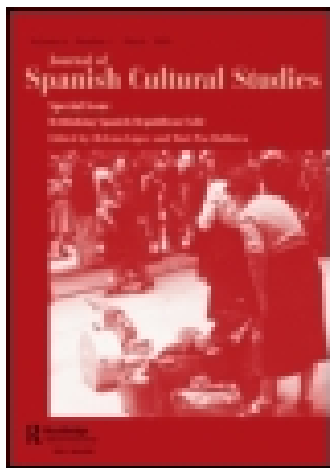


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## The Spanish 15-M Movement: a consensual dissent?

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### Abstract

Since May 2011, the Spanish 15-M Movement (commonly referred as *los indignados* [the outraged]) has become a major player in the domestic political scenario. Public opinion data reveal that there is a cross-sectional support for the 15-M among the general population in Spain, affecting people of different ages, genders, employment situations and levels of urbanization. The data present a “movement of dissent” and confirm the crisis of the consensual culture of the Spanish political transition from Franco’s regime to democracy. The 15-M challenges previous consensus and expresses the need to reform or to overcome the close-knitted institutional map designed by the elites driving the transition. The outraged movement advances and leads a new political culture based on widespread social dissent. Our data suggest an imbalance between the cultural and the political impact of the 15-M, and how this tension will be a central element of cultural and civic life in the next decades in Spain.

**Keywords:** 15-M, culture of the transition, political disaffection, social movements, consensus, dissent

### Context

In late 1977, *Cambio 16* magazine’s cover story titled *Más progres que nadie* [More liberal than anyone else] showed the results of a survey among youth in major cities across nine countries: West Germany, Finland, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Italy, the UK, Sweden and Spain. The data were flashy and did not match the image of Spain. Attitudes of young Spaniards of both genders were more similar to those of other Europeans than previously thought and, in fundamental aspects, adopted more liberal, advanced or progressive attitudes than French, British or Scandinavians. The culture of the dictatorship began to die before the dictator and institutional structures had to adjust to the political and social culture of the Spaniards.

The Spanish transition represented an unavoidable watershed in economic, political and culture terms. In political science, it became a model for other countries, characterized by interparty consensus and intraparty discipline (Gunther and Hopkin 194). In subsequent years, this spirit of institutional consensus led to a certain social consensus, in the sense that the experience of the social order was held as a common and nonlitigious one, and the community was unified around certain ethical values (Rancière 100). Guillem Martínez calls the prevailing hegemonic political culture in Spain for the past 30 years the “culture of the transition” (CT 2). The main characters, the ways of discussion and the level of consensus were converted into a myth. Precisely for that reason, the potential of changing the established framework were obliterated. As a result, the Spanish Constitution makes an immobile exception in Europe, considered

untouchable until recently by both main institutional players and public support. Thus, the CT has been a central element of the political field in Spain, offering a hegemonic view of what is possible and desirable. Nevertheless, a series of social movements and sectorial critiques of the consensus established in the transition have been taken place, especially since the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> The 15-M Movement has been heir to many of these previous social movements, but, unlike them, it has permeated the public and connected to a new dissent with central elements of CT, as shown in the following sections.

In her account of that period, Teresa Vilarós defines “transition” as “the space where oblivion is processed, black hole that sucks, encrypts and sends down the waste of our historical past” (11). As far as she is concerned, disappointment was a central feature of the Spanish popular culture in the 1980s. The Socialist governments showed clearly that there was no alternative to European capitalism. In the young Spanish democracy, by entering the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the limits of “the possible” soon became solidified. The hegemonic culture established a frame of coexistence based on certain tacit agreements around the convenience of a vertical and expert society. The primacy of the two major political parties in the political system and financial capitalism coincided with the deactivation of the autonomous labor movement, the countercultural vanguard and the neighborhood associations that pushed for a regime transition in the 1970s (Martínez 2; Moreno-Caballud 101).<sup>2</sup> As Martínez points out, the dominant culture became deeply focused on avoiding conflict. Once the problem is obscured, issues cannot be challenged. Taking the most controversial issues out of political agendas, public debate resulted in a progressive estrangement between citizens and institutional politics, and the polarization of the main political parties (Lobera and Ferrándiz 56). Some researchers even claim that already during the transition, the Spanish political parties followed a deliberate strategy of demobilization to facilitate agreements between elites (Sastre 35–41). Moreover, studies on mass culture reveal a drive by the media to depoliticize the social reality. An example of this was the films in the early years of democracy. The transition was a period of extraordinary political presence in the Spanish cinema (Trenzado 330). This presence did not continue after the consolidation of democracy and the implementation of the socialist cinematographic model,<sup>3</sup> beginning with the so-called *cine del desencanto* from 1980 to 1982 (Imbert 94; Trenzado 321).

During the last decades, Spain has been one of the Western countries with lower levels of political and civic participation. The Spanish case is an exception in the rise in citizen participation in Europe since the 1980s, pointed by some authors like Topf (“Beyond Electoral Participation”) and Gundelach (“Grass-Roots Activity”). Political participation through some forms of action has decreased or has remained stable at low levels, especially membership to parties; however, political protest and association seem to grow, especially among younger cohorts (Morales 84). The generation born in democracy is less inclined to collaborate with politicized organizations and associations (84). Polls reflect growing political disaffection in recent decades, but the economic crisis raised a new challenge to the transition culture. In the first phase of the economic crisis, between 2008 and 2011, all indicators of political support – as defined by Norris (9–30) – have been heavily eroded in Spain (Lobera and Ferrandiz 43–56). In a context of crisis, citizens looked for solutions. In the first place, they looked back to the mythologized transition,<sup>4</sup> but they clashed against immobile institutions and have finally confronted them. Inherited institutional and political culture – such as opacity and revolving doors between administrations and corporations – became no longer functional and questioned while dissenting voices became stronger. The 1978 Constitution embodies the iconic

pillar symbolizing the CT. Nowadays, a clear majority of Spaniards say that the constitutional text is outdated (53%) and ask for deep reforms (up from 29% in 2008).<sup>5</sup>

In this article, we sustain the interpretation of the Spanish *los indignados* [the outraged], also called 15-M Movement, as both an expression of a widespread erosion of the hegemonic transition culture and a new social and creative space for challenge and reform (Moreno-Caballud 101; Hughes 412). In this sense, the 15-M carries a civic dissent that not only speaks up against the tacit agreements of a declining institutional sphere but also opens new scenarios for what might be considered as “possible.” Nevertheless, there is an imbalance between the institutional and the critical public spheres, since the first has not yet abandoned the vertical and state-corporative-controlled dynamics of the last four decades. The 15-M did not come from nowhere; it represents a continuation of the movements of dissent that have taken place in Spain in the last decades. It can be understood as an update of these movements to the context of the current crisis and the expansion of their contents to social groups traditionally outside the culture of dissent.

