

“We are sleeping, let’s wake up”

The uprising of the Indignadxs in Spain

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On the left: a white-haired shoemaker in checkered shirt and brown khakis, casting uneasy glances at the circle of people surrounding him. A smirk settles on his lips as he prepares a witty rejoinder; perhaps he’s amused by the tourists, too.

To the right: a tan young man with a single dreadlocked braid hanging from the back of his scalp, tattered pajama pants, dirty fingernails. His hands move in front of him as though describing a box, and the words come slowly, ineloquently. His eyes evince a friendly conviction.

On the periphery of the improvised ring in the center of the city plaza, passersby mutter color commentary, dissecting the arguments of the combatants and the political allegiances betrayed by their appearances. American and German travelers snap pictures on their iPhones; an old man with his hands behind his back slowly shakes his head. Other protesters, camped here for over a month, ignore the ruckus and talk about cooking dinner, and the inordinate heat. Around the square, white taxis search for fares and street performers hold uncomfortable poses—a statue of Apollo, “the drunk Cuban”—in the hope of garnering a few Euros. A massive L’Oreal advertisement, offering product that maintains “Mediterranean Hair” for 48 hours, looms over the scene from above. The reclining lady in, the photo looks like she’s seen it all before.

The Puerta del Sol in Madrid—the city’s center, if there is one, the place where tourists head first, a shorthand for Spain—has become the nexus of what is alternately called the Movement of 15-M or the uprising of the indignados (the “indignant”; in a neat bit of political orthography, 15-M’s official organ spells it indignadxs to evade questions of gender). Starting with a massive demonstration against social spending cuts and youth unemployment on May 15th, young protesters have gathered here irregularly for the past several weeks, venting frustration at a globalized Europe (and a crisis-ridden globe), in which faceless bureaucrats in Brussels, Geneva, and Strasbourg dictate the financial priorities of their society. An occupation of sorts was maintained for a month after the initial outburst: a tent city emerged between the four-story hotels and overpriced sidewalk cafes, a maze of tarps, art projects, and other clutter that resembled a hybrid of Bonnaroo and a Turkish bazaar. Like-minded folks from around the country and the continent descended to talk austerity, welfare, revolution. Talking heads blabbered about what was going on in Sol. Backpackers had their pictures taken in front of signs carrying quotes from Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

And then, just as the effect was wearing off and the Spaniards were preparing themselves for summer vacation, the indignadxs willingly dispersed. This is not just about Sol, they said. We must take the message to the other neighborhoods, the other cities. This is just the beginning.

Of course, they left a contingent behind in Sol. Even insurrectionists must have a face, after all. Below the statue of King Carlos III, whose bronze girth occupies the center of the plaza, lies a new plaque: *Dormiamos. Despertamos.* “We were sleeping. Let’s wake up.”

Beside the Anarchy Bar, beyond the wall advocating against violence and searching for lost dogs, past the fountain whose rim has been converted into an impromptu vegetable garden, our rhetorical pugilists wrap up their

fight. The gist of it was rather unclear: the shoemaker seemed upset that these young bohemian types—who, doubtless lacking good sandals, didn't have their feet on the ground—were taking to the streets the moment the money stopped flowing. A classic argument: don't bite the hand that feeds you. Our dreadlocked challenger, on the other hand, was pleading the case of his compatriots: we never signed up for this. You've worked your forty years, received your free health care, settled into the life of a pensioner. What do we do when the social safety net that coddled our parents has nothing left to offer but the bitter fruit of a banking disaster? Did we gamble on subprime mortgages or rotten derivatives?

A few quick facts. Since the crisis of 2008, Spain's economy has been one of the poorest-performing in the "developed world." A massive trade deficit, rampant overinvestment in housing, and generally shoddy accounting are the primary culprits. Unemployment hovers at around 20%; for those under 25, it's over 40%. Massive spending cuts to the tune of 7.9% last year and 3.9% in the next have meant slashes in public salaries, cuts in social spending, and political turmoil. (Note: much of this has been done under the auspices of a nominally socialist government.) Empty suburbs dot the extremities of the major Spanish cities, testament to decades of rampant development and ill-advised expenditures in the decades following the collapse of Fascist rule in the 1970s. A general pessimism towards the future, and towards Spain's place in modern Europe, is prevalent.

