

Space and the desire for democracy in the 15M

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This paper examines the relationship between democracy and space by investigating the spaces produced by the explosion of democratic desire during the 15M movement in Spain in 2011. It argues that participants produced a space that was more an agora than a parliament, more a plaza than a factory floor, and space that was more for use than for exchange. The paper argues that if the project for democracy is to thrive, it should be unceasingly attentive to the spaces that democratic desire produces, both in spectacular movements like the 15M and in the more quotidian practices of ordinary inhabitants all over the world.

KEYWORDS

15M, democracy, Lefebvre, space, Spain

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper brings together three themes: democracy, space, and the 15M movement in Spain in 2011. The 15M was many things. One of them was an explosion of the desire for democracy as I understand it. This paper is particularly interested in understanding the kinds of spaces that such an explosion produces. It does not aim to give a full account of the 15M, which was a very complex movement. Some *indignados*, as the participants were called, saw the movement as a project to develop a generalised autonomous self-management, what I call in this paper “the desire for democracy.” Others saw it as a movement to reform State institutions and produce more favourable government policies, which I call “the desire to be ruled.” The 15M was very clearly an upwelling of both of these desires (Flesher Fominaya, 2015a, 2015b). However, this paper focuses its attention only on the 15M’s desire for democracy, because its goal is to explore what kinds of spaces that democratic desire produces. That is the empirical question that animates this paper.

It is pretty clear that in the various urban uprisings that took place in 2011 the question of space was important, and that particular spaces – like Tahrir Square or *Puerta del Sol* or Zuccotti Park – mattered greatly to participants. It seems clear, moreover, that the city and the urban also mattered to these movements. However, to my mind, the academic literature on the 2011 movements has not yet grasped the importance of space very well. I don’t mean to say space has been entirely ignored, only that there has been very little work that offers a sustained analysis of why space mattered to the movements. Most of the academic work on the movements is outside geography and so generally does not examine space explicitly. Within geography, more work takes space as a focus, but even there, to my mind, the literature so far has not yet produced a very robust understanding of how space was integral to the movements.¹ A typical pattern here is to promise an analysis of space, but then not really carry that analysis through. Let me describe just a few examples. Sevilla-Buitrago, in an otherwise excellent article about Spain, says the *indignados* changed “what the center of the political space should mean in a democratic society” (2015, p. 97), without saying what the established meanings were, or what the new meanings are, or why the change might matter. Similarly, Dhaliwal makes the claim that the 15M had a “spatial politics” (2012, p. 268), but tells us very little about the specifically spatial practices the movement engaged in. He celebrates the “emergence of new spaces” (2012, p. 269), but these are really just political activities that could be done anywhere. Those writing about other movements in 2011 are similarly taciturn on the question of space. In an early attempt to make sense of the Occupy

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movement, Wyly et al. (2011) ignore space and the urban almost entirely. Kumkar (2016), in an article on Occupy Wall Street titled “The Meaning of the Park,” one that takes as its topic the tactic of occupying urban public space, does not talk much at all about space, or its meaning to the movement. Halvorsen’s analysis of “taking space” in Occupy London (2014) does well to show how the occupation brought to light a tension between traditional understandings of political action and the equally political activity of social reproduction – tensions we see in Spain as well – but ultimately his analysis offers us much more about time – “moments of rupture” and the temporal rhythms of everyday life – than it does about space. Writing about the Arab Spring in Egypt, Souza and Lipietz say that in Egypt public spaces “in a weak sense” were turned into public spaces “in a strong sense” (2011, p. 621), but they say little about the meaning of each sense, nor do they discuss how those senses were important to the protesters. One last example should finish the point: the special section about Occupy Wall Street on the *Society and Space* blog in 2011 contained almost no mention of space, let alone a sustained analysis of it.

And so we need more sustained, robust analyses of why space mattered to the movements of 2011. This paper helps address that need by carrying through an analysis of how the *indignados* conceived of, used, and produced space in their project for democracy in 2011 and in the years following. To do so, it proceeds in three parts: (a) it gives a brief account of how I understand the project of democracy, (b) it articulates, also briefly, a way to theorise space that resonates with that project for democracy, and (c) in the largest section, it offers a sustained account of what kind of space the *indignados* produced, and why that space was appropriate to their democratic desire. For the 15M, I find, the desire for democracy produced a space that had at least three qualities: it was more fully an *agora* than a parliament, it was more a *plaza* than a factory floor, and it was a space valued more for use than for exchange.

2 | THEORISING DEMOCRACY

Democracy is obviously a very fraught idea, so I need to be as clear as possible – while also being brief – about the very particular way I understand the term in the paper. That understanding is the product of the theoretical work I have been doing on democracy over the last 15 years or so. In that work, I draw inspiration from a body of radical political theory and practice that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in the work of mid-century French scholars like Cornelius Castoriadis (1988), Henri Lefebvre (e.g., many essays in 2009), and Raoul Vaneigem (2012). This work was continued by Italian autonomists like Negri (1999), Virno (2004), and Agamben (1993), and by French post-structuralists like Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1987), Abensour (2011), and Rancière (1995). Broadly speaking, that body of work takes autonomy and popular self-management² as core ethical and political values. When understood in the context of the workers’ movement, this politics calls for workers to manage economic production themselves, rather than have it managed for them by capitalist corporations, or union leaders, or party bureaucrats, or any instituted power that is other than the actual bodies of workers themselves. This desire for workers’ autonomy in the productive process has existed since the inception of the workers’ movement in capitalism, but it took on a particular intensity in the mid-20th century in the wake of the thoroughgoing disaster of State socialism. In the USSR, China, Cuba, East Germany, North Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere, a single Party controlled the State apparatus and used it to brutalise the people it ruled. Castoriadis was a respected Sovietologist, and his arguments for workers’ autonomy are bound up with his research on the crimes of the Soviet regime. As this mid-century upwelling of autonomism found its feet, there was an effort to generalise the idea of autonomy and self-management beyond the workers’ movement to other movements, and beyond the economy to other areas of life, like the neighbourhood, the school, or the family.