#### *The current wave of cybermultitudes*

Although they are a response to a variety of social, political and economic circumstances, the 15-M mobilizations do have certain common characteristics with those that spread in Brazil and Turkey in 2013 and previously in Tunisia in 2011. None of them promote recognized public leaders in the traditional sense nor do they have a formal structure. No conventional organization, such as political parties or trade unions, seems able to exploit them. They are part of a new cycle of contention where engagement and conflict are directed toward neoliberal economics and liberal democracy, and the institutions that promote them (Hughes 412–13).

Spain pioneered the presence of “online multitudes” or “cybermultitudes” in 2004,<sup>6</sup> when the population reacted to the electoral manipulation of the 11th March terrorist attacks. The vast majority of those who participated had access to Internet or to a mobile phone. Digital technology played a crucial role not only in the ability to self-organize but also in creating collective action without (and confronted to) institutional structures. An emerging digital and critical public sphere made its first appearance in 2004 and erupted in 2011 with the 15-M.

Most digital revolts around the world received widespread support from the general public in their countries, not limited to a particular demographic or ideological sector of the population. In the case of the protests in Brazil in 2013, 81% of Brazilians supported them and 65% stated that they have brought about positive changes.<sup>7</sup> In Turkey, the protests mobilized approximately two and a half million people; between 70% and 79% of those did not belong to any political party.<sup>8</sup>

The distinctive feature of the 15-M is that civic support has remained high through the time. This trait places the Spanish social turmoil closer to the ones that are taking place in nonestablished democracies where socioeconomic protests also question the political regime inherited from the transition periods. When compared to the *Outraged* in other Western democracies, the Spanish movement stands out and remains popular. Where Occupy London was concerned, only 28% were sympathetic to the cause, and 18% were unsympathetic.<sup>9</sup> In the USA, the percentages were 29% and 27%, respectively. Furthermore, the support for Occupy Wall Street dropped sharply not only in the city

of New York but also in the rest of the country.<sup>10</sup> Sympathizers with the movement fell by half between November 2011 (29%) and April 2012 (16%).<sup>11</sup>

Our analysis focuses on studying the cross-sectional support for the 15-M Movement. This will help us to obtain a greater in-depth understanding of both the 15-M Movement and the erosion of the CT.

### **Emergence of a new political culture: cross-sectional support for the *outraged***

#### *Hypotheses and methodological aspects*

Apart from showing its own identity as a new form of social movement and activism, an analysis of opinion polls leads us to consider 15-M protest as the expression of a broad dissent. Its major social, media and political repercussions stem from its role as an amplifier for opinions that are widespread among the population and remain institutionally neglected.

An analysis of the data reveals cross-sectional support for the 15-M Movement strategies and discourse, coming from people of different age groups, genders, employment status and levels of urbanization. Our hypothesis is that in its first year and a half, the 15-M Movement expresses a generalized dissent to the way the economic crisis is being handled while also demanding a regeneration of democracy beyond the limits established along the transition. Overall, the majority of the population in every sociodemographic bracket expresses its support although to varying degrees.

The validation of our hypothesis is split into three subhypotheses:

- H.1: Spaniards extensively support the 15-M Movement (three out of four support its arguments and one out of two, its strategy).
- H.2: This consensus covers a cross section of society, affecting people of different ages, genders, employment situations and levels of urbanization.
- H.3: The consensus has remained firm ever since the movement appeared and includes a more open and radical turn of protest strategy.

Each one of the three subhypotheses was validated by analyzing seven surveys that were conducted by Metroscopia involving Spanish residents of 18 years and over, between 1 June 2011 and 4 October 2012. A total of 6,867 interviews were conducted on the gender and age quotas generally used in CIS (*Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*) studies,<sup>12</sup> stratified into level of urbanization and autonomous region with proportional distribution throughout the region concerned. The fieldwork dates and the sample sizes for the seven surveys are as follows:

- S1: 1,001 interviews, date(s): between 1 June 2012 and 2 June 2012
- S2: 1,761 interviews, date(s): 20 June 2011 to 11 July 2011
- S3: 901 interviews, date(s): 17 October 2011 to 20 October 2011
- S4: 600 interviews, date: 21 October 2011
- S5: 1,001 interviews, date(s): 9 May 2012 and 10 May 2012
- S6: 600 interviews, date(s): 16 May 2011 and 17 May 2012
- S7: 1,003 interviews, date(s): 3 October and 4 October 2012

The information was obtained through computer-assisted telephone interviewing using a structured and precoded questionnaire.

### Analysis

Each one of the hypotheses postulated is compared below with the fieldwork data obtained.

*H.1: 15-M is widely supported by the population.* In S1, S2, S4, S5 and S6, the respondents were asked if they sympathized with the 15-M Movement, as well as whether they thought that those involved in protests were basically right in their approaches and with their claims. The data show that throughout its first year and a half, the 15-M Movement enjoyed a relatively stable degree of support and sympathy. In the opinion polls, a sympathetic attitude toward the movement reached its height on 17 May 2012 – after the mobilizations to celebrate its first anniversary – when 68% stated that they sympathized with the movement. The lowest percentage of support was shown a few days before, on 10 May 2012 – just before the first anniversary demonstrations occurred – when 51% stated they were sympathetic.<sup>13</sup>

After its first anniversary, the number of sympathizers with the 15-M Movement is thus considerable and similar to the number when it first made its mark in May and June 2011. As we shall see later (on H.3), this support has remained solid after the demonstrations, known as 25-S (held in 25 September). Furthermore, we have observed that the degree of support for the 15-M Movement's arguments is even higher than the support for the movement itself: between 7 and 8 out of every 10 Spaniards state that they basically agree with the things that they are protesting about.<sup>14</sup> This figure is three times higher than the number of those who have gone to any of the demonstrations and eight times higher than those who have participated in any of its assemblies. The degree of consensus with respect to the movement's basic message – or at least the citizens' interpretation of the message – is overwhelming. It ranges from 81% at the outset to 68% a few days before the first anniversary (Tables 1 and 2).

