

The project of democracy and the 15M movement in Spain

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Abstract

This paper stages an encounter between an autonomist idea of democracy and the 2011 movement in Spain. While I hope the paper contributes to our understanding of the Spanish case, my main goal is to improve and extend this way of conceiving and practicing democracy by learning lessons the events in Spain have to teach us. What we can learn from Spain, the paper argues, is at least three lessons: 1) in any project for democracy there will always be multiple desires present, 2) people will need to practice democracy in order to grow stronger, and 3) the “we” of democracy cannot be taken for granted but must be actively negotiated.

Keywords: democracy, Spain, 15M movement

Introduction

This paper brings together two projects: a particularly autonomist conception of democracy as a radical political idea, and the various movements in Spain that were sparked by the demonstrations of May 15, 2011 and the encampments that followed. Throughout the paper I will call the former “democracy” and the latter “15M.” My intent is to bring democracy and the 15M into an encounter and a rich dialogue with each other that will challenge both participants and help them to grow stronger.

I will talk more about the paper’s particular idea of democracy below, but for now let me say that it is not at all the same as the prevailing idea of the term. That prevailing idea assumes that democracy is the same thing as the liberal-democratic State, with its elections, representatives, and sovereign power – a democracy in which people are given some say in who rules them. In contrast, democracy as it is conceived here is when people do not have rulers. Democracy is when people manage their affairs for themselves.¹ This way of conceiving democracy is very old, with roots in the Greek tradition before Plato. But I take my inspiration primarily from a strain of political theory that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, in the wake of the apparent failures of State socialism. As thinkers on the political left struggled with how to move forward after Stalin, they developed new ideas, or remobilized old ones, always in

¹ This idea of democracy is often modified as “direct democracy” or “radical democracy,” but I argue that the word democracy *already* means people managing their affairs directly for themselves. We feel compelled to attach such redundant modifiers because we have been trained to think that democracy is the same thing as liberal-democratic government. It’s not.

conversation with political practice. The Hungarian Revolution of 1953, for example, led to a revived theoretical interest in autonomous workers' councils as a political form. In the other direction, a spate of autonomist theorizing in the mid-1960s in France influenced the events in Paris in 1968.

So this paper, by bringing the idea of democracy into a dialogue with the empirical case of the 15M, is continuing a dialogue between radical theory and practice that has been ongoing for some time. Of course, readers of *Interface* will likely be in favor of such a dialogue. But still, let me give my reasons why I think this dialogue is worth continuing. I am a political theorist whose work is devoted to rethinking the idea of democracy, and in fact I do so primarily by engaging in a close reading of the *theoretical* sources. I have found these is great value in gathering together a collection of ideas of democracy, across the centuries, that resonate with each other to produce a coherent new idea. Nevertheless, I don't think an examination of those sources alone is sufficient. Empirical investigation of democratic *practice* offers something additional that is essential. First, concrete efforts to create democracy, like the 15M, always produce something that is new in the successes they achieve and the challenges they encounter. We should document and learn from both so that we will continue to build a store of collective knowledge about the practice of democracy that can be a resource for, and an inspiration to, future theorization. Second – and this reason is perhaps less well-worn – when we look actively for democracy in actual practice and bring that practice into engagement with theory, we find that democracy is much more common than we tend to assume. Democracy – real democracy – is not so rare, fantastical, utopian, or impractical as we might think. It is, on the contrary, an active and ongoing project that is being practiced by people all over the world, every day. And we can move beyond the question of whether or not democracy is possible or practical (it clearly is), and we can focus instead on how we can improve our practice.

To investigate that last question, the paper begins by giving presenting a theory of democracy as I understand it. It then presents an account of the 15M that is as detailed as possible in the space a journal article allows. This account provides something of the history of the 15M, the many other movements it was inspired by, the political context in which it emerged, the tactics it employed, and the successes and failures it experienced. The main element of this account, however, is a detailed exploration of the multiple political desires that the movement expressed. Lastly, the paper concludes by reflecting on the lessons democrats can learn from the 15M, which are 1) a desire for democracy is commonly accompanied by a desire to be ruled, and this internal struggle must be attended to 2) democracy is a project that must be *practiced* over the long term so that we may improve, and 3) the “we” of democracy is not an easy question, but a hard one, one that requires our most careful attention.

A theory of democracy

The concept of democracy presented here draws inspiration from a minor

current in political philosophy that advocates for what might be called autonomist (and maybe also anarchist, libertarian, or communist) political desires. This current has very long roots, but it has become more vibrant in the present era since about the mid-1950s, when the failures of State socialism became increasingly apparent. This current is large enough to make it difficult to mention all its elements, so let me highlight some particularly important sources.² The work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1991, 1997, esp. Chapters 1-3, 8, 11), particularly his idea of autonomy and his insistence on workers' organizations that are controlled by workers themselves rather than by hierarchical Unions or Parties, is an early touchstone. Castoriadis was a radical political theorist, but he was also a noted Sovietologist, and he perceived and exposed the disaster of Soviet State socialism earlier than most (e.g. 1997, Chapter 7). Also important is the work of Henri Lefebvre (2009, Chapters 4-6) and Raul Vaneigem (1974), both of whom sought to extend the concept of *autogestion*, or workers' self-management, beyond the workplace into all sectors of society.³ Following on in that same spirit is the joint work of Deleuze and Guattari in the 1970s (1977, 1987). Their radically anti-State political vision sought to free what they called "desiring-production" from the various apparatuses that capture and contain its energy. A bit later still, Jacques Ranciere (e.g. 1999 and 2007) explicitly theorized an idea of "democracy" that imagines it to be not a system of rule, but a popular force thrown up from below that never stops disrupting the system of rule. And these French voices resonate strongly with many in Italy, where, in the 1960s and 70s, a theory and practice of "workers' autonomy" (e.g. *Autonomia Operaia*) insisted workers be able to directly control their own lives. During the course of those decades, the idea of *autonomia* was extended beyond workers and the factory, to contexts such as housing and services in urban neighborhoods (Lotta Continua 1973). Though the movement in Italy was crushed in the late 1970s, this autonomist line of thought continued to be developed in the work of theorists like Antonio Negri (1999), Paolo Virno (1996), and Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2015). And of course, today, Negri's joint work with Michael Hardt is probably the best known manifestation of this tradition (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2004). Not all these authors use the term "democracy" to describe what they are calling for, although most do. And so that is the name I will use in drawing these various political desires together into what I hope is a coherent concept of democracy.

So, as I understand it here, democracy means that people manage their affairs themselves. They do not surrender their power to an entity other than themselves. They keep their power, and use it to govern their own lives. In order to do so, they must choose to become active. They must *take up* their own power and begin using it. They must engage in the practice, every day, of managing their affairs themselves. Through that practice they will develop as

2 Additional sources not mentioned include Clastres 1989, Abensour 2011, Illuminati 1996.

3 Of course Guy Debord's work is in this same tradition, it is just less explicitly interested in self-management.

democrats: they will come to know their own power better, and they will become better at using it wisely.

The corollary of that first principle, that people manage their affairs for themselves, is that in democracy people do not let something that is *other than* them manage their affairs *for* them. In democracy, people must not only become active, they must also *refuse* the alienation of their power to an entity that is other than them. The most famous such entity is the “artificial person” that Hobbes invented in 1651,⁴ a feigned, imagined being that is created to receive the power that actual persons surrender to it. Its explicit purpose is to use that power to control them. The most well-known of such entities is of course the modern State, which Hobbes’ work did so much to found. But equally artificial in their personhood are entities like the Party, the Union, or “the leadership” of any organization.⁵

A common concern expressed about this way of thinking about democracy is to call it utopian, or at least not very pragmatic. This democracy *sounds* nice, the critique goes, but it’s an impossible dream that we will never achieve, so we should work on something more practical instead. The answer to this critique is that democracy is entirely practical. It is something that can be practiced today, something that is *already* being practiced today. We should not mistake democracy for utopia. Democracy should not be seen as an ideal community at the end of history, one we expect to arrive at some time in the future. Nor is democracy a return to the state of nature, in Hobbes’ terms, a falling back into the community we had *before* we surrendered our power to the artificial person (see 1985, Chapters 13-17). Democracy is not properly any sort of community at all. Democracy is, instead, a *project*.⁶ It is a project that we take up, commit ourselves to, and try our best to carry forward into the future. Democracy is a perpetual project to retain, rather than surrender, our power, and to strengthen our ability to manage our affairs for ourselves. To be sure, that project always involves an effort to construct a democratic community. But that community is properly a *result* of the democratic project, not the substance of democracy itself.