So, my conception of democracy takes its inspiration from this tradition of autonomism and *autogestion(e)*. For me, democracy means that all people together manage their affairs themselves. They do not allow their affairs to be managed for them by an alienated power, a power that is other than them. This way of understanding democracy often gets called “radical” or “direct” democracy, but those modifiers are unnecessary. Democracy already means that people (*demos*) retain their power (*kratos*) and use it autonomously to manage their affairs themselves.³

Granted, this kind of democracy *is* a radical vision, one that imagines changes to the very root of present political relations. And so, as with any radical vision, it doesn’t make much sense to understand it as a finished community, one in which people have fully achieved the end-state of managing their affairs entirely for themselves with no alienated power at all. We should not expect that kind of utopian vision to be realised. Instead, democracy is better thought of as a project, one in which people ceaselessly seek to become democratic. This project is an everyday activity, a practice or habit or routine, in which people affirm their own power by actively using it to manage their affairs, and actively refusing to allow alienated power to govern them. In the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari (1977), I find it most helpful to conceive of this democratic project in terms of desire. Deleuze and Guattari make clear that we desire democracy, to manage our affairs for

ourselves. But they also warn us that we also desire to be ruled, to have our affairs managed for us. And so the project of democracy, given these conflicting desires, is a project to strengthen our desire for democracy and to leave aside our desire to be ruled.⁴

3 | THEORISING DEMOCRATIC SPACE WITH LEFEBVRE

Generally speaking the tradition of radical thought that inspires my conception of democracy did not take space as a central concern. One exception, however, was the work of Henri Lefebvre, who theorised space quite intensively in a later period of his career. This section identifies and elaborates Lefebvre's idea of "differential space," which, I propose, offers significant potential as a theoretical understanding of democratic space.

In *The production of space* (1991), Lefebvre argues forcefully that capitalist control of society depends on the production of a particularly capitalist space. In France in the 1970s, he argued, capitalism had taken the form of a tight partnership between capital and the State, what he calls the "State Mode of Production" (SMP) (2009, Chapter 3). In order to maintain its domination of society, the SMP produces "abstract space," a quantified, rationalised, homogenised space, a space that is oriented toward maximising both the exchange value of space itself and the production of exchange value *in* space. Abstract space dominates society but, Lefebvre says, its dominance can never be total. Abstract space should be understood, instead, as a tendential spatial project (1991, pp. 55, 64, 287), one that tries to increasingly abstract, rationalise, and homogenise space as a way to reinforce the SMP's rule. Because this spatial project can never be completed, there always remain, in the city and in society more generally, what Lefebvre calls "differences," elements that have not been incorporated into the project of abstract space. Abstract space seeks to incorporate these differences into its standard (1991, pp. 370–371), but since its project can never be completed, abstract space can never incorporate all differences.

While most of the book is taken up by this analysis of abstract space, later in the book (esp. pp. 353ff), Lefebvre proposes an idea he calls "differential space." He begins by elaborating his particular understandings of both desire and difference. He argues that desire should be understood as something productive. Although it has often been conceived of as a lack, whereby one desires what one does not have, it can also be understood very differently, as a creative power that is able to produce something new in the world.⁵ This conception is made clear when he is distinguishing needs from desire. He says that desire "precedes needs and goes beyond them, [desire] is the yeast that causes this rather lifeless dough to rise. The resulting movement prevents stagnation and cannot help but produce differences" (1991, p. 395). Desire is the productive force, in other words, and the outcome of its production is difference. Not all difference is the same for Lefebvre, however. He distinguishes three kinds of difference: produced, induced, and reduced. Produced difference is precisely this difference produced by desire. For him it is the most profound and transformational form of difference (1991, p. 250). Induced difference, on the contrary, is a difference that results from the workings of a system of control, like the SMP. Induced difference fits within and reinforces the logic of that system. And a reduced difference is a difference that has arisen that escapes the system for a time but is then "forced back into the system by constraint and violence" (1991, p. 382). For Lefebvre, it is produced difference, the difference that is produced directly by desire, that has radical political potential. Only produced difference "presupposes the shattering of a system" (1991, p. 372).

Lefebvre understands the "differential" term in differential space to refer to this produced difference. And so differential space, for Lefebvre, is a space that is self-generating, a space that produces itself according to its own desire. It possesses its own *conatus*, its own inner urge to persist and to spread itself into the world. This urge never ceases working, and so it never ceases producing differentials, never ceases generating new spaces. Differential space, imagined this way, is a productive, creative, and self-generating force that is constantly acting on the world and on the city in and through the activity of the bodies of urban inhabitants. It does not orient itself toward abstract space in order to oppose it. It knows nothing of abstract space. Differential space can be produced – it is already being produced – by the everyday acts of urban inhabitants. These "users of space," as Lefebvre calls them (1991, pp. 51, 233, 369, 386), by the very act of living, by persisting in space, generate differential space. Their bodies, and their lives, will never cease producing differences. He says that "the fleshly body of the living being cannot live without generating, without producing, without creating differences. To deny them this is to kill them" (1991, p. 396). It is the "masses," the users of space, "among whom genuine differences exist." It is they "who at the deepest level seek difference" (1991, p. 380). Differential space, imagined this way, knows only its own desire to produce, its own self-producing project, its own unceasing drive to produce new space and new lives-in-common in the city.