One approach to this problem is that taken by the Powers That Be in the EU: chastise the (mostly southern) countries who, in some adolescent refusal to abandon the kumbaya spread-the-wealth ideals of the 20th century, have irresponsibly funneled money towards state pensions, higher education, and social spending. Force them to enact strict austerity measures in return for a bailout from their more level-headed continental peers. Get them on board with the free-market, trust-in-the-bankers method. As the last few years have shown, this never fails.

Another approach: put your faith in Spain's parliamentary system to solve the problem. Switch from Party A to Party B, because something bad happened while Party A was in power and Party B is different, therefore everything will be fine. Express your anger responsibly in the form of ballots, simpler grocery lists, and letters to the editor. This is a strategy Americans will understand.

But might there not be a third way? A different way to view the problem? Maybe, the indignadxs say, the problem isn't Banker vs. Professional Socialist or Rotten Derivatives vs. Sound Investments; maybe the malaise is more endemic, more systematic. Could it be, just maybe, that a global, free-market economy—what with its faceless corporations managing your utilities, its suits-and-ties dictating the conditions of your economic survival, and its propensity for ever-increasing income disparity—is not the best way to build an equitable 21st-century society?

This chain of thought is nothing new. The 15-M-ers, with their demands for a more responsive (or even no) government, a greater respect for individual rights and potentials, and a less corporatist economy, are in many ways just the next chapter in a book that's been continuously written since the events of 1968. Slogans from 1999 Seattle and 2008 Greece are repeated and repainted; vague plans for economic justice and social harmony are bandied about and forgotten. Even the spectacle of it all—the masses of people seen marching on the evening news, the calls to arms on Facebook, the ogling tourists getting their chance to take a picture with a real anarchist—is just a rehash of the nagging self-consciousness that has been present in every anti-globalization, anti-technocracy, anti-something movement in the "developed" West of the past forty-odd years.

But the indignadxs, in one essential sense, are new. The voluntary dispersal of the original Sol encampment in the middle of June, with the aim of spreading the anger around the country—and, one suspects, robbing pessimists of the opportunity to dismiss it as just another carnival—has given the 15-M movement the possibility of sustaining an anti-European popular insurrection whose strength could perhaps be rivaled only by the anarchists in Greece. Autonomous assemblies, addressing the needs of residents outside the paradigm of Spain's hermetically-sealed political class, have cropped up in most Madrid neighborhoods and a good part of the major Spanish cities. A legitimate attempt at constructing alternative power structures—with the end, one hopes, of eliminating power structures altogether—is being made. The ambiguities inherent in any such movement remain, of course: 15-M is so far less an intelligible program than it is the articulation of a disgust with the world-as-it-is. But as the work of only several weeks, and without any martyr or rallying cry around which to coalesce, its successes thus far are nothing less than astounding.

The day-to-day work of peaceful insurrection continues. Demonstrations and occupations similar to those in Sol have caused consternation in Barcelona and Valencia. Indignadxs hold councils and solicit tactical suggestions

in open meetings. Columns of protesters are currently marching from around the country in preparation for another massive demonstration in Madrid on July 23rd.

How long until the Molotov cocktails start to fly? Or will the angry Spanish youths instead become bored with the prospect of sustained agitation and return to their parents' apartments and mope? On a dry mid-June night in the Puerta del Sol, as passengers from the Metro station rushed by and cast curious glances, a group of protesters busted out water guns and started shooting each. They raced around the appropriated shopping carts and dusty Persian rugs, spraying each other with water, giggling, screaming.

One has to wonder, for Spain, Greece, anywhere: is this as far as it goes?

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