I find it quite useful to follow Deleuze and Guattari’s lead and think of this democratic project in terms of desire.⁷ Democracy is a project to augment our

4 See his *Leviathan*, Chapter 16.

5 This list would also include the well-worn fiction called “the People.” Democracy does not mean, *pace* Locke and Rousseau, that people form themselves up into an abstraction called “the People.” That abstraction is no less fictional, imagined, or alienating than the State. Democracy insists, instead, that people remain themselves.

6 This way of thinking is strongly indebted to Lefebvre’s (2009, 61) conception of democracy: “Many democrats imagine that democracy is a type of stable condition toward which we...must tend. No...Democracy is nothing other than the struggle for democracy.”

7 Of course I take my main inspiration here from Deleuze & Guattari, most especially *Anti-Oedipus*. However, this concept is quite lively in Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* (1991) as well, where it animates the struggle of inhabitants/users against the abstract space of the State and capitalism, and for their own, differential space.

desire to manage our affairs for ourselves, and to atrophy, or leave aside, our desire to have our affairs managed for us. That might seem a simple matter: who would *not* want to retain their own power?⁸ Who would choose to be ruled by something other than themselves? We would. We do. Both of these desires are entirely native to us. We desire *both* to manage our affairs for ourselves *and* to have our affairs managed for us. Both desires are part of our inheritance as humans, part of our “species-being,” as Marx (1994) would put it. When our project of democracy is going well, when we are practicing diligently, our native desire for democracy will grow stronger, and our native desire to be governed will wither. It isn’t so much that we repress or sublimate the latter. It should wither. If we are doing democracy well, if we are actively managing our affairs in our daily practice, our desire to be ruled will fall into disuse, and it will become weak. Even if it does, however, we still must remain attentive. Our desire to be ruled can never be annihilated. It will always be there, striving to grow stronger. The project of democracy requires that we remain intentional and vigilant, continually nurturing our desire for democracy and leaving aside our desire to be ruled.

Of course any project for democracy does not take place in a vacuum. In our particular epoch, our way of life is dominated by the sovereign State and the capitalist Corporation. Our desire to have our affairs managed for us is strong. It has been developed over years of practice. It has been regularized to the point of being an unconscious assumption. We *have* to have a State! Workers *have* to have a Union to gain any power! The economy will collapse without healthy Corporations! Our desire to manage our affairs for ourselves is much weaker, much less attended to, much less practiced. But that does not mean it is not there. It is always at work, even if it is relatively less strong right now. And so in the present era, we need to be especially attentive to our democratic desires, to realize they are there, to learn about them, and to help them grow stronger. That is why I have taken up a project of scholarship that searches actively for this desire, that pays careful attention to it whenever I find it. The idea of this project is to build a little file, a scrapbook of clippings. I think in this era we very much need to record the existence of a desire for democracy, and to declare out loud that it exists, that it is at work. The more we look for democracy in this way, the larger our little file will grow, and the more we will understand that democracy is actually pretty common, that it is being practiced all over the world, that maybe it isn’t as rare as we often think it is.

Methodological note

And so this paper sits in the context of that project of seeking out and recording a desire for democracy. I want to seek out and bear witness to the story of democratic desires as they exist in empirical practice. I acknowledge that agenda, and I embrace it. At the same time, that agenda can lead to problems.

8 “For there are very few so foolish,” says Hobbes, “that had not rather govern themselves, than be governed by others” (1985, Chapter 15).

It can tempt me to mischaracterize the 15M, to overemphasize its democratic desires and ignore its undemocratic ones. Such a mis-characterization would do a disservice to the movement and its history, to be sure.⁹ But it would also do a disservice to my project. I want to record democratic desire, but in doing so I want to understand it as it actually exists in a rich context of actual practice. In almost every case, and certainly in the case of the 15M, democratic desire exists in a context in which a desire to be ruled is also at work. The project of democracy will always have to reckon with such other, often conflicting desires. And so in each case we need to understand not just an abstracted and disembodied desire for democracy, but the whole landscape of political desire in which a given movement operated, in as much detail as possible, so that we can learn the lessons it has to teach us.

So I approach the 15M looking for a desire for democracy, but with the methodological commitment to also see and report fully the other, often non-democratic, desires that were present as well. I will do my best to tell a rich story that is worthy of the complex reality of the 15M experience. And I will also do what I can, always, to advance the project of democracy. I also want to acknowledge some real methodological limits of this account. It is an empirical study done from afar by someone who does not speak Spanish or read it fluently. I was not present in Spain in 2011, and so I do not have my own observational data. I can only use observations reported by people who were there (e.g. Fernandez-Savater 2011b, and numerous other online reports from participants). In addition, there are numerous archives of primary documents generated during the 15M (e.g. 15mpedia.org), much of which is available in English. And of course I have examined intensively the secondary scholarship in English-language academic sources (e.g. Flesher Fominaya, 2015b). The latter makes up the core of my data sources, and of course these use a range of sources themselves, including observation, interviews, and archival documents. Throughout the empirical section, for almost all factual claims I have meticulously referenced the sources from which they came so the reader will be able to corroborate them. I will make my account of the 15M as rich, full, and true as I can, given these shortcomings. But, to be clear, I do not intend this paper's main contribution that it advances our empirical understanding of the 15M. Others have done excellent work on this question using primary research. My goal is not to correct or improve that work. Instead, this paper's contribution is to enhance, extend, and deepen our conception of autonomist democracy by bringing into a sustained engagement with a detailed empirical account of the 15M. I do hope, also, that the paper will also shed some small amount of new light on the 15M. Maybe I can see it with different eyes and produce something useful for those who know the case much better than I. I will of course let them be the judge of that.

9 For a thoughtful analysis of similar methodological issues, see Prentoulis and Thomassen (2013a, 169-70).

Democratic desires in the context of the 15M

A very brief history

The 15M movement announced itself to the world on May 15, 2011 in the form of a one-day march, protest, and demonstration in cities all over Spain. It was organized, mostly online, by a large number of groups, the most well-known of which were *iDemocracia Real Ya!* (Real Democracy Now!) and *Juventud Sin Futuro* (Youth Without a Future) (Antentas 2015; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 171; Durgan and Sans 2012, 97-8; Martinez-Arboleda 2015). The purpose of the demonstrations was to express the indignation felt by ordinary Spaniards at how their political leaders were handling the fallout of the global financial crisis that began in 2008. The participants gathered in the main squares of several Spanish cities, particularly in *Puerta del Sol* in Madrid and in *Plaça de Catalunya* in Barcelona. In *Puerta del Sol* the protesters continued in the square for a time, and eventually a small number of protesters spontaneously decided to occupy the square, as protesters had in Egypt, and to camp in *Sol* overnight. A day later the police demanded the campers clear the square, and they took violent measures to force them to do so (Durgan and Sans 2012, 98; Oikonomakis and Roos 2013, 9; Jimenez and Estalella 2011, 20; Sevilla-Buitrago 2015). In the days and weeks that followed, the number of campers in Madrid and in other cities grew quickly. They were inspired by the idea of occupation, and they were outraged by the violence of the police. Thus emerged the *acampadas*, or encampments, a major component of the 15M that I will say more about shortly (Nunes 2012).

The participants in the 15M came to be known as “*indignados*,” those who are indignant, or outraged.¹⁰ The motivations for the 15M were certainly complex, but some broad trends can be identified. They were outraged at the high rates of unemployment and precarious work in Spain, especially among the young (Antentas 2015, 147; Martinez and Bernardos, 2015; Taibo 2012, 156; Durgan and Sans 2012). They were concerned about the growing lack of affordable shelter in all Spanish cities, particularly in Madrid and Barcelona, and the increasingly common occurrence of mortgage defaults, foreclosures, and evictions (Flesher Fominaya 2015a). On top of these important economic concerns, they were also angry at the Spanish political elite and its two major political Parties, the right-wing *Partido Popular* (PP) and the center-left *Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol* (PSOE). Both were thought to be unconcerned with the needs of Spanish citizens and far too concerned with the needs of financial elites (*iDemocracia Real YA!* 2011; Castellanos, Henar, and Gonzalez 2011, Charnock, Purcell, and Ribera-Fumaz 2011) both local Spanish banks and international financial powers.¹¹ There was a very strong sense among *indignados* that these financial elites had caused the crisis but that Spanish politicians were not going

10 For an exploration of this core emotion of indignation, see Antentas 2015, 141.

11 This vague term had a very concrete and consistent meaning throughout the 15M: it meant the “Troika” of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

hold them accountable. Moreover, the PP and the PSOE were eagerly passing neoliberal austerity policies (privatization of public assets, deregulation of business, bailouts for banks) under the direction of the financial elites, while they were also cutting public services (housing, health, education) and salaries for public employees (Martínez and Bernardos 2015, 158). In the context of this outrage at the political class, the *indignados* were subjected to police violence in the public square on May 15 and in the days after. It increased their indignation.