*H.2: Is the support cross-sectional?* The second hypothesis that we considered was that the high degree of consensus revolving around the 15-M protest movements came from a cross section of the population. In order to test this, we analyzed the 6,867 respondents by sex, age, employment situation, level of urbanization and autonomous region.

*H.2.1: Sex and age.* There are few differences between men and women when it comes to sympathy aroused for the 15-M Movement, and the same applies to the different

Table 1. How agreement with the arguments has evolved: "is your own personal impression that, generally, those participating in the 15-M Movement are right/wrong about the things they say and protest about?" (in percentages)

	1 June 2011	21 June 2011	21 October 2011	10 May 2012	17 May 2012
They are right	81	79	73	68	78
They are wrong	9	10	17	20	14
Don't know/no reply	6	6	6	9	6
Don't know why they are protesting <sup>a</sup>	4	5	4	3	2

Fieldwork: S1, S2, S4, S5 and S6.

<sup>a</sup>Unprompted answer, this option was not read in the interview.

Table 2. How sympathy toward/rejection of 15-M has evolved throughout its first year: “are you rather in favor of or rather against the movement known as 15-M?” (in percentages)

	1 June 2011	21 June 2011	21 October 2011	10 May 2012	17 May 2012
Rather in favor	66	64	54	51	68
Rather against	21	17	27	33	22
Neither for nor against <sup>a</sup>	9	15	17	11	9
Don't know/no reply	4	4	3	5	1

Fieldwork: S1, S2, S4, S5 and S6.

<sup>a</sup>Unprompted answer, this option was not read in the interview.

age groups. There is only a 5% difference between men (61%) and women (56%), and a maximum of 11% difference between men and women over 55 years (52%) and the youngest (63%). In every one of those groups in Spain, the majority sympathize with the movement (Table 3).

*H.2.2: Occupation.* Neither does the occupation appear to have a major effect on the citizens' attitudes to the 15-M Movement. Those who are employed seem to sympathize with the movement (68%), almost as much as those who are seeking employment (72%), and the percentage is similar for students (69%). Once again, the majority of each of the population groups analyzed on the basis of their occupation sympathize with the movement. A special mention must be made to two of these groups because the values recorded are lower than the rest: retired people and women who do unpaid housework (generally referred to as housewives).

The occupational group in which the difference between sympathizing and rejection is lowest (albeit with a majority sympathizing) is housewives. It must be remembered that classification in this occupational category is influenced by subjective evaluations that tend to “extract” a more conservative ideological profile (Lobera and Seyfferth 19).<sup>15</sup> In spite of this, sympathy outnumbers rejection in this group, which is significant when it comes to see the cross-sectional support of the 15-M Movement.

The difference between those who were sympathetic and those who were unsympathetic was less marked in the group of pensioners and the retired group than among the unemployed. It must be pointed out that since 2010, the CIS data consistently show that the oldest people are those who least perceive the negative effects of the crisis, whereas

Table 3. Cross-sectional support of the 15-M Movement, sex and age: “do you feel rather sympathetic or unsympathetic to these mobilizations?” (in percentages)

	Total	Sex		Age		
		Man	Woman	18–34	35–54	55 and over
<i>N</i>	5,864	2,871	2,993	1,665	2,230	1,969
Rather sympathetic	58.6	61	56.3	62.6	61.8	51.5
Rather unsympathetic	28.5	28.5	28.4	27.1	25.1	33.4
Neither one nor the other <sup>a</sup>	6.1	5.8	6.4	5.6	6.5	6.1
Don't know/no reply	3.4	2.4	4.3	2.5	2.6	5.1

Fieldwork dates: S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6.

<sup>a</sup>Unprompted answer, this option was not read in the interview.



the young and, above all, those in intermediate age groups have a more negative perception about the way their family economic situation is developing. We cannot establish a causal relationship here, but we can stress that it is “coincidental” that those sectors of the population who have, from the outset of the crisis, been recording higher values in the crisis impact indicators are also more sympathetic toward the 15-M Movement (Tables 4, 5 and 6).<sup>16</sup>

*H.2.3: Levels of urbanization and territory.* Sympathy for the movement is not only an urban phenomenon. The sympathetic/unsympathetic ratio is above 1 in all levels of urbanization, the minimum being 1.5 in boroughs with less than 2,000 inhabitants, a maximum of 2.3 being reached in boroughs whose populations range from 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants (Table 4). We have observed that sympathy for the 15-M Movement is not limited to the urban areas where the main demonstrations have taken place; the majority of the population living in medium-sized and small boroughs also show sympathy for the movement. Furthermore, there is no autonomous region where the sympathy/rejection ratio is not greater than 1, the highest differences being detected in Navarre (3.4), Basque Country (2.9) and Catalonia (2.8) and the lowest in Extremadura (1.3) and Balearic Islands (1.5). The sympathy shown toward the 15-M Movement is not limited to a specific type of level of urbanization nor to certain types of region; it is cross-sectional.

*H.3: Continuity of the cross-sectionalism.* Since it first emerged, the 15-M Movement has taken on many forms: first with demonstrations and protest camps, followed by decentralized meetings, branching out into sectorial protests, in favor of public health, education, housing, etc. On 25 September 2012, sympathizers were called on to *Rodear el Congreso* (Surround the House of Parliament in Madrid). The action, which was originally called under the slogan *Ocupa el Congreso* [Occupy the Parliament], created a certain amount of controversy and some sectors considered that an increase in the degree of conflict with the institutions might lead to a moving away from the 15-M Movement’s logic.<sup>17</sup> Further questions were thus asked: will sympathy for 15-M remain at the same level regardless of the actions taken and will the general public support such actions as surrounding the Parliament, to the same extent as they have supported other less-controversial activities?

