



Perspektiven auf globale Politik

INDIGNADOS AND OCCUPY: CHANNELING POLITICAL DISSATISFACTION THROUGH AN ANTI- INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

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Between 2011 and 2012 many public spaces in global North were indefinitely occupied by people dissatisfied with the political system. The origin of this dissatisfaction, however, is not clear. This article rejects that the origin was either a popular longing for direct democracy or for an end to neoliberalism. It problematizes the frequent assumption that voting is a proper way to account for the will of the people: The manifestation of thousands of Indignados and Occupiers pointed to the idea that elections are not a sufficient method for expressing political will. This article goes further to suggest that voting is not a neutral method either.

by Rosa del Mar Moro (University of Oviedo)*

Both the *Indignados movement* and *Occupy* arose and continued to operate outside of the traditional institutionalized channels of protest – for numerous reasons: firstly, the progressive parties with a chance of reaching a sufficient majority to govern, both in Spain and the United States, had shown themselves incapable of presenting an alternative to the austerity policies against which these activists mobilized. Secondly, unions, oblivious to the changes in the *post-Fordist work* structure and increasingly economically dependent on public subsidies, had also been unable to funnel the social criticism against new forms of exploitation, increasing inequality and the transferring of public money into private entities. In addition, even the *World Social Forum* held in Dakar in



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February 2011 remained unconnected to the localized discontents in the Global North which just a few months later would blossom in Spain and then in the USA (Smith et al., 2013, 3).

To summarize, no political institution was in a position to give political form to and channel the diffuse and widespread dissatisfaction against the national austerity policies and/or the growing influence of big business over politics. In these circumstances, social networks became the avenues through which it was possible to start articulating and mobilizing the uneasiness against the political status quo (Castells, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Disputed Origins of Popular Support

The horizontal and discursive dynamics of both movements were, in themselves, evidence of this dissatisfaction with a political system characterized by opposite structures of hierarchy, negotiation and arithmetic majorities. Their very refusal to specify or settle on particular demands was not simply due to the practical difficulty of reaching an agreement among the activist (Gitlin, 2012, 29), but also due the awareness that a list of concrete requests to the state would have meant an implicit legitimization of the system and would have facilitated the movements' co-option (Gitlin, 2012, 110, 156; Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012, 384). A list of specific demands would also have detracted the movements from their radical goal of restoring real sovereignty to the people, as opposed to having power rest with a small political and economic elite.

The desire to keep apart from the political institutions explains why *Occupy* did not generate a *Tea Party*-like entity, even though there were internal discrepancies about keeping away from the electoral arena altogether (Gould-Wartofsky, 2015, 202). In a similar vein, the effort to transform the social majority formed by the *Indignados* into a political party was also controversial: *Podemos*, the political party that has capitalized on the discontent of the *Indignados*, carefully avoids any claims of representing the movement.

The refusal to engage in institutional politics cannot be explained exclusively by the activists' resentment toward political representation, as opposed to direct participation or, in other words, be attributed only to their expressed hope that the squares would become the seed of a new type of social coexistence based on direct democracy and the absence of political hierarchies (Abrasad@s de Sol, 2011, 27; Mouffe, 2013, 109-113; della Porta, 2012, 276). The probability that all activists and supporters of these two movements, given their transversal nature, would have agreed with this autonomist position is minimal (Benski et al., 2013, 545, 550; Kang, 2013; Ancelovici, 2015) – not to mention that a society completely reconciled within itself and capable of peacefully resolving their differences through dialogue and consensus seems both practically and ontologically unviable (Mouffe 1999, 2013).

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For similar reasons, the widespread and diverse support for the anti-institutional approach (Ferrandiz, May 15, 2014; Mouffe, 2013, 127; Castells, 2012, 120) prevents us from assuming that protests were primarily motivated by the rejection of neoliberalism. According to Mouffe (2013), the main reason why people took to the street in 2011-2012 was the lack of a real electoral alternative to neoliberal policies. It is, indeed, true that the very search for electoral majorities prevents the democratic system from offering real political alternatives, as political parties are stimulated to moderate their speech in order to win undecided votes from the center of the political spectrum. But again, the very possibility of so many ordinary people to be comfortable with such a drastic anti-liberal approach is weak. Moreover, the fact that those in the squares had recreated the deliberative ideal does not invite us to think that it was actually a desire of the protesters to create a radical alternative to neoliberalism: deliberation is known for inhibiting the introduction of controversial issues that could break the flow of discussions or hinder the final consensus (Young, 1990, 2001; Bourdieu, 2006, 2007; 1984), as some activists recognized in Madrid (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2012, 301). Furthermore, under conditions of economic and cultural inequality, the arrangement of debate in a single mass agora (as was the case in the *Occupy* and *Indignados* protests) tends to marginalize disadvantaged social groups, thus excluding precisely those radical voices that could threaten hegemonic cultural presumptions. Consequently, the latter are kept in subordinate positions. Codes of interaction considered socially appropriate hence work like an invisible barrier that discourages active participation of under-privileged people who feel neither called for nor qualified to speak up.