But the *indignados* were not only outraged. They also expressed a positive vision for the future.¹² Perhaps the most prominent element of this vision was a desire for what was often called “real democracy.” The core of the idea was that democracy as it was currently conceived of in Spain, which is to say a liberal-democratic State apparatus controlled in turns by the PP and the PSOE, is not *real* democracy. For some *indignados*, “real democracy” meant something very close to democracy as I understand it, a direct democracy beyond the State, in which people manage their affairs for themselves. For others, the term meant something less radical, something like a greatly reformed State apparatus with much more robust practices of public participation and accountability. In addition to this core desire for “real democracy,” participants in the 15M articulated other positive desires. Material goods like affordable housing and secure employment with good pay, pensions, and health benefits were paramount. They also called for robust public services like education, health care, water, libraries, and so on. Participants also desired better protection of their freedoms, including speech, assembly, and digital information.

While the movement was named for the remarkable flare-up of demonstrations that took place on May 15, 2011, the 15M as a whole encompassed a wide range of actions. As we saw, the demonstrations on May 15 gave way to the *acampadas*. These lasted for about a month in Madrid and Barcelona, and smaller *acampadas* were staged in many Spanish cities for shorter periods (Gelderloos 2011). It was in the *acampadas* that many of the ideas and practices of the 15M were forged. Participants occupied central squares in cities all over Spain. They typically managed the *acampadas* using the general assembly technique (*asamblea* in Spanish), in which decisions were made by participants using consensus procedures. In most places there were also “committees,” which were essentially sub-assemblies that worked on specific issues (Lopez and Garcia 2014). Some committees were logistical bodies that worked to organize the needs of the *acampada*: food, medical, communications, etc. Others were political committees that discussed what was wrong with the country and how it could be improved (Castellanos, Henar, and Gonzalez 2011, 111). Most *asambleas* and committees decided to organize themselves largely horizontally, with minimal hierarchical structure or centralized leadership (Dhaliwal, 2012).

12 “I am outraged,” says the Manifesto of iDemocracia Real YA!, but its next sentence is, “I think I can change it.” iDemocracia Real YA! “Manifesto (English).

In June, the participants in the *acampadas* decided, by consensus, to dismantle them. But they did so with the intention of streaming the political energy of the *acampadas* into other actions (Martinez and San Juan 2014, 12). This change in direction was successful for the most part, and the *acampadas* gave way to many follow-on initiatives that have influenced Spanish politics all the way through to today. The first of these was the neighborhood assemblies. These are groups of neighbors, organized with a great degree of horizontality, that manage a range of neighborhood affairs. These assemblies had a long history before the 15M (Castells 1983), but they were reinvigorated by the new energy of the movement (see Martinez and Bernardos 2015, 162, 167; Durgan and Sans 2012, 100; Dhaliwal 2012).

In addition to the neighborhood assemblies, *indignados* staged a series of shorter occupations in 2011 in central squares in cities all over Spain. They also carried out a series of “Indignant People’s Marches” through the Spanish countryside (and even one to Brussels (Take the Square 2011)) whose aim was to spread the 15M movement beyond the cities and to collect concerns and proposals from rural and small-town inhabitants as well.¹³ They also conducted social forums to discuss the crisis and the future of the movement. In the years following 2011 *indignados* also created all sorts of “platforms,” which are political proposals that serve as a organizing point for action. The most well-known of these is the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* or PAH (Platform of those Affected by Mortgages), which continues today and struggles for an end to evictions and for an adequate supply of affordable housing.¹⁴ PAH also fed into a revitalized movement for municipalism in Spain, an initiative that pursues many of the 15M’s desires by electing sympathetic candidates to citywide and regional offices. The former leader of PAH, Ada Colau, was elected the mayor of Barcelona in 2015 on a municipalist platform called *Barcelona en Comú* (Flesher Fominaya 2015a; Martinez-Arboleda 2015). Yet another 15M follow-on has been the so-called *mareas* or tides. These have been largely spontaneous movements by workers and others in particular sectors (health, public administration, education), to defend their jobs and improve their pay and working conditions (Antentas 2015, 151; Martinez and Bernardos 2015, 168). Often these take the form of protests against cuts in government spending, since many participants are public-sector employees. Tides have also emerged to pursue more general goals, like the defense of the environment or the protection of social services. One last follow-on effect of the 15M is the 2014 creation of a new political Party, *Podemos*, which grew quickly and has achieved considerable electoral success (Flesher Fominaya 2014; Martinez-Arboleda 2015). Many of *Podemos*’ creators saw it as a way to turn the energy of the 15M into an effort to gain institutional State power, which could then be used to make significant changes to policy.

13 On which see the article on the 15Mpedia, available at https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Marcha_Popular_Indignada#Propuestas.

14 PAH was active and strong before 2011, but like so many other efforts it grew and was invigorated by the 15M.

Historical antecedents

The eruption of indignation and mobilization that the 15M produced was extraordinary, to be sure, but it did not come out of the blue. It was inspired and influenced by many other movements that had come before, both in Spain and around the world.¹⁵ Perhaps the most venerable influence was the so-called Spanish Revolution, the experiments in popular self-governance and self-management carried out by Spaniards between 1936 and 1939 during the Spanish Civil War (Bolloten 1984; Dolgoff 1974; Oikonomakis and Roos 2013, 11). Of course those experiments, despite their many successes, ultimately gave way to the fascist victory, which resulted in almost 40 years of authoritarian government in Spain. When the Franco regime finally ended in 1975, a “transition” was achieved that moved Spain away from fascism and into liberal democracy. There is a pervasive sense in Spanish politics that the transition was the result of a “consensus,” and this consensus must be preserved so that the country does not revert to fascism. As a result, after the transition there was a strong taboo in Spain against questioning the prevailing liberal-democratic regime (Antentas 2015, 142-3; Cameron 2014). And so, in the period between the transition and 2011, activists tended to be quite circumspect in the way they expressed dissent. In this context, the 15M’s willingness to radically call into question the liberal-democratic regime as a whole was thus quite unusual and extremely bold (Martinez and Bernardos 2015, 160; Fernandez-Savater 2011b).¹⁶

The 15M was also strongly influenced by the longstanding practice of *asambleas barriales*, or neighborhood assemblies, in cities throughout Spain.¹⁷ These enjoyed a new energy as a result of the 15M, as I just mentioned, but they were also one of the main inspirations for the movement’s *asamblea* technique, its horizontal organization, and its emphasis on urban inhabitants discussing, deliberating, and making decisions for themselves.

The 15M’s central concern for the issue of affordable housing was a continuation of existing struggles like the PAH and *V de Vivienda*, which pressured the State to guarantee the existing legal right to affordable housing (Flesher Fominaya 2015b, 155; Durgan and Sans 2012, 97; Flesher Fominaya 2015a, 468). Also important in this respect were more radical efforts like *Okupa*, which uses direct action to establish autonomous squats and community centers (Martinez and Bernardos 2015, 174).¹⁸ *Okupa* activists were very influential in the May 15 decision to stay in the square and establish the *acampadas* (Martinez and

15 Cristina Flesher Fominaya’s work makes this argument insistently and convincingly.

16 This dynamic also made life difficult for the PAH in their use of the *escrache* technique, on which see Cristina Flesher Fominaya 2015, 476ff.

17 You can see just one small example at <http://valencia.democraciarealya.es/post/5897848950/asambleas-en-los-barrios>. See also Oikonomakis and Roos, 2013, 11.

18 See also the article on the 15Mpedia, available at https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Movimiento_okupa.

Bernardos 2015, 164; Martinez and San Juan 2014, 17; Oikonomakis and Roos 2013, 11), and for them this act of camping, of occupying public space in order to inhabit it, was very much a statement about the crisis of affordable housing in Spain (Maeckelbergh 2012).

Also important as a precursor to the 15M were a range of popular struggles prior to 2011 to defend public services – education, health, water, transportation, and so on – from neoliberal policies that would privatize them or eliminate them altogether. One key example of these efforts were the many mobilizations against the so-called “Bologna Plan” to privatize higher education, and veterans of this struggle later became key participants in the *acampadas* (Flesher Fominaya 2015b, 155).

There were also several new initiatives that arose at about the same time as the 15M and in a sense constituted its body. *Juventud Sin Futuro*, for example, was created in February of 2011 to articulate the frustrations of Spain’s “youth without a future.” *iDemocracia Real Ya!* was part of this spate of new initiatives as well. Another important element here were a diverse network of “hacktivists,” who were engaged in a struggle to ensure that people could access, manage, and control the increasingly important common resource of digital information (Martinez and San Juan 2014, 14; Jimenez and Estalella 2011, 20).¹⁹ Yet another contemporaneous effort was *No Les Votes*, which encouraged Spaniards to break the two-party control of government by abstaining from the electoral system.