The survey conducted a few days after the 25-S demonstrations (on 3 and 4 October) shows that the degree of support for 25-S is very similar to the percentages recorded for 15-M: half of the Spanish population (50%) agreed not only with the arguments put forward for what came to be known as 25-S, but also with the way of expressing them

Table 4. Cross-sectional support of the 15-M Movement, occupation: “do you feel rather sympathetic or unsympathetic to these mobilizations?” (in percentages)

	Total	Workers	Retired	Unemployed	Student	Housewife
<i>N</i>	1,761	858	327	314	127	134
Rather sympathetic	65.4	68.1	57.8	71.6	72.7	69.3
Rather unsympathetic	31.8	29.7	39.4	24.3	22.7	29.9
Neither one nor the other <sup>a</sup>	–	–	–	–	–	–
Don’t know/no reply	3.4	2.4	4.3	2.5	5.1	<1

Fieldwork dates: S2.

<sup>a</sup>This option was not registered in S2.



Table 5. Cross-sectional support of the 15-M Movement, level of urbanization: “do you feel rather sympathetic or unsympathetic to these mobilizations?” (in percentages)

	>2000	2001– 10,000	10,001– 50,000	50,001– 100,000	100,001– 500,000	100,001– 500,000
<i>N</i>	346	888	1,587	716	1,414	332
Rather sympathetic	49.1	56	60.4	61.6	59.5	55.1
Rather unsympathetic	32.7	30	26.8	27	27.7	34.3
Neither one nor the other <sup>a</sup>	7.2	5.9	6	5.9	6.6	5.4
Don't know/no reply	5.5	3.6	3.9	2.6	3.3	2.4
<i>Sympathetic/ unsympathetic ratio</i>	1.5	1.9	2.3	2.3	2.1	1.6

Fieldwork dates: S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6.

<sup>a</sup>Unprompted answer, this option was not read in the interview.

through demonstrations. Around 27% agreed with the arguments, but not with the way of manifesting them. In other words, three out of every four citizens supported the arguments for the call to “Surround the Parliament,” as opposed to 17% who disagreed. Furthermore, most citizens also criticized the way the police acted during the demonstrations: about 57% thought they were too heavy-handed, compared to 32% who considered that their action was sufficient (only 4% thought the police action was not firm enough; Table 7).

Support for the arguments and the sympathy aroused among people of different ages, both genders and even different political ideologies proves to be cross-sectional, which is consistent with what has been observed up to the present, the biggest difference occurring for ideological reasons. However, the majority support the movement's arguments in all segments: 6 out of every 10 (61%) people who vote for the Popular Party (PP) sympathize with the arguments put forward by the 25-S Movement, and the percentage rises to between 8% and 9% where the voters for the rest of the parties are concerned.

Finally, other opinion polls published recently confirm that the movement is still receiving support. On the second anniversary of the 15-M Movement, according to the *Índice de Opinión Pública* [Public Opinion Index], three out of every four Spanish voters (76%) approve of the demonstrations promoted by the 15-M Movement, and one out of every five (20%) state that they have taken part in the protest activities or demonstrations.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, on 16 May 2013, the Metroscopia opinion poll indicated that 63% of citizens were sympathetic toward the movement – as opposed to 18% who were against – and that 78% believe their demands are justified, compared to 10% who think that they are not justified.<sup>19</sup> Where consensus is concerned, and to different extents, the protest mobilizations after 15-M – and that we can consider as arising from that movement – are still supported by the majority and are still cross-sectional.

## Discussion

### *The 15-M resonances and emergences*

The 15-M can hardly be categorized under stereotyped labels derived from conventional social science. It is not a *mass movement* because of the absence of the political and class

Table 6. Cross-sectional support of the 15-M Movement, region of residence: “do you feel rather sympathetic or unsympathetic to these mobilizations?” (in percentages)

	Andalusia	Aragon	Asturias	Balearic Islands	Canary Islands	Cantabria	Castile-La Mancha	Castile and León	Catalonia	Valencia	Extremadura	Galicia	Madrid	Murcia	Navarre	Basque Country	La Rioja
<i>N</i>	1,136	154	121	115	228	68	231	283	1,015	544	120	306	718	154	67	563	38
More sympathetic	55.3	55.2	53.7	53	64	(55.9)	53.2	56.2	66.3	57.2	45	54.9	54.7	53.2	(65.7)	68.7	(50)
More unsympathetic	30.8	31.2	33.9	34.8	23.7	(27.9)	31.6	30.7	23.8	27.6	35.8	29.7	31.1	31.2	(19.4)	24	(31.6)
Neither one nor the other <sup>a</sup>	6.3	6.5	7.4	6.1	4.8	(11.8)	6.5	6	5.3	7.9	5	7.8	6.4	9.7	(3)	2.8	(13.2)
Don't know/no reply	4.4	3.9	2.5	3.5	5.7	(1.5)	3.1	3.2	2.4	3.7	6.7	2.9	2.9	2.5	(4.5)	3.2	(<1)
<i>Sympathetic/unsympathetic ratio</i>	1.8	1.8	1.6	1.5	2.7	(2.0)	1.7	1.8	2.8	2.1	1.3	1.8	1.8	1.7	(3.4)	2.9	(1.6)

Fieldwork dates: S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6.

<sup>a</sup>Unprompted answer, this option was not read in the interview. Note: In brackets, values for guidance purposes, due to low samples.

Table 7. Continuity of the cross-sectionalism, sex, age and vote: “a few days ago a series of demonstrations known as 25-S took place near the House of Parliament. Which of the following attitudes toward the arguments used and the way of expressing them with these demonstrations do you agree with most?” (in percentages)

	Total	Sex		Age			Reminder of the November 2011 vote					
		Man	Woman	18–34	35–54	55 and over	PP	PSOE	IU	UPyD	Another	Didn't vote
<i>N</i>	1,003	496	507	286	367	350	282	249	69	44	85	120
Agrees with the arguments for the call and the demonstrations	50	51	48.7	56.6	47.7	46.6	24	67	(81.2)	(50)	(68.2)	49.2
Agrees with the arguments for the call but not the demonstrations	27	25	28.2	24.5	32.2	22.6	37	21	(13)	(31.8)	(22.4)	27.5
Does not agree with the arguments for the call	17	18.5	14.6	12.6	12.5	24	34	6	(2.9)	(15.9)	(7.1)	14.2
Was unaware that those demonstrations had taken place <sup>a</sup>	2	1.2	2.6	1.7	2.7	1.1	<1	2	(<1)	(<1)	(1.2)	5
Don't know/no reply	4.1	4.2	5.9	4.5	4.9	5.7	5	4	(2.9)	(2.3)	(1.2)	4.2

The fieldwork was carried out on 3 October 2012 and 4 October 2012. 1003 interviews. In brackets, values for guidance purposes, due to low samples.