The Possible Shortcomings of the Political Institutions

The reason for the stated widespread support to the anti-institutional logic of the *Indignados* and *Occupy*, as well as their correlative desire to stay out of the political institutions that had disappointed so many people, can be found elsewhere: in the inability of the political system to fulfil its own promises.

The institutional designs of modern democracies have been in place since the late eighteenth century. According to Manin (1997), this arrangement is based on four fundamental principles: periodic competitive elections, political mandates with certain maneuverability, freedom of public opinion, and parliamentary debate. Of these principles, the vote has aroused the greater dissatisfaction as it is arguably a passive form of political participation, incapable of transmitting different intensities (Hirschman, 1982). Nonetheless, it is also the only form of participation capable of ensuring, through majority rule, the Pareto principle [i.e., “if all voters prefer alternative x to alternative y, the rule ranks x over y”], anonymity and neutrality (Dasgupta & Maskin, 1999, 72-73). Accomplishing the Pareto principle means that if a majority prefer the alternative x to the option y, the elections would indeed give the victory

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to x. Anonymity, on the other hand, ensures that each individual participation is just as important as the other, regardless of voter identity. Neutrality, for its part, guarantees that the procedure will not favor any particular alternative. Nevertheless, I argue that elections are not such a neutral method of choosing political options and this is why so many people felt disengaged with formal politics.

This admittedly sweeping statement is based on the puzzle that vote counting, the technical foundation of elections, assumes that each vote is equal and comparable when, in reality, not every citizen is capable of consistently synthesizing all of her political preferences in one single ballot, regardless of their social position. The interests of underprivileged social groups are always more complex and more difficult to resume in one single vote than the preferences of those collectives most benefited by the system. The most disadvantaged are often torn between immediate individual interests and group long-term claims related to the social structure that supports and legitimizes their collective subordinate position (Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980; Przeworski, 2002, 20). A manual worker, for example, must often choose between risking her immediate livelihood by supporting a prolonged strike over working conditions, or accepting a restriction of her rights which would allow her to continue working at the expense of massive downsizing. A person in a more privileged social position, on the other hand, would not have to consider the need to support or defend any collective action demanding radical social change and, therefore, as a supporter of the status quo, does not face the same kind of conflict.

The Political Bias of the Electoral System towards the Status Quo

If we accept these premises, individual and secret vote tends to favor the expression of the former over the latter in the cases where the person feel a contradiction between their individual interests, and their collective interests or group loyalties. Particularly when strong ties of collective identification or powerful social organizations (such as trade unions or political parties, that represent (and recall) group solidarities and structural inequalities) are absent, the individualist stimulus of the vote is especially difficult to counteract. This, in turn, produces a systemic bias for the status quo and against subordinated groups that, at the individual level, express fear to the immediate consequences of any real change, but that collectively long for an alternative social order.

In conclusion, the origin of the dissatisfaction expressed by both the *Indignados* and *Occupiers* arguably lies in the fact that institutional-electoral systems are biased towards the preservation of the status quo. Hence it was wise for *Occupy* and the *Indignados* to keep the protest -- or, at least, parts of it -- away from the political bias of the electoral institutions and, instead, to try to constitute a strong political subject first. The question of how to maintain this new collective subjectivity well and alive without the constant constitutive labour of traditional

representative institutions needs to be considered in all of its complexity: it is true that three years after the mobilization of 2011 and 2012, in 2014, the recently created Spanish party **Podemos** transferred part of the political impetus of the *Indignados* movement into the electoral institutions with unprecedented success ([Kadner, 5 nov, 2014](#)). In contrast, none of the controversial electoral initiatives in the USA were as remotely successful ([Malone & Fredericks, 2013](#)). However, rather than focusing on the immediate electoral success of either of both movements and thus falling back to measuring the success of social mobilization against the relative ground gained towards institutionalization (see the introduction to this series by [Anderl, Grimm, Vathauer, 2016](#)), more might be gained by considering, on a more general note, if the output generated by a political system too narrowly focused on counting heads *can* be neutral, at all. If not – shouldn't it be expanded to include other political forms of expressions?

If the institutional-electoral system is biased towards the preservation of the status quo, it may effectively be wiser to fight for such an expansion and to keep mobilization alive and partly away from the political bias of the electoral institutions, at least until it has constituted a strong political subject that may neutralize the inherent bias of individual voting.

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*This is the fourth post in the **blog series** „**Movements and Institutions**“. Check out the [introductory post](#) for more information on the series and click [here](#) for all contributions.*

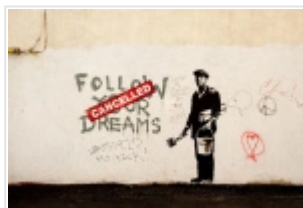


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