The influences on the 15M certainly extended beyond Spain as well. In many respects, the 15M is a continuation of a decades-long struggle against neoliberal globalization. A core element of this struggle emerged in 1994, when the Zapatista uprising of indigenous people in Chiapas, Mexico coupled a militant anti-neoliberalism with a relatively horizontal and decentralized leadership structure that worked to achieve greater *autonomía* (autonomy) for rural villages in Mexico. In addition to their domestic mobilization, the Zapatistas organized a series of yearly *encuentros* (encounters) that drew together hundreds of like-minded struggles all over the world. The first *encuentro* was in Chiapas in 1996, but the second, in 1997, was in Spain. In 1998, People’s Global Action (PGA) was formed in Geneva as a follow-on effort inspired by the *encuentros*. Spanish activists who had participated in PGA and the wider Global Justice Movement (GJM), of which PGA was a part, went on to play a key role in the 15M (Maeckelbergh 2012; Flesher Fominaya 2015b, 148). The emergence of PGA in 1998 was of course followed by the spectacular World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999, and those gave rise to almost a decade of anti-neoliberal GJM activism. The GJM, heir to the Zapatista spirit, tended to favor horizontal organization, valued consensus decision-making, and had a strong autonomist/anarchist influence that carried over quite clearly into

¹⁹ It should have been no surprise that when the *acampadas* were established, one of the first tents the participants set up was the media center that began live-streaming the events in the square.

the 15M (Flesher Fominaya 2015b; Graeber 2004).

Perhaps the strongest manifestation of this bloom of anti-neoliberal activism was in Argentina in 2001. There, an acute economic crisis led to a markedly decentralized and leaderless resistance movement whose rallying cry was *que se vayan todos!* (“get rid of them all!”),²⁰ a call for a wholesale reset of the current governing structure. The *indignados* were to adopt this cry verbatim. The Argentinians also used *asambleas barriales* to organize themselves horizontally, and they shared with the Zapatistas this strong taste for *autonomía* and self-management (Sitrin 2006; Adamovsky 2003).

Of course these simmering tensions and sporadic outbursts of resistance came to a head in the 2007-8 financial crisis, when the global economy crashed. What followed in Iceland was particularly important, because in that country a swift and potent protest movement forced the conservative government to step down, the banks that caused the crisis were held accountable, and the Icelandic constitution was rewritten in a participatory process (Martinez and San Juan 2014, 14; Oikonomakis and Roos 2013, 11). Iceland demonstrated to everyone else that protest movements could have profound effects, and the waves of mobilization against the crisis increased. In October of 2010, Stephane Hessel published *Indignez-vous!* in France, and it gained an audience in many other languages. In December of 2010 in Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation began the rolling events of the Arab Spring, which were to be a central inspiration to the 15M (Antentas 2015, 137; Durgan and Sans 2012, 97; Oikonomakis and Roos 2013, 13; Puig 2011). In January of 2011, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen rose in protest against their authoritarian governments, demanding a more democratic form of life. In February, Bahrain and Libya followed suit, and in Egypt President Hosni Mubarak resigned. On March 2, the UK was roiled by more general demonstrations “against the cuts,” which decried the persistent neoliberal attempt to eliminate social spending of all kinds. That same month in Portugal the *geracao a rasca* (precarious generation) erupted in protest against persistently low wages, temporary jobs, and a vanishing social safety net (Antentas 2015, 140). When the 15M was born on May 15, therefore, it was part of a long line of mobilization, protest, and outrage at the crisis, at neoliberalization, at austerity, at economic precarity, and at objectionable government. The Greeks continued that line later in May, and then in September, quite belatedly, Occupy Wall Street added an American voice to the outcry.

The movement had “two souls”

So the 15M was heir to a very large number of popular actions that stretch far back into the twentieth century and all over the world. And so we should not be surprised that desires expressed by participants in the 15M were rich and

20 A more literal translation expresses the phrase’s subjunctive hope: “would that they all go!”

complex. Amador Fernández-Savater (2011a) reports walking around in the early days of Sol and seeing “three posters in a row: ‘Self-management,’ ‘Reform the electoral laws,’ [and] ‘We don’t want corrupt politicians, we want efficient managers’.” We want to manage ourselves, in other words, *and* we want to be managed by others. “What is the nature of this movement?” Savater asks. “Is it a revolutionary movement that proposes generalized self-management? Or is it a liberal movement that asks for political representation that is more representative of people?”²¹ Carlos Taibo (2012) argues that the movement had “two souls.” Taking up the idea of the movement's multiplicity, I characterize the 15M as presenting a number of different contrasts. That is, across a number of different issues, the movement expressed multiple and very often conflicting desires. It wanted an old-left model of politics and it also wanted a new-left one. It wanted to embrace the Party and State and it also wanted to live without them. It wanted to reform capitalism through the welfare State and it also wanted to overthrow capitalism altogether. It wanted a centralized, hierarchical leadership and it also wanted a horizontal, decentralized, leaderless movement (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 167). It wanted to have unity and cohesion and it also wanted to be pluralist and incorporate differences. In the following pages, I will discuss each of these sets of contrasting desires in turn.

Institutional left and autonomous left

Cristina Flesher Fominaya agrees that the movement embraced two very different political sensibilities: one associated with what she calls the “institutional left” and one that favored *autonomía* instead (Flesher Fominaya 2015b). The former is rooted in a traditional left imagination, which is to say an orthodox Marxist imagination. It says that capitalism, with its exploitative class relations, is overwhelmingly the most important problem facing society, and so “only the working class” can make meaningful social change.²² It must organize itself into Unions and Parties that advocate for class interests. The workers’ movement must be unified around the agenda of promoting workers’ interests over and above the interests of capitalists. For this agenda to advance, Unions and Parties must be hierarchically organized and disciplined, with a centralized leadership that can act quickly and decisively.

For as long as this orthodox, institutional left idea has existed, it has been shadowed by a heterodox desire for something different, for an open, autonomous, horizontally organized movement. This other desire agrees that capitalism is a problem, but it does not insist that capitalism is necessarily more important than, for example, patriarchy, or racism, or heteronormativity. Class is a critical political category, but so are gender, race, sexuality, and more. A

21 “¿Cuál es la naturaleza de este movimiento? ¿Se trata de un movimiento revolucionario que propone la autogestión generalizada? ¿Se trata de un movimiento liberal que pide una representación política del pueblo más representativa?”

22 A good example of this way of thinking in the literature on the 15M is Durgan and Sans 2012.

political movement need not be unified around one political imperative. Indeed, it is stronger when it is pluralist and inclusive of diverse political agendas and diverse subject positions. Moreover, a movement's organization should not be hierarchical, centralized, and top-down, but horizontal, decentralized, and bottom-up.²³

The struggle between these different ways of being politically “left” has been present since dawn of capitalism, but the orthodox, institutional approach has for the most part been dominant. In the 20th century, that dominance has been profoundly shaken by the patent failure of State socialism to be anything other than a dictatorship. It was undermined further by movements in the 1960s that struggled to broaden left politics beyond capitalism and the working class. One of the key arguments of these new-left movements in the 1960s was that politics is not confined to working class struggles on the factory floor, that it also takes place in the home, in the neighborhood, in the city, in the ecosystem, and in the colonial territories. The 15M is of course heir to this opening out from the factory, and this inheritance can be seen in its focus on the affordable housing needs of residents in urban neighborhoods in addition to its focus on the more traditional questions like jobs, wages, and benefits. This heterodox attention to the neighborhood and the city, for example, was acute enough that in the *acampadas* that some even argued that they were paying too *much* attention to the neighborhood, and they needed to take the struggle beyond the neighborhood to include the workplace (Antentas 2015, 151). Along similar lines, there was a strong desire in the 15M to exclude Unions and Parties from the demonstrations, assemblies, and *acampadas* (Acampadasol 2011; Durgan and Sans 2012, 93; Maeckelbergh 2012, 224; Flesher Fominaya 2015b, 144; Martinez and Bernardos 2015, 162; Martinez and San Juan 2014, 14; Jimenez and Estalella 2011). Union members were welcome to participate, this line of thinking went, but not as representatives of their organization. They were encouraged, instead, to represent only themselves.

However, while this autonomous-left desire sometimes seemed ascendant, even predominant, in the 15M, that should not cause us to think that the institutional left was absent. A desire that is central to the institutional left, to create hierarchical organizations and institutions with strong leaders that can act quickly and get concrete results, was very much present in the 15M. It asserted itself repeatedly. At no point was a desire for *autonomía* and self-management total. It is probably fair to say that *autonomía* achieved the level of common sense in the 15M, but it only did so by being constantly reasserted and argued for, over and above expressions of desire, always present, for the institutional left (see especially Flesher Fominaya 2015b).