<sup>a</sup>Unprompted answer, this option was not read in the interview.

organizations of the workers' movement in the early decades of the twentieth century. Even though they are massive in numerical terms, current mobilizations express the contestation of the "multitudes" (Hardt and Negri). The *indignados* consider themselves a social movement of persons, instead of activists or militants which are terms associated "to the 'old way of doing politics,' based on ideological or partisan affiliations" (Perugorria and Tejerina 434). Individuals, organized groups and informal groups take part without losing their identity. They self-organize with messages that do not easily fit into the left-right ideological axis and neither into the formalized discourses of the new social movements that opened up the political agendas in the second half of the twentieth century.

Feminism, ecology and pacifism put across postmaterialist values that provide ideological components essential to online multitudes (Inglehart and Norris). But the 15-M overlaps and blends specific and single-issue agendas. It appears to be an expression of a new notion of citizenship that does not demand constant militancy limited to one sector. Cybermultitudes decentralize the nodes of coordination, allowing for multiple, simultaneous, merging and fluctuating activisms. Digital networks transformed a wide variety of people into political actors, who ended up turning some digital spaces and communities into artifacts and actors for cooperative political action. In this sense, the *indignados* can be interpreted as a political meta-subject, comprising different physical arenas (such as political assemblies) and digital arenas (such as own generated forums and social media) that provide each other with feedback. In addition, digital networks allowed the *indignados* access to a wider basis of citizens and more open agendas of debate than media gatekeepers who remain editorially linked to the main parties and "the old way of doing politics."

The 15-M is not the first attempt at articulating a powerful critique of the Spanish establishment. In fact, the very transition was built upon dissent, that later would be invisibilized and deproblematized. Thus, the *problematizing* neighborhood associations and the civic (counter)cultures of transition, that represented a significant politicization of everyday life, remained completely out of the institutions of the new democratic regime and were actively forgotten by the system (Labrador 45). The 15-M Movement should be put in relation to an existing but obscured tradition of dissent. In this sense, it can be understood as both the continuation of the dissent movements of the last decades in Spain – updated to the context of the profound socioeconomic crisis – and an expansion of their contents to social groups that traditionally had remained outside the culture of dissent.

The *indignados* took two basic traits from the alter-globalization and other social movements that arose in Spain in the last decades. They gave value to "discursive public opinion" and to "deliberative democracies," making compatible direct and representative systems (Sampedro, "Opinión pública" 18). This means a clear point of departure from the political culture inherited from the dictatorship and the transition. Franco's most popular dictum was *Haga como yo, no se meta en política* [Do as I do, do not go into politics]. The democratization of the country was never considered to require a repoliticization of the population into new democratic values. The Spanish transition was built on the tacit agreement that an elite-driven process and a demobilized population would avoid the fragmentation and polarization associated with the breakdown of the Second Republic. In this context, the 15-M demands for a more participatory and transparent politics entered into an open conflict with the hegemonic culture of previous decades.

Unlike 2000s' anti-globalization movements, cybermultitudes no longer claim to operate in a supra-state arena (Chandler). Although internationally linked, they point

fingers to their national governments. Activists display new repertoires, such as long occupations of public spaces and intense sectorial mobilizations that guarantee them a lasting presence in the public arena. While contesting economic policies and core institutions, reclaiming the streets and *plazas* for contestation the 15-M defies the words of Manuel Fraga – former Franco Minister and latter one of the founding fathers of the 1978 Constitution: *La calle es mía* [The street is mine].<sup>20</sup> If the transition is constructed from the demobilization, the 15-M goes against the CT, reclaiming public space for its repoliticization. Indeed, the 15-M starts as a disobedience movement, occupying public spaces for political protest.

The 15-M has also enhanced neo-communitarian practices and social self-aid initiatives among the most proactive sectors of the population. It advances new approaches to democracy complementing (not replacing) electoral politics (Subirats), with the aim of increasing the opportunities of participation for the citizens.<sup>21</sup> Besides activating institutional contestation, the 15-M transfers the focus of politics to *metapolitics or subpolitics*, attempting to foster new concepts of democracy rather than dealing with the interests of the individual or further a given collective and ideologically fixed project. The *indignados* air strong critics of conventional politics and demand that participatory alternatives to representative democracy be recognized as legitimate and compatible with existing institutions after they are renewed. But the 15-M is not only contestation to the past. Demands are consistent with the notion of *life politics* related to discussions about individualization, reflexivity, consciousness, globalization, politics of recognition and identity, etc. (Giddens; Beck, Giddens and Lash; Rose).<sup>22</sup>

On the one hand, the *indignados* perform a cultural task by building and advancing new repertoires of protest and cultural practices. Nonviolent and generative social conflict has entered and renewed a public sphere that now questions nondeliberative and elite-controlled institutions.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the *indignados* perform an instrumental task. Attempting to change the political agenda, they managed to popularize core demands such as a new electoral law, institutional transparency against corruption and government responsiveness. Although extremely popular, these policy changes remain excluded, in practice, from the game of politics as established by the two main parties in a bipartisan agenda control. The constitutional reform of Article 135 and the social costs derived from it were agreed by the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) and the PP (Partido Popular). The polls show that the *indignados* have contributed to seriously erode the bipartisan electoral cleavage. But the meaning of the 15-M cannot be perceived with standard measures of the political impact of the new social movements.