Now of course, once differential space is produced through the activity of users/inhabitants, it will encounter the homogenising machine of abstract space, which will try to capture differential space, to transform its produced differences into reduced differences. So it is good to have the analysis of abstract space that Lefebvre devotes most of the book to.

The users of space will always need to fight something like a rearguard action, a struggle to ward off the attempts by abstract space to homogenise and systematise what differential space produces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). But this warding off is always secondary to the primary activity of differential space, which is to produce itself according to its own desire.

I think the project of democracy requires us to be keenly aware of this primary activity of differential space. It urges us to attend to how differential space is produced in and through the activity of urban inhabitants, how they manage that space themselves, and how they ward off abstract space so that differential space can spread and flourish. This inquiry into differential space is what I take up in the next section. Insofar as the 15M was an expression of the desire for democracy, what kinds of space did participants produce, and how did they cultivate and manage that space themselves?

4 | THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE IN THE 15M

In May 2011, people all over Spain, but especially in cities, took part in one of the most significant uprisings in the country's history.⁶ It began with an online call to fill the squares of cities around the country to express outrage at the way the government was handling the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis, the continuing lack of good jobs and affordable housing, and the insistent neoliberalisation of the Spanish political economy (Hughes, 2011, pp. 409–410). This first event took place on 15 May, which is how the movement got its “15M” moniker. Far more people answered the call than anyone expected, and the squares were overflowing with an extraordinary popular energy. As evening fell on 15 May, several participants in Madrid decided they wanted to extend the action by setting up *acampadas*, or camps, to occupy the squares and keep that popular energy alive (Martínez López & San Juan, 2014, p. 12). The *acampada* idea spread quickly to other cities, and over the course of the next month squares in cities all over Spain were occupied and used intensively to express outrage, and to hold *asambleas*, or assemblies, in which participants engaged each other in discussions and explored alternatives to the current way of life. After about a month, participants decided to disband the *acampadas* and redirect their energy into a number of different initiatives. These included reinvigorating the long-standing tradition of neighbourhood *asambleas*; rising up in *mareas*, or tides, to advocate for particular issues;⁷ developing new political parties to compete in electoral politics (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p. 6); and intensifying activism around the provision of affordable housing.

As I say in the introduction, the 15M was complex and contained many different desires. Some participants desired democracy as I understand it, others did not. Those that did desire democracy generated a very rich spatial imagination that produced all sorts of new spaces. To sum up that imagination, we could say in a sentence that the 15M produced: (a) an *agora* for popular self-management more than a parliament for elected representatives, an *agora* in which both public and private life was manifest, (b) a *plaza* to be used by urban inhabitants, more than a factory to be operated by workers, and (c) space as a common resource whose value is in its *use*, more than in exchange.

4.1 | The Agora (rather than Parliament)

As the Barcelona *acampada* unfolded in the *Plaça de Catalunya*, an arrangement of space developed such that the central area was set aside for general discussion, a congress of the whole, while the edges of the square were used for the commissions that focused on specific themes (de la Llata, 2016, p. 116). Participants, especially in Barcelona, often referred to this central area explicitly as an *agora* (De la Llata, 2016, p. 116). Of course this is a reference to the *agora* of the ancient Greek *polis*. That *agora* was, at least as Aristotle conceived of it in *Politics*, a public space in the centre of the city where citizens deliberate together – using *logos*, or rational speech – to manage the affairs of the community. Aristotle felt that this political activity was essential to the human development of the citizens of the *polis*, and so his political philosophy stresses the importance of active participation, such that each citizen engages fully in political affairs in order to practise this essential activity. Aristotle therefore imagines very minimal government institutions and systems of representation, because these would replace the essential activity of citizens. To be sure, there are any number of problems with Aristotle's philosophy, including the exclusion of women and slaves from citizenship, the insistence on reason as the highest human faculty, and the rigid distinction between the private sphere (household) and the public sphere (*agora*). So what the Barcelona *acampada* was invoking by using the name *agora*, at least in part, was the Aristotelian emphasis on popular participation in the square, on direct bodily presence with others in urban space in order to engage each other over the question of collective affairs. It was an attempt to restore “the street as a place of political communication,” as the Barcelona *acampada* put it (Dhaliwal, 2012, p. 264; see also Jiménez & Estalella, 2011). In the 15M, therefore, *agora* was the name of a space in which people turned to face each other and participate with each other in *asambleas* to manage their affairs (Martínez & Bernardos, 2015; Rovisco, 2017, p. 341; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015, p. 95). The implied contrast is with a space we might call

parliament, a space in which a few government representatives act on behalf of people, stand in for people, as they gather to discuss and make decisions about the affairs of the whole community. In producing and using *agoras*, by gathering their bodies together in assemblies to discuss their affairs, the *indignados* were turning toward each other, literally and figuratively (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013a, p. 2). They were also, as a result, turning away from parliament (Dhaliwal, 2012, p. 263; Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013b).⁸