23 A nice review of this way of thinking is in Oikonomakis and Roos 2013, 3-4.

The State and the alienation of power

The 15M was also composed of multiple and contrasting desires with respect to the question at the heart of my conception of democracy: the alienation of power. Participants clearly wanted to retain their power and use it to manage their affairs themselves. But they also wanted to allow their power to be alienated, to surrender it to something other than themselves. The former desire desires democracy as I conceive it, and the latter desire is a desire to be ruled, which typically manifests itself as a desire for the State and the Party.

A desire to retain power

Democratic desire in the 15M rejected both the State and the Party because they necessarily alienate power from people and vest it in an artificial person. The claim made in this sense was not that *this particular* manifestation of the State (or government) had failed to represent people adequately. It claimed that *all* States, all Parties, all Governments, and all Unions are institutions, artificial entities, that have been created to be other than and separate from actual people. These institutions take the place of people and make decisions in their stead. People, this way of thinking holds, should not allow the artificial person to take their place. People should take their *own* place and make decisions themselves. In the same way, for this line of thinking, all forms of representation alienate power from people. A representative *re-presents* people, but those people should, instead, *present* themselves and govern themselves directly (Antentas 2015, 146; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013b, 2; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 173). Even in a liberal democracy like Spain, where people have some say in choosing their representatives, the fundamental alienation that representation institutes is present (Lopez and Garcia 2014; Oikonomakis and Roos 2013, 6).²⁴ In this way of thinking, the cry of *que se vayan todos* did not mean “we want both of the current corrupt parties, the PP and the PSOE, to leave power.” It meant, “we want to clear the ground of all Parties” and govern ourselves (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 176; Durgan and Sans 2012, 102; Martinez-Arboleda 2015; Dhaliwal 2012, 259).²⁵ From the perspective of this desire, the rise of the new Party, *Podemos*, in the wake of the 15M was precisely the wrong move. This desire did not want to surrender its power to a new, improved Party and let it govern them.²⁶ Those who desired democracy wanted, instead, to become active and to manage their affairs

24 See also https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Democracia_directa and <http://www.d-3.info/democraciadirecta/>.

25 In this context, the other main cry, “*no nos representan*,” which means “they do not represent us,” could be taken to imply something like, “they do not represent us because they can’t. The entire operation of representation is impossible.”

26 “I wonder,” worried one critic on Twitter, “how long it will take for people to stop doing things for themselves and start expecting [Podemos leader] Pablo Iglesias to do it for them,” see Flesher Fominaya 2014, 6 and Taibo 2012, 157.

themselves.

Certainly the most important manifestations of this desire were the *asambleas* and the committees in the *acampadas* (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 177). Here people presented themselves, their actual bodies, in order to discuss issues and, using consensus methods, deliberate toward a decision. For the most part, the assemblies were less interested in making demands on the powers that be, and more interested in examining their own political desire. Their goal was less to solve the problems the politicians had failed to solve than to develop their own ability to directly manage their affairs themselves.²⁷ This element of the 15M drew inspiration from the practices of the anarchist collectives that democratically managed whole regions of Spain in the 1930s, but it also drew heavily from the consensus-based *encuentros* of the Zapatistas, the *asambleas* in Argentina in 2001, and the horizontal practices of the Global Justice Movement (Maeckelbergh 2012). And after 2011 this desire led to a wave of autonomous initiatives (self-managed organizations, co-operatives, squats, solidarity networks, etc.) that were launched in the 15M's wake (Martinez and San Juan 2014, 31).

A desire to surrender power

At the same time, a desire to surrender power was also very much present in the 15M. This desire was most evident in calls to *reinvent* the State. These calls agreed that the *current* State was irredeemably corrupt. It was seen as an *Estado del Malestar* or Malfare State (Antentas 2015, 140)²⁸ whose purpose was to satisfy Spanish and international financial interests by cutting public spending and expanding austerity policies.²⁹ But this desire did not reject *all* States. Instead, it wanted to re-establish a strong welfare State, with its generous public spending, active regulation of the economy, and robust protection for workers. This desire felt such a State as the most promising way forward for Spain (Flesher Fominaya 2015b, 154; Martinez and San Juan 2014, 3, 16, 23; Dhaliwal 2012). A renewed welfare State was seen as something that could work *for* the people by ending the cuts, regulating (or even nationalizing!) the banks, reforming the tax code, addressing unemployment, and expanding the provision of affordable housing.³⁰ Here the phrase *que se vayan todos* did

27 Sevilla-Buitrago (2015) even calls this practice "generalized self-management," which is the identical term used in France in the 1960s and 1970s, as we saw. At least in the literature surrounding 15M, there is therefore this direct intellectual connection to the heterodox tradition of the new left.

28 See also https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Estado_del_Malestar.

29 This desire also defined the principle Spanish Unions in the same way. They were seen as in league with the government and the financial interests, helping to advance austerity. And they were themselves hierarchical, ossified, disconnected from workers. In most cases they had tiny memberships, since the Spanish workforce had been massively de-unionized in the era of post-Fordism. See Antentas 2015, 139, 149; Martinez and San Juan 2014, 16; Durgan and Sans 2012; Gelderloos 2012.

30 For example, the 16 proposals made by the May 20, 2011 assembly in Madrid are mostly

not mean we want to get rid of State power *per se*. It meant that *these two Parties* must go away so that *new Parties*, Parties that truly represent the people, can come to power, end austerity, solve the crisis, and save the county (Antentas 2015, 146; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 175). Similarly, here “*no nos representan*” implies “*these two parties* don't represent us effectively (but others certainly could).”

It is in the context of this desire that the 15M can be seen as a follow on from the various protests “against the cuts” in Britain to resist the privatization of public services and reinvigorate the welfare State. The most spectacular example of this in the 15M was when protesters in Barcelona encircled the parliament building to prevent legislators from casting their votes for a bill that would drastically reduce public spending (Durgan and Sans 2012, 100; Martinez and San Juan 2014, 11). Similarly, according to this desire the calls by *No Les Votes* to abstain from voting can be interpreted as a way to starve specifically the PP and the PSOE of votes so that *other Parties* might emerge. Indeed, it was common to hear 15M participants calling for thoroughgoing reforms to Spain's electoral system in order to break the domination of the PP and the PSOE and allow for other Parties to participate in governing. Of course from the perspective of this desire, the emergence of *Podemos* is precisely the *right* move: a surrender of our power to a new, improved Party, a truly *popular Party* (Flesher Fominaya 2014).³¹

So, while its new-left champions like to present the 15M as a fully autonomous, leaderless movement that entirely rejected the State (e.g. Arditi 2012; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013b; Oikonomakis and Roos 2013; Dhaliwal 2012), it clearly manifested both a desire for democracy and a desire to be ruled. It is hard to say for sure which of these desires was more prevalent. It reasonable to propose, in fact, that a desire to be ruled was the majority desire. Most participants probably thought the 15M was about reinvigorating the welfare State in response to neoliberal austerity (Flesher Fominaya 2014).³² But still, it is also clear that a desire for democracy was very much present, and it was strikingly strong. Many participants felt a desire to manage their affairs themselves, and they explored and reinforced this resonance by spending many hours *practicing* democracy. In that practice, democracy grew stronger. A

proposals to reform the State, not ignore it (Asamblea Sol 2011; Durgan and Sans 2012, 102).

31 There were many far-left Parties in Spain at the time, but they were, as a whole, a disorganized and fractious mess (Martinez-Arboleda 2015). None offered the kind of popular hope, and willingness to embrace a center-left agenda like the Welfare State, that *Podemos* did. It should be noted, however, that *Podemos* quickly transformed from a participatory, decentralized popular Party into a relatively centralized and closed organization, at least according to Martinez-Arboleda, 2015.

32 See also the proposals in the *iDemocracia Real YA!* Platform, most of which run toward a reformed, more welfare-friendly State (https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Plataforma_Democracia_Real_Ya); and see the *demanda de m3nimos* (“minimum demands”) of the Barcelona *acampada*, which again focus on making the Welfare State more robust (https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Acampada_Barcelona#Demanda_de_m.C3.ADnimos).

desire for democracy did not magically emerge, all at once, as a universal desire among 15M participants. For it to flourish, it had to be asserted, consciously and actively, over and above a desire to be ruled.

Anti-capitalism and anti-austerity

The 15M also presented contrasting desires with respect to capitalism as an economic system. Here the question is quite similar to the question with respect to the State. One desire wanted the end of the capitalist system; the other desire wanted to maintain capitalism, and only objected to *this* form of it, in which financial interests were inordinately powerful, and governments offered the population nothing more than a steady diet of austerity.