As our data show, online multitudes appear to generate a new public space for contestation, which takes in a very broad range of activists and citizens. The *indignados* bring together people with different social and political viewpoints, even conflicting ones. More than being “one movement,” it is an expression of a sociopolitical discontent shared by millions of Spaniards, for which it acts as a sounding board. At the same time, it constitutes a plural space where new political action and discourse emerge. It provides expression and collective tools for political struggle that can be used by the majority of those affected by the crisis and of those disaffected from polarized bipartisan politics (Calle). From this perspective, ideological positions, collective identities and classic political programs cannot account for the composition and influence of the *indignados*. From the outset, they put into practice “the politics of &,” adds Calle (29), by which he means an inclusive attempt at taking in the widest sociological and ideological spectrum.

Refusing to be characterized into a particular electoral niche or a specific socioeconomic sector, the *indignados* challenge party divisions as fictitious. They argue that, in practical terms, the two parties that have a possibility of governing display similar policies when they gain power. Opposed to this *de facto* bipartisan model, the 15-M would be anticipating “the democracy of the future” (Cruells and Ibarra 14). The public opinion that the *indignados* are mobilizing leads to debates and proposes policies that are alternatives to the “aggregated public opinion” as expressed in terms of votes and parliamentary representation (Sampedro, “Opinión pública” 20). Moreover, the 15-M is clearly linked to previous mobilizations that did not fit into the political map designed during the transition (Sampedro and Duarte 238).

*The indignados: who are they, where they come from?*

The challenge to Spanish institutional politics generated in the transition has aroused an incipient interest among academics, who asked “who are they and what are they demanding?” (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana and Mena). They wondered where the citizens present at the protest camps and in the first meetings came from. Other studies indicate concern over the 15-M’s impact on the elections (Jiménez), as though elections were its main target; they concluded that most of those who participated in the meetings were young people. The majority were assumed to be left wing and more inclined to support reform rather a breakup, focusing more on the underlying political questions – reforming the electoral system and improving the quality of democracy, based upon more transparency and participation – than on specific public policies and, finally, with many spokespersons and no leaders.<sup>24</sup> A more recent report (issued by the same think tank as the above two, *Fundación Alternativas*) yielded data that are reflected no longer just in interviews with activists but in surveys applied to the entire population, like the ones that we are presenting in this article. The study in question indicated that young people, employment instability and social exclusion were not the main characteristics of the 15-M members, extremely varied in their sociodemographic patterns. In ideological terms, anger and indignation were the principal feelings, expressed in terms of opposition between “the underprivileged (unemployed, workers and the young) and the powerful (politicians, bankers and companies)” (Likki 1).

The aforementioned results would be endorsing the qualitative and quantitative methods (and with varying degrees of emphasis), the distinctive features of the 15-M that we mentioned. However, until now we have only been able to rely upon partial studies, only valid for identifying certain actors in very specific temporal contexts. We consider that they overlook the basic deliberative aspect of the 15-M Movement. It should not to be interpreted or measured by its institutional impact, especially if this is considered in the short term and is measured only by its effects upon the parties, the public authorities and the policies concerned. Out of habit, an attempt has been made to pigeonhole the *indignados* in the classic ideological dimensions of left and right, as well as to inscribe the movement into an obsolete spectrum of political parties or, at least, a spectrum that is in the process of change.

The emergence of the 15-M only a few days before the 22 May 2011 elections is not coincidental. It reflects the deep-rooted disaffection that a significant portion of the general public feels regarding the ways in which the political – and economic – system works. A few days before the start of the 15-M mobilizations, a poll conducted by the Spanish Sociological Research Centre ranked the political class as the Spanish citizens’

third greatest cause for concern (22.1%), after unemployment (84.1%) and the economic problems (46.5%). Political support to professional politicians and the two main political parties has been seriously eroded in Spain since 2008, especially when considering the indicators that concern approval of public posts, trusting democratic institutions and assessing the way democracy is functioning.

The citizens' mobilizations that eclipsed the official election campaign in May 2011 took on social overtones in its second year, when the *mareas* (meaning multifaceted protests and demonstrations) against the successive public service cutbacks occurred in summer and autumn 2012. These tides are an example of an "expanded" tool of political expression, reinvented and with a more far-reaching range. They supplement strikes rather than replacing them. They transform strikes into longer mobilizations and are supported by social sectors once opposed to striking or inactive and ones that, to a great extent, adopt strategies and discourses totally different from those of the trade unions. These new forms of symbolic conflict have increased both the repertoire of protests and, above all, their scope in ideological and social terms. Something similar can be said about the demonstrations in front of state and regional parliaments, which gave a political and electoral turn to the *indignados*' strategy.

After 15 September 2012, with the call to surround the *Congreso de los Diputados*, the 15-M moved its epicenter from *Puerta del Sol* to *Plaza de Neptuno*, closer to the Lower House. Further pressure was thus exerted on the political representatives, while the *indignados* adopted a more political strategy seeking a change in public policies to affront the crisis and introducing modifications to the political-institutional framework. The demand for a public audit of the debt and people's referendums on the method of payment were now presented together with a proposal for initiating "a constituent project" to reform or supersede the Constitution established in 1978. The fact that new parties were elected to the Galician Regional Parliament (*Alternativa Galega de Esquerdas*) and Catalan Parliament (*Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*), plus statements of political representatives in favor of the 15-M (now from the young sectors of the two major parties), indicated that changes were starting to be made to an electoral map that was thought to be stable. According to the CIS opinion polls for the elections,<sup>25</sup> in 2013 the overall intention to vote for either the PP or the PSOE fell below 50% for the first time ever.<sup>26</sup>

The way the 15-M Movement has evolved has led to decentralization and diversification: first, by forming neighborhood assemblies,<sup>27</sup> through decentralizing the unitarian assemblies, which were originally convened at one single point in every city. The setting up of work groups and logistics committees – more than 30 in the first month – led to a plethora of specific groups, some associated with the "tides" such as public education and health service. The housing situation has been one of the major areas of protest and action since the outset of the movement, and has included group activities taken to prevent evictions and to support groups like the *Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas* [Platform for Mortgage Victims]. This move toward decentralization and diversification is a sign of growth, of territorial and political expansion. It must not be forgotten that the 15-M is expressed and acts as a distributed network. More sectors and more groups – albeit smaller – mean a growth of the network and a greater ability to take decentralized political action. This logic may seem contrary to the unified and massive strategy thought to be essential for the triumph of



previous social mobilizations. But it is a strategy attuned to the digital logics of a networked public sphere (Benkler).