In Madrid, the *agora* was created in *Puerta del Sol*, the Gate of the Sun, which is the main plaza in the centre of the city. *Sol* is just down the street from the *Palacio de las Cortes*, the Palace of Parliament, which houses the legislative branch of the national government. And right up against *Sol* itself is a building called the *Real Casa de Coreros*, which means the Royal House of the Post Office, but which is currently residence of the President of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, a sub-national-scale government.⁹ The *Real Casa de Coreros*, which is on the south side of the square, literally casts a shadow over *Sol*. It is a big, imposing building that seems to be standing right up against the plaza, looming over it with its shoulders thrown back and its chest puffed out (see Figure 1). When the *acampada* and its *asambleas* were in full swing, the scene was almost an exact incarnation of the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, with the *Real Casa de Coreros* as the artificial person, looming over the natural persons in the town below (Rovisco, 2017, p. 346). I don't mean to say that the *indignados* staged this scene consciously, with copies of Hobbes in their back pocket. Rather I am saying that what their autonomous collective activity produced was this material landscape of an *agora* set up right in among the spaces of parliament. That landscape made clear the contrast between the *agora* and parliament. The *agora* showed itself, in material space, to be quite clearly other than parliament, an outdoor gathering of speaking bodies and tents and signs in motion that stretched out flat across the surface, in clear contrast to the fixed, heavy, imposing, and vertical edifices of the State.

In order for the *agora* to function effectively, the *indignados* chose certain kinds of locations. They favoured open areas where people could gather and turn to face each other for discussion. Their location tended to be in the middle of the population, so that it was convenient for as many people as possible to assemble there (Maeckelbergh, 2012, pp. 214–215). The space needed to be “public” or “common,” in the sense that it was generally agreed to be open, a space that anyone at all was allowed to access, use, and enjoy. In city after city, *acampadas* arose in these large, central, public spaces like *Sol* and *Catalunya*. Those qualities of the physical space mattered to the *agora*, but that should not tempt us to think that such physical spaces are the same thing as the *agora*. If you visit *Sol* or *Catalunya* today, they would not look like the scene I describe above. In order to exist, the *agora* had to be brought into being – it had to be produced – by the activity of people (Fernandez-Savater, 2011a). People had to assemble, bodily, and practise democracy together by engaging each other in discussion and deliberation about the future of Spain. This assembling of bodies, the *asambleas* of the *indignados*, produced what we might call a space of presentation. People presented their bodies in the *agora*, arranged themselves to face each other, and practised the project of democracy together (Maeckelbergh, 2012, p. 220). This again is precisely the opposite of parliament, a space of re-presentation in which people are re-presented by their representatives. In the space of parliament, representatives stand in for people; they present their bodies in the place of people (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013b, pp. 174–176). This bodily presentation and political activity was thus an essential aspect of the *agora*.

In the *agora* of the 15M, this act of bodily presentation had a very important effect. It caused people to come face to face with their own difference. The *indignados* quickly became aware that their desires were not identical (Asara & Kallis, 2018, p. 18; De la Lata, 2016, pp. 127–128). Some wanted democracy, others were more inclined to be ruled. Some were young, others not. Some were longtime activists, some had never been active. Some were native to Spain, others had immigrated. Some were feminist, others not. Some were women, others men. The movement tried very consciously to draw in as many Spaniards as possible, and so participants were quite diverse. The last two differences, for example, proved particularly challenging. There was significant struggle around the question of just how feminist the politics of the 15M should be (Castellanos et al., 2011, p. 111). Relatedly, everyday life in the *acampadas* was much more difficult for women than for men, particularly with respect to sexual harassment and assault (Ezquerro, 2011, p. 9).

At the same time, bodily encounter in the *agora's* space of presentation also helped the *indignados* understand what they shared. Many participants reported feeling alone in their experience of the crisis (García-Lamarca, 2017, pp. 46–47; Lois-González & Piñeira-Mantiñán, 2015, p. 133; Oikonomakis & Roos, 2013). They thought they were the only ones who were outraged at the politicians, or who had lost their home, or who couldn't find a job, or who wanted to take their affairs into their own hands. When they arrived in the square, though, and they began seeing the bodies and hearing the voices of others, the outrage and the hope of others, they realised they were not alone (Antentas, 2015, pp. 146–147; Martínez & Bernardos, 2015, p. 164). Instead they shared, with many others, a whole range of emotions, and complaints, and ideas for how to make things better (Flesher Fominaya, 2015b, p. 479). This emergent solidarity forged an unexpected collective identity, one that was made possible and nurtured by the bodily encounter of the *agora*.



FIGURE 1 The Madrid Agora in the shadow of *Leviathan*

What the *agora* did, in other words, in making clear both participants' difference and sameness, was to raise insistently the question of "we." Who are we? What do we want? These questions are absolutely central to the democratic project, but they are also often taken for granted. We know we don't want "them" governing us, so we often gloss over what "we" means. It is often understood as little more than a vague "not them." But that understanding is not at all sufficient for the project of democracy. The question of "we" is an open one, and it must be attended to constantly and carefully. It is not a question that will be worked out for people by their representatives. People must work on it themselves. To be coherent, the "we" must have some measure of solidarity, sameness, a shared sense of identity. But to live, to grow, and to thrive the "we" requires difference, tension, and conflict (Maeckelbergh, 2012, pp. 225–226). One of the most salient lessons the project of democracy can learn from the 15M, I think, is that the production of the *agora* helps participants attend seriously to the question of "we." The presentation of bodies in the *agora* means that people are not hidden from each other by schemes of re-presentation. They are present, and they are presented to each other. As they assemble in the *agora*, they come to understand much better both what they share and how they differ.