The first desire was almost certainly in the minority. It was especially strong among former GJM and current *Okupa* activists. It was uncompromisingly anti-capitalist and offered a critique of private property, wage exploitation, and so on (Maeckelbergh 2012, 208). The financial crisis of 2007-8 was seen as merely a particularly strong example of capitalism's normal pattern of destructive crises. This desire saw the precaritarization of jobs as the predictable result of capitalism's insistent drive to reduce the cost of labor. And the affordable housing crisis in Spain was seen as merely a normal cycle in a capitalist system in which urban space is privately owned and exploited for profit. One frequently seen sign put this idea well, "*no es una crisis, es el sistema*" ("it's not a crisis, it's the system"). The crisis, and all its terrible fallout, were not an inexplicable aberration, an accident caused by bad behavior by a few deviant bankers. It was, instead, characteristic of the *normal* operation of the capitalist economic system (Segovia 2012). The only solution, this desire held, was a systemic shift *away* from capitalism. This anti-capitalist position is already unusual in advanced capitalist societies, but it was even more marginalized in Spain because the few anti-capitalist parties that existed on the far left (e.g. *Izquierda Anticapitalista*) were generally fractious and roundly unsuccessful in Spanish elections (Martinez and San Juan 2014, 30; Durgan and Sans 2012, 94). If you adopt a hard-line anti-capitalist position, the lesson seemed to be, you will be irrelevant in Spanish politics.

Another desire in the 15M accepted capitalism, or assumed its existence, but forcefully rejected *this* form of capitalism, neoliberal capitalism, in which financial interests were given free reign to destroy the economy without facing any consequences (Taibo 2012, 157; Flesher Fominaya 2015a, 481). In this capitalism, welfare spending is slashed in order to service the national debt owed to international banks and European financial agencies (Cameron 2014, 1). A desire to reject this capitalism hooks neatly into a desire for the welfare State we saw above. Expanding the welfare State effectively undermines this capitalism, and promises, implicitly, to reclaim another, lost form of capitalism, in which productivity and profits are robust, the State spends freely on social programs and actively regulates the economy, Unions are strong, and wages are high.

I think it should be clear – but perhaps it bears mentioning – that only an anti-capitalist desire is consistent with a desire for democracy. People cannot retain their power and manage their affairs for themselves in a capitalist system. A capitalist Corporation is just as fully an artificial person as the State is. It is an artificial “body” that owns the means of production and therefore controls decisions about economic production. In democracy, of course, people directly manage economic production themselves.³³ As Marx (1994) argued so convincingly, capitalism alienates workers in multiple ways: from their labor, from the product of their labor, from the means of production, and from each other. Each of these alienations does violence to the core of the project of democracy: people endeavoring to retain their power and use it to manage their own affairs.

The body without organs and the body of the sovereign

There were also multiple desires within the 15M with respect to how the movement should be organized. These desires are a bit more difficult to articulate, so I will give each a technical name and then try to explain their contents in more detail. The first is a desire for what Deleuze and Guattari would call a “body without organs” (BwO) (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, e.g. 149-166). In this mode of organization, whatever organization there is *emerges* when and where it is needed. In a BwO, organization is not established *a priori* and then codified in fixed institutions. If organizations emerge and choose to coordinate with each other, they do so in a decentralized network in which no node is more important than the others. In a BwO there is no relation of sovereignty: one part of the body never has institutionalized authority over other parts of the body.³⁴ Relations between people, and groups of people, are horizontal relations of equal power, they are not hierarchical relations of control. If leaders exist, they do not become leaders by holding an office in a sovereign institution. They emerge as leaders by being active and encouraging peers to join in their initiative (Nunes 2012). They become – always temporarily – a more important hub in the network of action. The BwO is of course an ideal type, and in real practice organizations are best understood as relatively more (or less) consistent with its form.

It is possible that such a body might have difficulty rousing itself and acting effectively, and that is the main motivation for a contrasting desire, what we might call a desire for the “body of the sovereign.”³⁵ This mode of organization creates enduring institutions that organize the body into persistent structures.

33 This is the precise meaning of the French term *autogestion* – self-management (of a factory) – which was popular on the European left in the 1960s, for which see Lefebvre 2009 and Vaneigem 1974.

34 Not even the whole can be sovereign over the parts. This part-whole relation is a particular interest of Deleuze & Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1977).

35 This phrasing is also strange: I refer the curious to the passage on Hobbes' artificial person, above, or, better, to the frontispiece of *Leviathan*.

We might, therefore, also call it a body *with* organs. These institutions are arranged in a hierarchical structure such that it is always clear where sovereign authority rests. Leadership is conferred by holding a formal “office” in that structure. This mode of organization is at pains to make unequivocally clear who has the authority to decide, to speak, and to act on behalf of the body. As a result of this clarity, the body of the sovereign is thought to be able act decisively and effectively (see Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 167-8). As with the BwO, the body of the sovereign is an ideal type. Although the modern State is its archetype, even it can really only approximate its form.

These two desires were both very much present in the 15M, and they can be seen operating in myriad ways across its various activities (Sevilla-Buitrago 2015, 99). One particularly instructive case, I think, was the struggle in the *acampadas* over what authority the general assembly should have. In a given encampment, there were many “committees” that concerned themselves with various specific issues, like policy, communications, or the provision of food. Each committee met and deliberated on their own, in their own assembly. But *acampadas* also had a “general assembly” that brought together all the participants in the camp. Some wanted this general assembly to be in *horizontal* relation with the other assemblies, such that it functioned merely as a forum where each committee would come to share information about their activities (Gelderloos 2011). Others wanted the relation between the general assembly and the other assemblies to be *hierarchical*: because the general assembly was an assembly of *all* participants, they wanted it to be sovereign over the more particular assemblies. They felt it should have the power to ratify or reject the proposals formulated by the smaller assemblies (Maeckelbergh 2012; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013a, 178). Clearly the former, more horizontal approach would give each committee more freedom to take action, but it risked allowing the *acampada* to dissolve into a incoherent scatter of unrelated efforts. The latter, more hierarchical approach would limit the freedom of each committee, but many thought it would make the *acampada* more unified and therefore better able to act decisively and to articulate a clear message from the 15M to the outside world.

As the movement progressed, it became known for its leaderless, horizontal, and decentralized structure. That image is not wrong. It is true that there was a very strong desire in the 15M for the BwO, so strong that it at times appeared to pervade the movement and become common sense. Its organization more nearly approximated the BwO than the body of the sovereign. But it is important to remember that, as with a desire for democracy, the horizontality that existed was always the product of struggle. Horizontality and decentralization always had to be argued for and actively chosen by the group. To prevail in a given instance, a desire for the BwO always had to be stronger than an ever-present desire for the body of the sovereign and for the effectiveness that sovereign is thought to offer (Flesher Fominaya 2015b, 151; Dhaliwal 2012, 262).

So we should be attentive to that ever-present struggle. But with respect to

organization we should also make sure to notice how effective the organization of the *acampadas* was. Even though these settlements were organized mostly horizontally, nevertheless people effectively managed nurseries, food distribution systems, infirmaries, vegetable gardens, sanitation regimes, and complex information infrastructures (Jimenez and Estalella 2011, 23; Maeckelbergh 2012, 213; Martinez and Bernardos 2015, 165; Sevilla-Buitrago 2015, 97; Gelderloos 2011; de la Llata 2016). Throughout the course of these achievements, participants in the 15M had the opportunity to practice horizontal self-management and to develop their skills. And their evident success on this score should teach us that we are wrong if we assume that self-organization cannot be efficient. We are wrong if we think that the body needs a sovereign to act effectively. In many different areas of life, for an extended period of time, the bodies in each *acampada* organized themselves effectively on their own, mostly horizontally, without a sovereign. We should remember and emphasize that fact.

At the same time, even if they were markedly effective in organizing themselves, the *acampadas* were not at all perfect. For example, in many *acampadas* and assemblies patriarchal attitudes existed that made participation difficult for women. At times, men used sexist language, or dominated discussion, or were sexually aggressive, or belittled feminist analyses of the crisis (e.g. Castellanos, Henar, and Gonzalez 2011, 111; Ezquerro 2011). These failings are important to consider particularly in the context of the question of the organization of the body. Because the assemblies tended to not be governed by formal institutions whose leaders could impose binding rules of conduct, women could not appeal to a sovereign authority to address the problem (Gonick 2016, 222). For example, in the early days of the Madrid *acampada*, the committee for feminisms announced that its members were no longer going to sleep in the camp because of the sexual, sexist, and homophobic aggression they were experiencing (Ezquerro 2011, 9). In the absence of a sovereign who could prohibit and police such aggression, participants could only create their *own* collective response to the problem in an effort to enable women to feel safe in the camp. In this case they were unable to do so. Such self-produced solutions are not easy to achieve, but that is what is required in the absence of a sovereign. Just as we must acknowledge the organizational successes of the *acampadas*, we must also acknowledge the Madrid *acampada's* failure in this case. We are far more capable of creating a BwO than we think we are, but that should not tempt us to think that it will be easy, or that our practice will be perfect.