The 15-M had an effect upon social protest strategies, as well as upon institutional life and electoral results. Nothing of the sort had happened either through the usual classic politics channels in Spain or through other formal organizations such as trade unions. As discursive public opinion – taking the form of a discontinuous yet constant flow of summonings, assemblies, protests and manifestos – the 15-M Movement has reformulated the repertoires of classic collective action, turning demonstrations into the occupation of public zones and strikes into citizens' tides (Romanos 210) and having an effect, almost from the start, on organizations and partisan discourse. This has been done without the 15-M losing popular support or cross-sectionalism. Quite the opposite, public support for the *indignados* movement has given the greatest boost to all these processes.

### Conclusion

Primary data recorded among general population in Spain, between 2011 and 2013, confirm a wide support for the 15-M: three out of every four citizens sympathize with its arguments and one in every two agree with its protest strategies. The aforementioned support has not only been constant in time but also cross-sectional, coming from different ages, both sexes, diverse occupational situations and levels of urbanization. Two levels of interpretation can be advanced. The 15-M has expressed and maintained the social rejection to the neoliberal policies and the social costs associated to the economic crisis. In parallel, the *indignados* also express the present inadequacy of the regime transition initiated in 1978. Although *la Transición* was clearly successful in many terms, it now confronts a radical and widespread critique in several political issues. The stalemate or degradation of the institutional life is not an argument of extra-parliamentary or minority groups anymore.

Our interpretation does not deny the economic crisis and the political system interpretations. We blend both into a process of an emerging new political culture. A whole repertoire of tools and discourses are being displayed since May 2011 for expressing and participating in the public sphere. Social debate and mobilizations clash against the institutional framework, and these tensions will be one of the main driving forces of Spanish public life in the next decades.

In a restricted view, the 15-M functions as a vehicle to confront specific problems derived from the economic crisis or political corruption. In its more recent manifestations – such as sectorial protests (*mareas*) and public denunciations of public officials (*escraches*) – the polls show degrees of support similar to those reached by the 15-M Movement in its first year and a half of existence. This far-reaching appeal of the *indignados* also applies to attitudes toward actions that display overtones of challenging the political system. Parallels can be drawn between the cross-sectional consensus that we analyzed in this article and the (also cross-sectional) political disaffection observed since the beginning of the crisis (Lobera and Ferrándiz 41–65). The 15-M appears to be the visible channel for a comprehensive but critical consensus. One possible prediction forecasts that social protests and political disaffection will fade away when economic recovery was accomplished. This is the perspective of current governing elites. But the extent of the public support toward the 15-M suggests that the demonstrations function

as a sounding board for a social majority critical with the institutional framework of the transition, asking for deep reforms that may overcome the CT. This macro-level interpretation is already accepted in the cultural field.

This “culture of the transition” has been openly denounced by emerging voices (Guillem Martínez; Fernández-Savater; Moreno-Caballud). A common critique is that the acknowledgment of social and political conflict was always suffocated or minimized by elite-built consensus. Mainstream media agendas and a profoundly altered public sphere accept now previously vetoed issues. At present, open discussions are being carried out regarding the republican memory and the massive crimes of the dictatorship, the police violence during the transition and nowadays, the absence of institutional laicism and the role of the monarchy and even questioning the future of a united Spanish national entity. Critical clamors accompany now the public appearances of the royal family, the two majoritarian parties or leading financial families and CEO in the streets.

In ideological terms, the 15-M has been depicted as a “climate ... especially of *cultural* transformation (even *aesthetic*): a modification of the perception (what is seen and unseen), of sensibility (what is tolerable) and of what is possible (yes we can).”<sup>28</sup> This quote connects the *indignados* with the notions of *subpolitics*, *metapolitics* or *life politics* that we already mentioned. Although still embryonic, new political subjects experiment individual changes of self-perception and develop participatory tools or innovative organizations that show strength in small-scale initiatives. All together, in one way or another, this soft hegemonic thesis maintains that this burgeoning subjective and social fabric will foster the Spanish game of politics in the future.

While the sociocultural field is open to the *indignados*' contestation, the economic and political institutions remain closed to their demands. The balance of three years of contention is clearly negative for the 15-M. The constitutional reform of August 2011 was the first measure adopted by the social democrat government of Zapatero. Forced by the European Bank a few months after the citizens camped in the center of Madrid, this reform constitutionalized the orthodox economic policies to fight the financial crisis. A law of transparency was finally approved at the end of 2013 but leaving the Crown and the Church aside. Together with the Citizens' Security Law for repressing protest and mobilizations, this legal response depict the Spanish institutional sphere as outdated and in a clear tension with a large social body.

*The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain* was a much-praised book by Víctor Pérez-Díaz. The neo-corporativism that this author presented as the key element for a successful Transition has been transformed now into clientelism, institutional opacity and degradation mainly because the return of the civil society was partial and incomplete. The 15-M shows a high degree of support for political and institutional change. Here we proved that its sociological distribution is homogeneous across almost any sector of the population. Moreover, the *indignados* blend older political dissents – including those who fought Franco and were later obscured by the official consensuses – with new generations of activists, from the anti-conscription and alter-globalization movements to the hacktivists who were crucial in the initial stages of the 15-M. Given its extent, the new critical consensus might include citizens who have become disaffected with the 1978 regime and were not previously mobilized. Further empirical evidence will be needed in order to compare the waves of mobilizations during the transition period and nowadays. Nevertheless, the data presented in this article

suggest that the “return of the Spanish civil society” might be taking place again through the 15-M Movement and its derivations.<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