4.2 | Private space, labour, and everyday life in the *Agora*

While the *agora* of the 15M resonated with the participatory quality of Aristotle's *agora*, it greatly stretched the boundaries of that idea as well. For Aristotle, as for Hannah Arendt (1998) after him, the *agora* is a public space that is for discussing public affairs only. In the *agora* one practices politics, or what Arendt calls "action." The household, by contrast, is understood to be a private space for private affairs, like labour and reproduction. For Aristotle and Arendt, what takes place in the household is not politics, but reproduction, the maintenance of what Aristotle calls the "necessary conditions" of politics (see *Politics*, pp. 1278a, 1328a, 1328b, 1329a). In the *acampadas*, *indignados* certainly engaged in public, "political" work when they discussed affairs in the *asambleas*. But they also carried out, right there in the middle of the *agora*, activities that are supposed to be private, household activities: food preparation, eating, sleeping, caring for children, cleaning, and managing toilets (Asara & Kallis, 2018, p. 14). "This square is our home!" was a common chant heard early in the occupations (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015, p. 96; see also Fernandez-Savater, 2011a, p. 3). The *agora* that the 15M produced was just as much a household for reproduction as it was a public square for politics (Castañeda, 2012, p. 314; Jiménez & Estallega, 2011, p. 23). The commission in the Barcelona *acampada* responsible for food, for example, was one of the largest and most active centres of activity in *Catalunya* (De la Lata, 2016). Another example was the great care taken to ensure the daily maintenance of the squares. There was concern to show that "this is not a *botellón*, or drinking party," but a collection of adults who can take good care of the space they are inhabiting (Castañeda, 2012, p. 316; see also Fernandez-Savater, 2011a; Martínez & Bernardos, 2015, p. 165).

This act of bringing private life out into the *agora* is, I think, a very important aspect of the spatial practice of the *indignados*. Judith Butler (2015) repeatedly objects to Arendt's – and Aristotle's – conception of politics because it excludes private life. It excludes from politics the reproduction of everyday life, and the infrastructure, both physical and social, that Butler insists are so important for bodies to persist. For Butler, by contrast, the private must be a fundamental concern of politics. Over the course of one month in May and June 2011, the *indignados* fully blew open the limited traditional understanding of the *agora* and its limited understanding of politics. They practised labour and reproduction right there in public, and they produced and self-managed the infrastructure necessary for Butler's persistence of bodies. They understood this "private" activity to be self-evidently vital to the project of democracy.¹⁰ The *agora* they produced was thus a hybrid space, a space that was both public and private, a space for both politics and reproduction. This space, what we might call a more-than-Aristotelian *agora*, suggests that the affairs we manage ourselves in democracy are always both public and private affairs. The project of democracy concerns itself with whole lives and with whole bodies, and it produces this fulsome *agora* as a result. So, while the democratic practice of the *indignados* was, in one sense, a powerful *return* to the Aristotelian *agora* and its idea of democratic participation that is different from parliament, it was also a profound subversion and expansion of that limited and unequal *agora*.

4.3 | The Plaza (rather than the factory floor)

In addition to this expansion of the *agora* to include the private sphere, the 15M added another layer of meaning as well. The *agora* they produced was understood to be more a *plaza* than a factory floor. As I discuss in the section on democracy above, an autonomist way of thinking democracy has roots in the workers' movement, most immediately in the struggles of workers in the 1950s and 1960s to self-manage factories and economic production. The classic space of that autonomist tradition is the factory floor, a space where, in the most robust examples of self-management, workers would assemble

bodily to make production decisions (Castoriadis, 1997, Chapter 3; Lefebvre, 2009, Chapters 5 and 6; see also Ness & Azzellini, 2011). Such a space is entirely consistent with the vision of an *agora*-that-is-not-parliament we saw in the last section.

This vision certainly could have been adopted by the *indignados*. In the 2001 uprising in Argentina, for example, workers seized abandoned factories and began running them successfully on their own. They were called “*fabricas tomadas*,” or “taken factories” (Kabat, 2011). In the 15M, however, there was very little sense that the *fabrica* was an important space. Instead, the constant refrain heard from the *indignados* was “*toma la plaza*,” or “take the [neighbourhood] square” (Castañeda, 2012, p. 311; Hopke, 2012, p. 10; Jiménez & Estalella, 2011, p. 19; Oikonomakis & Roos, 2013, p. 9; Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013b, p. 171).¹¹ For the *indignados*, the *agora* was foremost a *plaza*, not a *fabrica*. It was a neighbourhood space, a local space in a wider city, used by neighbourhood inhabitants in their everyday lives in the city. To the *indignados*, this was the obvious location in which to assemble and manage their affairs together. Their democratic project, then, was not so much heir to the workers’ assemblies of the 1960s as it was heir to the *asamblea barriales*, the neighbourhood assemblies (Asara & Kallis, 2018, p. 13; Flesher Fominaya, 2017, p. 8).

Asambleas barriales have a very proud history in Spain, particularly in Madrid, where they thrived throughout the 1970s, even under the dictatorship of Franco (Castells, 1983; Díaz-Parra & Mena, 2015). In that decade, the *asambleas* struggled to improve conditions in working-class neighbourhoods: better housing, transportation, schools, hospitals, parks, and social life. They were synergistic with the labour movement, and they shared many activists, but they were nevertheless different movements with different agendas (Castells, 1983, p. 269). Certainly in Spain in the 1970s this turn to neighbourhood-centric organising was in part a strategy to circumvent the fascist regime’s brutal – and very typical – repression of the labour movement (Asara & Kallis, 2018, p. 13; Castells, 1983). But the *asambleas barriales* were also part of the wider heterodox effort in the 1960s and 1970s to extend the labour movement beyond the factory to other realms, including the neighbourhood and the city (Lefebvre, 1968, 1970; Vaneigem, 1974, 2012), and beyond the working class to other agents, including the urban inhabitant (e.g., Continua, 1973).¹²

The neighbourhood *plaza* was so clearly the primary space of the 15M that some *indignados* began to worry that they were too focused on the neighbourhood, and they developed some tentative attempts to “take indignation to the companies,” in order to reinvigorate the mostly moribund workers’ movement in Spain (Antentas, 2015, p. 151). But that effort was fairly minor, and the factory floor always remained marginal in the spatial imagination of the 15M (Taibo, 2012, p. 156).