More generally, of course, this question of organization is central to all projects for democracy. When people undertake to leave aside the sovereign and live without pre-established, top-down controls, underlying prejudices, inequalities, and forms of oppression will almost always rise to the surface. In democracy, people must address these challenges *themselves*. But those “people” are not all the same, and they are not equal. They will nearly always encounter each other from pre-existing positions of unequal power and privilege. There is no sovereign who will declare, and enforce, equality. The democratic response to

this problem is not to return to a sovereign. Rather people must find ways to work out problems themselves. In other cases during the 15M, women (and men) did have some success with this challenge. They proposed and agreed to some norms (against sexist behavior, for a more even distribution of the opportunity to speak) that helped improve the situation, to an extent, in the camps (Lopez and Garcia 2014, 22; Antentas 2015, 152). They established and managed specific working groups, like *Feministes Indignades* in Barcelona, to discuss and articulate the feminist perspective within the 15M, and to open a space where women, lesbians, and transgender people were able to participate more fully (Ezquerro 2011). To be sure, these interventions required women to be extremely active and courageous in articulating the problem and insisting on mitigations, and it depended on men to really listen, to perceive their obligation to actively address the problem, and to commit to changing their behavior and their thinking. By no means were the outcomes achieved entirely satisfactory. Sandra Ezquerro is clear that the movement did not achieve the level of “genuinely feminist indignation” that it needed to (Ezquerro 2011). But still, we should be attentive to, and learn from, this decision by participants to make a serious, and haltingly successful, attempt to address important problems of patriarchy without relying on a sovereign authority.

Pluralism and unity

In addition to those different desires with respect to the organization of the movement, the 15M also exhibited different desires with respect to its participants and its political content. Some wanted that content to be open and plural. They argued it should include all who wanted to participate, to welcome many different subject positions (class, gender, race, sexuality, and more), and to allow different perspectives on the politics and the agenda of the movement (anti-capitalist, anti-PP-PSOE, feminist, pro-welfare-State, etc.). The *acampadas*, in particular, tended to be remarkably open to whomever wanted to participate, to get information, or to just to watch (Maeckelbergh 2012, 215). This desire for openness resonates strongly with the *autonomía* or “new-left” desire we saw earlier. At the same time, another desire, one more closely associated with the institutional or old left, insisted that the movement needed to be less open, that it needed to unify around a shared analysis of the problem (usually neoliberal capitalism), a shared subject position as members of the movement (the working class, or a modified version of that, such as “the precariat”), and a shared political agenda to pursue (see Lopez and Garcia 2014, 7).

A desire for a more open movement has long been part of the struggle of the “new left” to move beyond the restrictive imagination of the orthodox workers’ movement. In the 15M, this desire manifested itself in a concern for certain subject groups. There was an argument that young people and students as a group were particularly disadvantaged by the crisis. There was a concern for those who could not afford housing and for those who had been evicted. There was, as we saw, a feminist analysis of how the crisis impacted women

(Castellanos, Henar, and Gonzalez 2011, 112). There was a focus on neighborhood residents as users of space and public services. And there was attention to how the crisis was disproportionately harming recent immigrants to Spain.

In addition to making central these subject positions beyond the working class, some also argued more generally that pluralism was a good in itself. They felt that disagreement and even conflict inside the movement was good for its health (Maeckelbergh 2012). Including more perspectives, ensuring those perspectives were heard, and insisting that different ideas engage each other in serious argument, they said, would make the movement more vibrant, more intellectually and politically sharp, and more successful in the long run (Maeckelbergh 2012, 222-227). Such openness and pluralism means, logically, that the political agenda of the movement must be indeterminate. Its agenda cannot be established *a priori*. It must be worked out in the course of the struggle by participants themselves. To a great extent that is what happened in the 15M, this desire for openness required participants to engage each other in serious and difficult deliberation about what the 15M was, what it desired, and in what directions it should move.

But this desire for pluralism was accompanied by its contrary, a desire for unity. This desire worried that openness and pluralism would lead to disagreement and would render the movement confused and disorganized. It wanted the movement to have greater unanimity so that it could present itself to the Spanish population, and the Spanish government, with one voice that articulated a clear message. Without this unanimity, this desire worried, the 15M would appear to be merely a cacophony of different voices that knew it was upset but did not really know how it wanted to change Spain, and as a result it would have little impact on the country. This more general desire for unity was often manifested, as I suggest above, as an orthodox Marxist insistence on class and capitalism as the core idea of the movement (Lopez and Garcia 2014, 15).

The tension between these two desires can be seen, again, in the struggle of feminists to have their analysis be taken seriously (Ezquerria 2011). In the economic committee of the Madrid *acampada*, those who desired unity wanted to downplay the feminist claim that patriarchy was a core problem in Spain. The most oblivious participants simply denied that patriarchy was an important issue.³⁶ Others insisted that patriarchy, while real and important, must be seen as secondary to the *main* problem, the unifying problem, which was capitalist class oppression. On at least two occasions, initiatives to have the 15M claim that the revolution was “a feminist revolution or no revolution at all” were met with jeers, the physical removal of the message from the camp, the assertion that “the revolution is not a gender issue” (Lopez and Garcia 2014, 20-1; Castellanos, Henar, and Gonzalez 2011, 112). A desire for unity thus worked actively to prevent the emergence of Ezquerria’s (2011) “genuinely feminist

36 In Santiago de Compostela, for example, men dismissed feminist arguments about the gendered effects of the crisis as a “minor issue” (Ezquerria 2011).

indignation” in the 15M.

This question of the tension between an open pluralism and a closed unanimity was cross-cut by another desire, one felt particularly by the veterans of the Global Justice Movement, who were tired of being on the radical margins of Spanish politics and who wanted the 15M to include and activate a very broad swath of Spaniards (Flesher Fominaya 2015b, 144, 150). This element very much wanted the movement to be open and inclusive, but not so much because they wanted an inclusive new left, or because they believed that pluralism is healthy for the movement, but because they wanted the 15M to resonate as many Spaniards as possible (Lopez and Garcia 2014, 17). We can see this hope in the way *iDemocracia Real Ya!* claimed, in their calls to action, to be just like everyone else in Spain: not radical, not marginal, but entirely in line with Spanish popular opinion. Their manifesto (2011), for example, says:

We are ordinary people. We are like you...Some of us consider ourselves progressive, others conservative. Some of us are believers, some not. Some of us have clearly defined ideologies, others are apolitical, but we are all concerned and angry about the political, economic, and social outlook which we see around us: corruption among politicians, businessmen, bankers, leaving us helpless, without a voice (see also Flesher Fominaya 2014).

This group often used the term “apolitical” to define the 15M. They did not mean they were apathetic or disengaged from politics (Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen 2013a, 173; Taibo 2012, 157, Durgan and Sans 2012, 101). They meant they did not want to be connected to, and limited by, narrow political positions, such as “supporters of the PSOE,” or “anti-capitalist,” or even just “pro-Union” (Durgan and Sans 2012, 111; Gelderloos 2011). They were against the crisis, to be sure, and committed to the idea that the existing political parties were unable to effectively represent the people, but beyond that they strove have the 15M remain open to whomever shared these very broad (and widespread) core feelings. At times this desire for openness, paradoxically, worked to marginalize some voices within the movement. In the case we just saw above, among those who claimed “the revolution is not a gender issue,” some were orthodox Marxists, but others were these “apolitical” activists who did not want to raise a controversial banner like feminism because they considered it was a hot-button, “political” position that would make the 15M look radical and push people away from the cause (Ezquerria 2011). Despite these negative impacts, this “apolitical” approach also showed its mettle in the sense that the 15M did in fact attract huge numbers of people in many cities across Spain. It was consistently supported by a large majority of the Spanish population, over many years (Antentas 2015, 155, Puig 2011).³⁷ Compared to the previous decade, where GJM activists were quite marginal to the mainstream, the 15M was very

³⁷ Antentas cites *El Pais*, May 19, 2013. This popular support existed also in the United States for Occupy Wall Street. See Brown 2011.

much at the heart of the Spanish political imagination.

Participants' desire for openness and pluralism, in other words, was complex. Clearly, a democratic project does not desire to enforce unity *a priori* or from above. The old-left desire to close the community and impose a Marxist discipline is clearly not a democratic desire. The new-left attitude of openness toward pluralism is consistent with democracy's commitment to self-management by *all* people. But at the same time, openness and pluralism cannot be an unthinking article of faith. In a movement for democracy, there will always be a tension, constantly evolving, between pluralism and unity, and between openness and closure. Openness and pluralism must be proposed and defended by people themselves, and the limits to openness and pluralism must be decided and acted on by people as well.

