensus in their shameful passivity when faced with the offensive presence of Felix Millet, well-known swindler of public funds and generous benefactor of the Catalan cultural and political elite, who appeared before this same parliament with a haughty silence and a smile of contempt.

The media of mass intoxication set aside their condescending paternalism in portraying, to that point, the May 15 movement, and thereafter set about their task of misrepresenting and criminalizing. Starting at noon that very same Wednesday, they tried to sow division among the demonstrators, resorting to their usual stratagems, distinguishing between "violent" and "peaceful" people, and spreading messages against violent people on twitter, etc; they did all this with the aim of diverting-- and distorting- attention to the well-worn topic of violence. One spokesman for the Ministry of the Interior, in a further demonstration of his ineptitude and crass bad faith, characterized the gathering at the park as “urban guerrilla warfare”.

Nonetheless, that Wednesday morning indeed threatened to draw a red line, (as the indignant (indignado) president of the Generalitat put it). That was the red line separating the representatives of the kleptocratic system, protected by thugs with privileged labor contracts, from the people literally thrown into the street, homeless, diminished in their rights (health, education, employment, pensions) and having no other recourse than to throw their bodies against the armed violence of the state; it was a red line, finally, showing the isolation of a political caste more and more deeply entrenched in its own inanity.

Did the “Citizens” Desert?

Although the morning passed without incident, apart from those organized by the Ministry of the Interior and by the media of intimidation, the threats by President Mas at noon on Wednesday, announcing that he would unleash his guards against the protesters,

seem to have had their effect on the self-described "pacifists." The meeting of the afternoon, where unions, neighborhood organizations (also present in the morning, but without much enthusiasm) and other associations of so-called civil society had promised to attend, was notably short of people. Where were the health care workers, who had been in the streets a few weeks earlier, and who had been so active against the cuts? Where were the "combative" trade unionists, now that the central government, the previous week, had approved new rules severely undermining the framework of industrial relations? It is difficult to escape the feeling that the "enraged" (indignados) had played politics and had, again, left in the lurch those people really expressing their outrage (indignacion) in front of Parliament.

One does not have to fall into conspiratorial paranoia to suspect that there was a sotto voce "disassembly" underfoot to isolate the supposedly "violent" people from the pacifists. Although the mass meeting in front of Parliament was supposed to be an all-day affair, *the self-proclaimed "pacifists" called a meeting at noon on Wednesday, with very few people in attendance, canceling the afternoon part of the demo, and in a clear maneuver aimed at sowing disarray*, urged the people in the Ciutadella to head for the la Placa Sant Jaume. Was this some incoherence of the spontaneous movement, or was it a maneuver of those "citizen" ideologues embedded in the movement itself, trying to abort it at a time when the May 15 movement was showing more and more outrage (indignacion)? Whatever the case, it amounted to capitulating to the blackmail of the criminalization being touted by the government-media apparatus.

It would not, therefore, be off the mark to conclude that the dominant component of the mobilization beginning on May 15 was, as intimated previously, a symptom of the proletarianization of the middle class, as well as an accurate expression of its political dimension and its limited capacity to counter that trend. It showed the political inconsistency of a social movement based on a wrong-headed pacifism which fell into the trap of the media's spectacular dichotomy between violence and pacifism, and whose no less ambiguous talk of democratic regeneration was recuperated by those same representative bodies the movement initially seemed to denounce. When things reached this point, the riff-raff of the political class (los indignos) had defeated the enraged people in the movement (los indignados).

The May 15 movement will, therefore, go down as one more episode in the process of social decomposition, an episode whose massive presence on the streets rattled the cages of those who administer the increasingly fragile capitalist socioeconomic order. We must therefore focus our attention on what happens in the street and not on the TV or computer screen (the solidarity movements of residents against evictions and resistance occurring at the grassroots level of society are some examples).

The lived experience of the past month suggests that the experience of political conflict of the people who unleashed the May 15 mobilization is predominantly intellectual, academic, ethical, and ideological, i.e. an experience specific to those generations who lived with the illusion of economic expansion under the hegemony of finance capital over the last two decades, and who are puzzled by its collapse. These generations had

benefited from a certain accumulation of family resources and from public spending (a social peace subsidized with scholarships, employment and training schemes, NGOs, etc.), which ran parallel to the consolidation of the democracy elaborated at the time of Franco's death, and whose social and political experience is not based on confrontation. This would explain why the May 15 movement, at least initially, did not call for a break with the "system", but rather for its cleansing.

Nonetheless, the "system" continues. During the week prior to the mobilization at the Catalan Parliament, the central government in Madrid, given the absence of any agreement between employers and the unions, enacted new laws amounting to a further hollowing out of the guidelines for labor relations, just as it was launching a new debt issue (at twice the interest on German debt). Thus the combined forces of capitalist order, without much difficulty, managed to criminalize the movement of May, but will they be able to criminalize an unstoppable reality?

C. V. Barcelona, June 21, 2011

PS-On Sunday June 19<sup>th</sup>, a great sea of humanity filled the streets of Barcelona (more than 100,000 people, this time with "all" those missing in action on Wednesday) with a predominantly playful, festive atmosphere, one touting the actions of the previous month, and in which the political machines of the institutional opposition were trying to claim their share of the credit. What will come of this remains to be seen. The movement will have at least served the purpose of showing the practical limitations of mass mobilizations of a "citizen" (cudadano) character, which seek to regenerate institutions in a context defined by the rampant degradation of the material conditions of life and by democratic totalitarianism.