When they decided to disband the *acampadas* after about a month, the *indignados* expressed their explicit intention to redirect the energy of the camps into the neighbourhoods and the *asambleas barriales* (Hughes, 2011, p. 413). This initiative had varying results in different places. Some *asambleas* became more active than others (Jiménez & Estalella, 2011, p. 23). But one of the main results of this initiative was to intertwine the *asamblea* initiatives with the ongoing movement for affordable housing, also concerned primarily with the everyday lives of urban inhabitants in neighbourhoods, and give both more strength. In many poorer neighbourhoods, newly energised *asambleas* worked closely with affordable housing activists, the most prominent of which is the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH), to address neighbourhood problems like housing affordability, evictions, and mortgage debt (Díaz-Parra & Mena, 2015; Elola, 2019; Hughes, 2011, p. 411).

One last fact should be considered in this context. Throughout its life, the 15M consistently rejected association with traditional Unions (Jiménez & Estalella, 2011; Maeckelbergh, 2012, p. 224). That rejection was inspired by a number of different motives. Unions like the *Comisiones Obreras* and the *Union General de los Trabajadores* were heavily hierarchical and centralised, and so the democratic desire of the 15M rejected the Unions for that reason (Antentas, 2015). Another mark against the traditional Unions was that they had long been working hand-in-hand with the government to implement neoliberal austerity, and so the 15M saw them as very much part of the problem rather than the solution (Antentas, 2015, p. 139; Gelderloos, 2011). However, it was also true that these organisations were Unions of *workers*, and that was an identity that was not foremost in the minds of most *indignados* (Hughes, 2011, p. 413). Unions organise workers in the workplace, but the 15M was a mobilisation of urban inhabitants in the space of the neighbourhood-and-city, and so Unions were not seen as organisations that were relevant to the movement. When Union leaders and members came to the *plaza*, they struck the *indignados* as out of place. They were welcome to participate as individuals, as inhabitants of the city, but as representatives of the Unions they were unwelcome and even at times actively excluded (Antentas, 2015, p. 150).

4.4 | Space for use (rather than exchange)

As an *agora* (rather than parliament), which was a *plaza* (rather than a factory), the space produced by the 15M was also a space valued for its use, rather than a space valued for exchange. The question of use value versus exchange value is of

course very well-worn in the literature on the political economy of space. It was a particular obsession of Lefebvre's, for example. But I think what is well-worn is only the critique of the way capitalist cities reduce space to its exchange value. The question of what the use-value of space might mean is quite a lot less discussed. Even in Lefebvre, we get far more critique of space-for-exchange than we do discussion of what space-for-use might be like. One great exception¹³ to this trend is Giorgio Agamben's nine-volume *Homo Sacer* series, especially the last volume, whose purpose is to excavate and articulate the existence of a *use* that cannot be exchanged. This project will require, he argues in *The Highest Poverty*, "the elaboration of a theory of use – of which Western philosophy lacks even the most elementary principles" (2013, p. xiii). In this context, the 15M yet again proves instructive: not only did they make a critique of space-for-exchange, they also produced, actively and consciously, their own forms of space-for-use.

In Spanish cities before the financial crash of 2008, there had been a long process of speculation, financialisation, and gentrification of city centres, particularly in Madrid and Barcelona (Martí-Costa & Tomàs, 2017, pp. 2115–2116). Real estate investment during this period produced mostly expensive housing and spaces to attract tourists, rendering city centres unaffordable for almost all residents (Díaz-Parra & Mena, 2015; Lois-González & Piñeira-Mantiñán, 2015, pp. 128–129; Martí-Costa & Tomàs, 2017, p. 2,115).¹⁴ In addition to this more specific urban process, during the same period the housing market more generally underwent heavy financialisation and securitisation. One feature of financialisation was predatory lending, which used all sorts of new financial products to actively extend mortgages to the low-income segment of the market, to people who were previously considered to be unable to afford a mortgage. After the 2008 crash, this led, predictably, to widespread mortgage default and financial ruin that disproportionately affected poor people (Flesher Fominaya, 2015b, p. 468; Gonick, 2016, p. 841).

