

People protest in front of the City Hall of Pamplona, northern Spain.

Playing At Revolution

It is never easy to end a revolution. One month after the beginning of the protests which began on May 15 in Madrid and quickly spread to the rest of Spain, most of the camps have been dismantled. Just a few nostalgic souls refuse to abandon their posts in Puerta del Sol in Madrid and Plaza de Cataluña in Barcelona, the two most symbolic squares of these peaceful revolts.

IT IS A BITTER-SWEET ENDING. AFTER THE EUPHORIA OF being the heroes of a spectacular story of justice, freedom and hope, for the protestors, the last few days of the demonstrations were shrouded in acrimony and discrepancies over when to go home, what to do next, how to continue the mobilisations and how to channel their demands in a sustainable and efficient way. Even the rain played a role in Sol, preventing on several occasions the celebration of the Assembly which was to put an end to the camp. The loudest voices heard on these last days have been

those of the shop keepers and business owners who calculate losses of thirty million euros over the past four weeks.

However, while the cleaning squad does its best to deliver on its promise to leave the square exactly as it was, the reasons why the whole movement began should not be forgotten. An unemployment rate of more than twenty percent – around five million people – has left rating agencies, financial markets and international media speculating day after day about the health of the Spanish economy. This has created an atmosphere of unmanageable uncertainty and a housing bubble that

exploded leaving up to one million unsold houses. Many people risk losing their homes and many mortgages are unpaid, while banks are refusing to lend money to individuals and small businesses. Public administrations are dealing with growing debts and shrinking budgets, while politicians from both main parties, the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE) and the People's Party (PP), are immersed in a continuous fight, unable to agree on a few basic terms, without ideas or proposals that could lead to hope that the end of the crisis might be in sight.

The movement was inspired by Stéphane Hessel's book *Indignez-vous!*, as well as by the Arab Spring, very recent and nearby. In fact, many observers wondered why it had taken so long for the Spanish youth to mobilise. Throughout the previous months, young people had taken to the streets in protest in Athens, Paris and London, whilst the Spanish youth still had not reacted despite facing an unemployment rate of more than forty percent and gloomy perspectives for their country and their future. The most qualified Spanish generation ever has finally stood up.

On May 15, several thousand people gathered in almost sixty cities around Spain to protest what they considered to be an inefficient political system and an unbearable economic situation. They had been convened by the platform Democracia Real YA (Real Democracy Now) via Facebook and Twitter. Spontaneously, some of them decided to stay in Puerta del Sol throughout the night, but at dawn the police intervened and some twenty people were arrested. As a consequence, many of those who had participated the day before, and various others, returned to Sol and set up their tents in solidarity. The numbers quickly snowballed and the square, and others all over Spain, were completely occupied by protestors.

The protestors' main demands were simple. They wanted electoral reform to allow open lists and to facilitate the access of smaller parties to the political race, and a more representative system – rejecting the extreme polarisation of Spanish politics and accusing the PP and PSOE of simply perpetuating themselves in power. They focused on the fight against corruption in politics – more than one hundred candidates in the last local and regional elections were under some kind of legal impeachment – and asked for the end of life-long politicians' privileges. Greater transparency and greater media freedom were also demanded, with press groups now heavily dependent on political and corporate interests. They also asked for a clearer separation of powers, especially within the judiciary, which is often accused of serving political interests. Most of these claims have been part of the public opinion debate for years, but have never gone beyond the main parties' rhetoric and mutual accusations.

What started as a movement of protest and discontent quickly turned into a celebration. People suddenly realised that together, they could do something. They recovered a shared



vision that they could change things. This feeling was boosted by their impressive organisational skills which were widely covered, admired and praised by the international media. Accustomed to participating in voluntary collective activities and music festivals, urban campers deployed a very effective non-hierarchical order. A good number of committees were created: cleaning, infrastructures, noise-control, audio communications systems, food, child care, and even a library – 4,000 books had been donated in Madrid. For a movement born through social networks, technology has been a key component. It has been said that the computing power used and installed in Sol these days is equivalent to that used at NASA headquarters. The square was declared an alcohol-free, smoke-free area. A daily general assembly was held every evening to make proposals and take decisions. Waving hands substituted shouts and voices as a means of approval and disapproval. Far from the traditional scenes of violent anti-system activists, this has been a very civilised revolt.

So much so, that the establishment did not know how to tackle it. The protest erupted in the middle of the campaign for local and regional elections, which were to take place a week later, attracting the attention of both politicians and the media. Most politicians viewed them with distrust, suspicious about their real intentions, and some despised their methods.



Nonetheless, campers kept an exquisite neutral attitude towards all parties, although they asked voters to stay at home as a way of showing their discontent with the system. Conservatives accused them of favouring the left – they would have traditionally been a natural part of the leftist electorate – but the PP turned out to be the real beneficiary, with a ten percent lead over the Socialists, winning most of the major cities and almost all the 17 autonomous regional governments.


In any case, before and after the polls, the movement attracted not only young people and students, but also pensioners, housewives, the unemployed and employed. According to a survey by Metroscopia, 66 percent of Spanish citizens declared their sympathy with the protestors, 81 percent thought that the demonstrators were right, and ninety percent agreed with the demand that parties modify their internal procedures and start paying more attention to people's needs.

The so-called Spanish Revolution – after the term was coined by *The Washington Post* – has been compared with other revolutionary processes, the closest being the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, to put it in the same basket as the quest for rights and freedom by the Tunisians, the Egyptians, the Yemenis, the Libyans or the Syrians, would be a misreading of history. Many references have also been made to the protests in

France in May 1968. After all, the bulk of the protestors are middle class, highly educated youngsters. But whereas the French rebellion was clearly aimed at a Marxist-style revolution, including a violent takeover of power, the Spaniards have not waved any ideological flag and have not really challenged the established authority.

What this soft revolution shares with many others is the risk of dissolving itself within its own contradictions. In terms of democracy, the nostalgic superiority of direct participation through assemblies – in which decisions are taken by unanimity – becomes unmanageable as the number of participants and issues grow. The lack of leadership, considered a strength by the protestors, becomes a nuisance as the impossibility of finding valid interlocutors becomes more evident. The outright rejection of the system as a whole precludes the development of a viable dialogue. Unfortunately, the latest events after the dismantling of most of the camps, such as protestors trying to prevent MPs from entering the Catalan Parliament for the budget debate, may change the general public opinion's attitude towards them. They complain about the quality of the Spanish democracy, but interfering with other citizens' rights will only make them lose credibility and popular support.

The movement of May 15 needs to find the way to keep its voice and spirit alive. Its future lies in making good use of new media – where it all started – which it mastered. The protestors should also maintain a periodic presence in the streets, to measure their force but also to invite others to join in. The setting up of neighborhood committees may be a start and the announcement of a worldwide concentration on October 15 will help recover momentum in autumn. Inevitably, the demonstrators will need to articulate ways to channel their demands and proposals in the political system.

People in Sol had the certainty that they were making history. They now have the task of showing the rest of society that they were not just playing at revolution, but really launching one, even if its fruits will only be enjoyed in the future. And politicians should not forget that this has been the first warning; if the movement finds its path, there will surely be more. 

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