Conclusion: Learning from the 15M

First lesson: There are multiple desires

The 15M was an extraordinary and sustained manifestation of a desire for democracy. Participants wanted to manage their affairs for themselves. They even used the word “democracy” explicitly to define what they were seeking. There is no question that the 15M understood, and said clearly, that democracy is not the same thing as the liberal-democratic State. This fact is of the greatest importance, and worth emphasizing. They expressed their desire for democracy and started practicing it in a serious way. Nevertheless, the movement *also* expressed, quite clearly, a desire to be ruled. Participants desired the State, the Party, and a strong leadership to manage their affairs for them. This desire also used the word “democracy,” but used it to mean merely a reformed liberal-democratic State that was relatively more participatory and more inclined to pursue welfare policies.

So the 15M was not purely a movement for democracy as I understand it, and we democrats should not be seduced into narrating it that way. However, at the same time we should not despair at that fact. We should, instead, learn from it. The lesson we should learn is this: in any movement like the 15M, we should expect both desires to be present. Even in a case where it seems the world is awash in a bloom of democratic desire, there will also be a desire to be ruled. If we want democracy, we should be alert to the persistence of this other desire within us. It will always be present, churning away. We will always need to ward off its return, to remain awake, and to be insistent in our desire for democracy. And should not forget that this dynamic can work the other way too: in cases where a desire for democracy seems absent, it is almost certainly there. In these cases, we should not throw up our hands in defeat. We should assume that democracy has fled. We should continue to seek out a desire for democracy. It will be more faint, harder to recognize, but it will be there. Even when it is fledgling, we can always tend it, and help it to grow.

Second lesson: We need to practice

Although democracy was widely practiced during the 15M, we should be clear-eyed in saying that the practice was not perfect. Assemblies and committees were often slow, inefficient, and at times unable to reach decisions. Even if the movement produced much hope and exhilaration, over time many participants grew fatigued and disillusioned. Some dropped out (Maeckelbergh 2012, 228; Gelderloos 2011). And, as with the case of sexism in the committees, at times they failed to treat each other well. Moreover, as we have seen, participants wanted not only democracy, but they wanted to be ruled also. And these failures of practice were likely intensified by the fact that the 15M was so large and drew so many people that were politically inexperienced (Puig 2011).

The lesson of such failings is *not* that democracy is too much to ask of us, that it is too much for us to handle. When democracy is practiced imperfectly, it does not prove that people are incapable of democracy. This argument is often expressed in the wake of such an upwelling, and we should reject it vigorously. It is equally wrong to assume the opposite, that we are naturally suited to democracy, and that we will practice it perfectly from the start. People are neither innately suited to democracy nor innately unsuited to it. Democracy is neither an impossible dream they can never realize, nor an ancient inheritance in which they will thrive if only they are allowed to claim it. Instead, democracy is a *project*. It is a project people can choose to take up, commit themselves to, and practice. At the beginning of this project, we should expect people to be inexperienced. But as they practice democracy, they will get better at it. Most participants in the 15M had not practiced democracy much. Few of us have. Most of us are used to being ruled by an artificial person, and we are not experienced at managing our affairs ourselves. We need to practice. Any failings in the democratic practice of the *indignados* point to the need for *more* democracy, not less. For all of us. More practice, more experience, more learning, so we can grow stronger, refine our skills, and get better.

Even if we must be clear-eyed, we should also not overstate the shortcomings of the 15M. The *indignados* realized great successes in democracy as well. They occupied central squares in cities all over Spain, for as long as a month, and managed life in them pretty efficiently. They provided services like food, information, medical care, child care, and so on using a markedly horizontal organizational structure that was mostly without leaders. They called into question the dominant assumption that the liberal-democratic State is the same thing as democracy. They rejected the claim of the political class that continued austerity policies were the only viable choice. And they brought to life the possibility of a different kind of movement, one that did not orient itself toward the governing authority and demand that it govern differently, but oriented itself toward itself and opened up the possibility of democracy, *real* democracy.

Third lesson: Who are “we”?

Last, and not at all least, the 15M teaches us that when we take up the project of democracy and we begin to manage our affairs for ourselves, we will realize quickly that this “we” is a complicated thing. When people refuse the State and begin managing their affairs for themselves, they are not dropped down into a state of nature where they are immediately equal and indistinguishable persons. Instead, they continue to be marked by the inequality, bias, and privilege they carried in State society. In a State society, that inequality is managed by the artificial person, and the question of how people will live together is set out in a constitution and enforced by an authority. But in democracy people must decide for themselves what to do about difference and inequality. In the 15M, as we have seen, people had to decide what to do about gender inequality and intimidation within the group. Part of their democratic practice involved developing rules to govern that behavior and procedures to enforce those rules.

This question is not at all easy. Vulnerable groups often find it incredibly useful to have a State authority to protect them from harm.³⁸ In democracy, such protection must be put in place by people themselves. In the 15M, women did not appeal to an artificial person to police the behavior of men. They set about doing themselves, in alliance with men, by setting up a series of rules to restrict behavior. I cannot say for sure whether what they achieved is better or worse than what a State-like authority inside the movement would have achieved, had it existed. Certainly what they achieved did not solve the problem fully. But still, they did achieve certain protections, certain limitations on unacceptable behavior by men. They did open up new spaces for discussion and debate in response to a felt need for them. I think we should not ignore this achievement, and we should not dismiss the potential it offers us.

This lack of a State authority to protect the vulnerable is something democracy must be honest about and take responsibility for. At the same time, I think we should see this lack not only as a weakness, but also one of the potential *strengths* of democracy. The lack of an authority forces people to *encounter each other*, rather than turning to face the artificial person. In democracy, people must face each other’s bodies and interact meaningfully to make important decisions and solve real problems. When they encounter and engage each other in this serious way – when they really *practice* democracy – they have the potential to confront and address inequality, bias, and privilege in a way that is unlikely in a State society. To put the matter in Judith Butler’s terms, while democracy can expose the vulnerable to harm from those who are more powerful, it can also open up the powerful to “interpellation” by the vulnerable (2004, esp. Chapter 2; 2015, esp. Chapter 3). In democracy, people stand face to face, body to body. Their interactions are no longer mediated, and policed, by the artificial person. Those in positions of privilege are no longer

³⁸ Of course not only does the State often fail in this task of protection, but also it is often itself the perpetrator of the harm.

insulated from direct contact with the vulnerable. The vulnerable can thus make claims and raise objections, they can interpellate the powerful. In the 15M, for example, women raised objections about gender inequality and masculine aggression by men. They did not file a claim with the State authority. They directly interpellated men. Men could not avoid hearing the objection being raised. And, just as Butler suggests, they could not avoid making a decision about how to respond. Even if there was no authority to force them to respond in a particular way, in the way we might hope, they still had to make a choice about how to respond. We should not miss what was gained here, which was this unmediated encounter of bodies, which I think offers us an incredibly heightened potential for direct and substantive discussions about how to redress gender oppression.

Coda: We, Whose Task is Wakefulness Itself

When the *indignados* set out on their march to Brussels, they carried a banner at the front that read, *vamos despacio porque vamos lejos*, we are going slow because we are going far. I think this is the right way to think about democracy. Democracy is a very long-term project, carried out over years, even decades, and its aim is to develop our desire, and our ability, to manage our affairs for ourselves. Our goal in taking up democracy isn't, primarily, to achieve certain outcomes in the short term, like better jobs, affordable housing, an end to austerity policies, and a revitalized Welfare State. If those goals are our overriding purpose, then we will be more successful taking up a State project, and giving in to our desire to be ruled.³⁹

What a desire for democracy impels us to do, instead, is to practice democracy. It urges us to become active, to encounter other people, and to engage with them in the project of self-management. It pushes us to begin assembling a new form of life, a life in which people no longer passively accept Hobbes' deadening bargain, but instead take up their own power and begin discovering what they can do. The project of democracy doesn't really bear fruit in a few election cycles. It shows its mettle in the very long term, as we engage in daily practice to develop our desire for democracy and increasingly leave aside our desire to be ruled. Perhaps one day, long in the future, when our project for democracy has come very far, we may look up from our practice and realize that our desire to be ruled is now so faint, and our desire for democracy so strong, that we can never imagine going back to our old life. Perhaps at that point we will see what the Popular Assembly of Algete was trying to say when it tweeted: *dormíamos, despertamos, y ahora tenemos insomnio crónico*, we were sleeping, we woke up, and now we have chronic insomnia (Sanchez 2012).

39 "Medicare for All" and the "Green New Deal" are the most prominent examples in the United States today.

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