Of course this process was not unique to Spain, but it was particularly intense there. In the last two decades, Spanish cities have been subjected to a concerted and long-term project to intensify the hegemony of exchange value as the primary logic of space. The *indignados* identified this project, and they vigorously opposed it. Before the 15M, radical groups in Spain like *Okupa* had been analysing and critiquing these urban processes, using squatting and social-centre techniques to construct a radically democratic alternative (Díaz-Parra & Mena, 2015, p. 45; Martínez & Bernardos, 2015, p. 168; Vilaseca, 2014, p. 120). *Okupa* knew through their activism quite a lot about how the hegemony of exchange value corrodes most people's ability to live in the city and use it in a way that meets their needs. They understood explicitly that the affordable housing question was a question of the production of urban space for its exchange value rather than for its use value, and they articulated those analyses as participants in the 15M. Near the beginning of the 15M, this analysis by *Okupa*, and their methods, were seen by most Spaniards, and even most participants in the 15M, to be a radical fringe view (Elola, 2019; Gonick, 2016, p. 836; Martínez & Bernardos, 2015, p. 167). During the course of the 15M, however, *Okupa's* analysis and methods came to be seen as an increasingly reasonable response to the urban situation in Spain (Jiménez & Estalella, 2011, p. 20; Martínez & Bernardos, 2015, p. 173). And so after the *acampadas* were disbanded, there was a wave of spontaneous squatting among poor people (Díaz-Parra & Mena, 2015, p. 40). The most well-known example of this was the "Hotel Madrid," a building very close to *Sol* that was occupied by activists in October 2011 and supported by both radicals and more moderate groups in the 15M (Martínez & Bernardos, 2015, p. 175; Gonick, 2016, p. 836). Even the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH)*, which before the 15M tended to favour more conventional political tactics like lobbying to change the punitive mortgage laws, became increasingly likely to support squatting actions. The *PAH*, in partnership with the reinvigorated *asambleas barriales*, also pursued a range of other tactics, both radical (blocking evictions and "*escraches*") and conventional (advocating reform of mortgage laws), to prevent evictions, alleviate mortgage debt (Elola, 2019), secure more affordable housing, and make Spanish cities more liveable for poor inhabitants (Díaz-Parra & Mena, 2015; Flesher Fominaya, 2015b, p. 471; García-Lamarca, 2017).

But in addition to this critique of and struggle against space for its exchange value, the *acampadas* and *asambleas* of the 15M were also, and perhaps even more importantly, a creative act of using space, an act of producing space through the use of bodies. It was a declaration by inhabitants of their intention to continue to use the space of the city by inhabiting it, even in the face of rampant financialisation and gentrification. As such, the *acampadas* were a spectacular and city-wide version of the squatting and social-centres actions that *Okupa* had been doing for years (Martínez & Bernardos, 2015, p. 165). *Acampadas* were, above all, spaces of use, spaces that were produced through use. They did not exist without the bodies of *indignados* assembling and setting about their work: discussing, deciding, eating, sleeping, laughing, shouting, and so on. Amador Fernández-Savater's "camping notes," which are daily dispatches he wrote during the *acampadas*, give a particularly good understanding of what it was like to experience the production of these spaces of use. He relays the report of a friend in Barcelona that "the plaza materializes without stopping ... the square becomes more and more habitable" as more and more people arrive and become active in it (2011b, p. 3). In Madrid, the result was a "collective effort deployed in *Sol* to create a *plaza*" (2011c, p. 2). In this way of thinking about it, *Sol* was not so much a taking of the

square (*toma la plaza*) as it was a productive, affirmative act of creating the square as participants wanted it to be, through their use (Fernandez-Savater, 2011a). Participants (rather than protesters) inhabited and used the square (rather than occupied it), and in the act of inhabiting and using it they produced the space they desired (Maeckelbergh, 2012, p. 214). It was only in and through this “use of bodies,” as Agamben (2015) would put it, this unabstractable and inappropriable concrete experience of practising democracy together, that the *agora* as space-for-use came into existence. The *acampada* was not merely a protest against, and negation of, an exchange-value conception of the city. It was also this other thing, this joyous affirmation of use. The *agora* thus made manifest the idea that, as Fernandez-Savater put it, “*la democracia que queremos es ya la misma organización de la plaza*” (2011a, np): “the democracy we want is the same thing as what we have already organised here in the *plaza*.”

5 | CONCLUSION

Of the three kinds of differential space produced by the democratic project of the 15M, the *agora* as other than parliament may seem the most self-evident. Once democracy has been defined as people managing their affairs themselves, then obviously parliament, in which representatives manage their affairs instead of people, is entirely the wrong kind of space. But the *agora* as other than parliament that the *indignados* produced is still important to identify and describe for at least two reasons. The first is that the project of democracy must keep up a consistent practice of producing the *agora* as a way to ward off parliament. Parliament, as the primary space of the liberal-democratic State, will never stop asserting itself. It will never stop inserting itself into any *agora*, never stop judging the *agora* to be an immature version of parliament, and never stop proposing parliament as the next stage in the *agora*’s political evolution. This narrative, that the liberal-democratic State is the apex political form, is pervasive, insistent, and seductive. Almost everybody holds it to be self-evident. And so democracy – real democracy – needs an intentional, continuous, and resilient project to refuse this invitation to parliament, and to persistently create the *agora* instead. Only through such an intentional project will the *agora* be able to thrive. And so when we see people producing an *agora*, as the *indignados* did so spectacularly in 2011, we need to pay close attention. The second reason is that, as the experience of the 15M helps us understand, the *agora* only comes into being through the active use of bodies. It is not a space that is waiting, fully formed, for people to enter. They must produce the *agora* by assembling, discussing, and deciding together. When they do, they will not be experts. They will not inherently know what to do. Despite all their successes, the *indignados* did not fully know what to do. There is no deep democratic instinct that will present itself to people when they take up the project of democracy. They must practise. They must learn how to produce the *agora* every day. The more they produce it, the “more and more habitable” it will become, and the better they will become at practising democracy.

With respect to the *plaza* produced by the 15M, the lesson I think we should take is that it was both important and inessential. It was important because it was so clear to the *indignados* that the *plaza* was appropriate to their struggle and the factory was not. The struggle to broaden Left movements beyond the workplace, beyond the worker, and beyond capitalism as the primary axis of oppression is not over. We must continue to assert the importance of those other spaces in defiance of those who would reduce them to one overarching workplace logic. However, at the same time, the *indignados*’ insistence on the *plaza* was contingent rather than necessary. The *plaza* is not an essentially more democratic space than the shop floor. Both are absolutely appropriate to the project of democracy. The *plaza* made sense to the *indignados*, but the *fabricas* made sense to the uprising in Argentina in 2001. We must continue to democratise *both* plazas and factories. And of course we must continue to go beyond those spaces, to democratise the home, the school, the fields, and many other spaces as well.