1. Several of these earlier movements also had an important line of action from the Internet and social media. Some good examples are found in the *Movimiento de Resistencia Global* – with the Indymedia network between 1999 and 2002 – the “Night of the SMS” prior to the general elections of 2004, the *V de Vivienda* movement in 2006 or the mobilizations against the Sinde Act in late 2009.
2. Neighborhood organizations were of great political importance in the predemocratic stage. In 1976, for instance, neighborhood organizations became the first mobilizing force, achieving 36.2% of the total political participation (Sastre 56).
3. For example, the vigorous documentalist movement of the transition virtually disappeared after 1979. The few exceptions that occurred suffered serious administrative or legal problems (Trenzado 319), as in the case of *Rocío* (1980), by Fernando Ruiz, and *Después de...* (1981), by Celia and Juan J. Bartolomé.
4. A large majority of Spaniards (82%) miss the “spirit” of interparty consensus of the *Transición*. See data in *El referéndum que no fue*, Josep Lobera. 26 September 2011.
5. Metroscopia poll, published in *El País*, 7 December 2013. [http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/12/07/media/1386433511\\_482195.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/12/07/media/1386433511_482195.html)
6. We studied this mobilization before the 2004 general elections and suggested the term “cybermultitudes” or “online multitudes” in order to stress the digital practices used (Sampedro “13M: Multitudes online”). In that case, mobile phones and SMS were the key tools.
7. Datafolha poll, based on 4,717 interviews conducted from 27 June 2013 to 28 June 2013. Published by the *Guardian*, 29 June. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/29/brazilian-dilma-rousseff-support-protests>
8. A first poll conducted by Istanbul Bilgi University, published by *Time Magazine* on 5 June 2013. <http://world.time.com/2013/06/05/live-from-occupied-gezi-park-in-istanbul-a-new-turkish-protest-movement-is-born/> and a second poll conducted by Konda, published by Bianet on 13 June 2013. <http://www.bianet.org/english/youth/147543-94-percent-of-gezi-resisters-participate-individually-poll-says>
9. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2913/ Occupy-Britain.aspx>
10. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/may/14/occupy-wall-street-people-power-popularity>
11. <http://www.pollingreport.com/politics.htm>
12. On the characterization of the sample design for CIS barometers, see Valentín C. Martínez’s “Diseño de encuestas de opinión: barómetro CIS.”
13. The difference of values within a few days seems to indicate that demonstrations on the first anniversary of 15-M would have had the effect of increasing sympathy for the movement among citizens.
14. The 10-point difference between support to the arguments (78%) and sympathy for the movement (68%) is accounted for by a segment of the population that does not share a formal expression of the protests but does agree with the underlying arguments.
15. Lobera and Seyfferth show that women who only carry out domestic activities are the only group where a subjective assessment plays a significant role in the classification of the respondent (19). This appraisal – affected by the major importance that some women attach to this occupation – has meant that, in this type of telephone interview, the group of housewives was reduced by almost 25% when compared to surveys based upon classifications using objective criteria (and not declarative criteria). It is the only group where there is a difference of this kind between objective and declarative interview methodologies.
16. Some of these indicators are the assessment of their own family’s financial situation, the manifestation of distress about the crisis and the general outlook for the economy.

17. Severe criticisms were leveled at the call from the institutional sphere, such as those made by the secretary general of the PP, María Dolores de Cospedal, who likened the 25-S call to the failed 1981 coup.
18. *Índice de Opinión Pública* [Public Opinion Index], conducted by Simple Lógica between 1 April 2013 and 8 April 2013. <http://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-mas-mitad-espanoles-favor-15m-presente-elecciones-20130510142959.html>
19. Metroscoopia survey, published by *El País* on 18 May 2013. [http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/05/18/actualidad/1368894896\\_892384.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/05/18/actualidad/1368894896_892384.html)
20. In 1975, he was appointed as vice president and minister of interior of the government of Carlos Arias Navarro, in the first rule of King Juan Carlos. Under his tenure in the ministry in 1976, he coined the phrase “The street is mine,” after the attempt of demonstration on May Day, which he refused.
21. These objectives have a great deal in common with the spirit of “hacking democracy” (Stockwell), the interaction between hacker ethics (Himanen) and metapolitics-oriented movements.
22. Other related notions were previously formulated such as subpolitics (Beck) or life style politics (Sicinski and Roos).
23. Nearly three out of four Spaniards believe that the 15-M is a peaceful and nonpartisan movement (Lobera 1).
24. As far as their effect on the 2011 Local Council Elections was concerned, an increase in spoiled ballot papers and blank votes was detected. It was likewise observed that the two major parties lost a large number of votes in the constituencies where the mobilizations received the greatest support.
25. CIS is a Spanish government centre, which depends on the Ministry of the Presidency whose objective is scientific research into Spanish society. <http://www.cis.es>
26. CIS. Study number 2.984. April 2013. [http://datos.cis.es/pdf/Es2984mar\\_A.pdf](http://datos.cis.es/pdf/Es2984mar_A.pdf), page 13.
27. About 120 groups emerged in Madrid alone.
28. Amador Fernández-Savater. [http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Fuerza-poder-Reimaginar-revolucion\\_6\\_155444464.html](http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Fuerza-poder-Reimaginar-revolucion_6_155444464.html) Emphasis added.
29. *Podemos*, after only five months of existence, got nearly 10% of votes and five seats in the Elections to the European Parliament on 25 May 2014 in Spain. Post-electoral polls show even stronger support levels for coming elections. The new political formation demands are similar to those expressed by 15-M movement, specially those related with a regeneration of democracy beyond the limits established along the transition and a more participatory and transparent politics. At the present, *Podemos* is successfully attracting 15-M supporters. Their voters profile is cross-sectional, coming from different ages, both sexes, diverse occupational situations and levels of urbanization, alike the cross-sectional support to the 15-M presented along this paper.

### Notes on contributors

Victor Sampedro initially approached the theoretical debates of the democratic nature of public sphere and later on examined empirically the impact of Spanish and international social movements in policy and media agenda-setting. His background in Communication Studies, Sociological Theory and Political Sciences led him to extensively lecture, publish and conduct research of these three disciplines, both in Spanish and international institutions. Without abandoning the study of conventional mass media, he incorporated the ICT uses for collective action and policy innovation. In 2011 he began to coordinate an interdisciplinary and pioneering **Postgraduate** Program on Digital Communication, Culture and Citizenship, which incorporates de logics of collaborative and open education. Most of his academic production, media appearances and socially engaged projects can be accessed at: <http://www.victorsampedro.com/>. His last book is *El Cuarto Poder en Red*, Icaria, Barcelona, 2014.

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