The last question, about space for use rather than exchange, might seem the most hackneyed, but it is perhaps also, subtly, the most important issue. It appears on its face to be only anti-capitalist resistance, but I think Agamben’s work suggests convincingly that the question of use runs far deeper than just capitalism. The idea that Agamben’s many books are trying to put before us is that there is something that exists in the world – the use of bodies – that cannot be alienated from those bodies, something that is impossible to extract from bodies and make abstract, something in bodies that cannot be transformed into an artificial version of itself and made into a force of oppression. Agamben is seeking, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would put it, that core of desire that cannot be captured by an apparatus. Certainly the forces of abstraction and alienation are at work in capitalism. But the power of the State, so seductive and so very dangerous for democracy, takes exactly the same form. The State is, as Hobbes made clear, constituted precisely by alienating the power that inheres in the bodies of people, abstracting it from those bodies, and transforming it into the artificial person of the sovereign State. Not only can urban space be commodified and valued for exchange, it can also be subjected to the sovereignty of the State, claimed by the artificial person as fully his own. Insisting on the use of space, therefore, is about more than merely

resisting the capitalist city. It also refuses the social contract of the State as well. This question of use, I think, of bodies and of spaces remaining inalienable, accountable only to themselves, and to each other, is an essential question for the democratic project, one I think the *indignados* very much help us to understand.

These lessons the *indignados* have to teach us can only be understood, I think, if we understand democracy properly. Democracy will not arrive overnight, or in a month, or even over the course of a decade. Democracy will not be installed through revolution. Democracy is not finally won when the right Party wins an election. Democracy is, instead, a project, one that unfolds over the very long term. It is a project we decide to take up, a project in which we produce the *agora* and the *plaza* through our participation and use. A project in which we become active and take our affairs into our own hands. A project in which we develop the habit of practising democracy, of gathering to discuss and manage our affairs together. In the very long term, if we are diligent in our practice, our bodies and minds will become used to it. We will develop a durable habit such that democracy becomes routine, normal, taken for granted. This habit will be a significant achievement, but it will still not mean democracy has arrived. We must continue our practise far into the future, continue producing *agoras*, *plazas*, and the other spaces of democracy. “*Vamos despacio porque vamos lejos*,” as the *indignados* put it, “we are going slowly because we are going far.”¹⁵

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Where publicly available, archival sources are cited in the reference list.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Important exceptions are De la Lata (2016) and Erensü and Karaman (2017).

² The main romance languages have a specific word for this idea: *autogestion* in French, *autogestione* in Italian, and *autogestión* in Spanish. The English term “self-management” is very vague.

³ Clearly this idea of democracy is very different from a liberal-democratic government, and this fact needs to be continually reiterated because liberal-democratic government is widely thought – incorrectly – to be the same thing as “democracy.” Castoriadis (1991, pp. 139, 221) correctly says that liberal-democratic government is properly an *oligarchy*, because it is a system in which the few (elected representatives) rule the many (everyone else).

⁴ Desire is of course also a term with many meanings. In the next section I specify my understanding, which is that desire is productive rather than a need for something we lack.

⁵ I am sure readers of Deleuze and Guattari (especially *Anti-Oedipus*) will recognise the resonance here.

⁶ My account here is drawn from a combination of archival sources, some primary, most secondary. this archive is mostly in English, since I do not read spanish well. I was not present in 2011, but as events unfolded in may, I followed intensely online reporting in english by participants (e.g., takethesquare.net). In addition, there is quite a large online archive of primary documents that have been translated (e.g., at 15mpedia.org), since participants were keen to document their experience and disseminate it. Of course I have also closely examined the English language academic sources. Given the limits of my methods, I have cited liberally in this section so that if I make a factual claim that is not well known it is corroborated by at least one source.

⁷ Examples include health services, education, the environment, and water.

⁸ The *agora* is thus very different from a march, a tactic the *indignados* also used (Castañeda, 2012, p. 311). In a march, people all walk in one direction toward a destination, which is very often a government office. They address themselves to that office, usually in the form of a demand that the office take some action. The *agora* is also entirely different from voting in booths, each person an isolated individual, telling the State which candidate’s body she prefers to stand in for her body.

⁹ For those in the United States, this is essentially equivalent to the Governor of a State.

¹⁰ This act of carrying out the private labour of reproduction in the *agora* was also very much present in Tahrir Square in Cairo (AlSaiyyad and Guvenc, 2015, p. 2020), Syntagma Square in Athens (Karaliotas, 2017, p. 61), Zuccotti Park in New York (Kumkar, 2016, p. 707), St Paul’s in London (Halvorsen, 2014), and Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013 (Erensü and Karaman, 2017, p. 30)

¹¹ One of the main hubs of information during the 15M was the website [https://tomalaplaza.net/](http://tomalaplaza.net/).

¹² This attempt to extend the movement beyond the factory is, by the way, the whole point of Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city” – almost always misunderstood today – by which he meant a struggle by urban inhabitants to manage the production of urban space themselves, without the State, the Union, or the Corporation.

¹³ So to speak.

¹⁴ These issues were also very central to the uprising in Turkey in 2013 (see Erensü and Karaman, 2017, pp. 19, 24).

¹⁵ See Roos (2011).

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