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## The “Indignados” Movement

### *Indignados: The Reasons for Outrage*

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The question has to be asked. Is the anger of the young Spanish *indignados*, the “outraged” or the “indignant,” a groundswell movement or merely a one shot rebellion? In one country after another the young people of Europe are making their voices heard. Yesterday it was Portugal, now it is Greece. Whatever the outcome, the movement that took place in Spring 2011 will have marked a major turning point for mass mobilisation in Europe over the recent decades, both because of its inherently transnational awareness and also because the young people of Europe have found a thoroughly modern way of spreading the message of protest.

#### **In Their Hands**

“Send the bankers to prison!”, “We are not commodities!”, “They don’t represent us!”, “Don’t try and fool us!” If the rejection of capitalism is at the heart of the young Spaniards’ demands, their slogans sound like attempts to take charge of a destiny which has been lost to them on two fronts, both collectively and as individuals. The slogans denounce in effect the growing incapacity of politicians to counteract the course of events in the financial world that dominates people’s lives. It has to be remembered that in Spain and southern Europe, the austerity plans introduced as a result of the crisis came to “add insult to injury” for a generation of young twenty to thirty year olds, thus aggravating several years of underlying

social frustration. These young people, who are better educated and more qualified than their parents, are confronted with mass unemployment, and find their lives downgraded not only by a loss of social status, but also by their housing situation. The “familialism” traditional to Mediterranean cultures seems to be backfiring, making it difficult for individuals to start their own families in societies where the founding of one’s own home is seen as the symbolic rite of passage into the adult world. The average age for leaving the parental home in southern Europe is around 28. The intergenerational support network still plays a mitigating role, but more and more begins to stand in the way of any aspirations towards independence; even if it is culturally accepted, the long delay experienced by these young people before being able to set up their own home is increasingly seen as an injustice. It was already the motivation behind the “mil-euristas” movement (those earning around a thousand euros a month), initiated several years ago by young thirty-something professionals to demonstrate their frustration toward continuing low salaries and long term debt. Today the *indignados* movement throws the spotlight on a generation who feel their lives are “for sale” and have the very real fear of mortgage debt being transferred to future generations. The rejection of financial capitalism and ultra-liberalism is twofold: it is a backlash against enforced personal debt, but also against the burden of inherited debt and the power invested in the transnational financial authorities regarding the implementation of austerity measures.

### **Alternation Without Alternatives**

The proclaimed disillusionment of the *indignados* vis-à-vis the institutions must be seen to result from the apparent acquiescence of the political establishment faced with this financial orthodoxy. The movement, at least in its Spanish component, is noteworthy for its rejection of the traditional system, its denunciation of political impotence and for calling the ruling classes to account. The sense of disillusion is all the more unpalatable in Spain since it is the ruling Socialist Party whose rigorous measures put paid to the prospects of the younger generation entering the labour market and any hope of a change that may bring salvation. This is not however an “anti-elite” movement since it is driven by a generation of young educated professionals. It is more of a call for greater political responsibility from a government that has been found to be blatantly ineffectual and possibly even corrupt. It is a movement that claims to be apolitical, although not devoid of ideology: the *indignados*

position themselves outside the ordinary electoral system and demand a new role for the individual in the capitalist system through more social justice and “real democracy.” They hope in this way for a reform of the scale of values, exemplified amongst others by the slogan: “Our dreams won’t fit in your ballot boxes.” They have chosen to organise themselves in a way that draws on a form of direct democracy: in Madrid’s Puertadel Sol square, self-organized working groups are invited to put forward propositions for an alternative political agenda. Some point out the democratic risks involved in rejecting the current political system, fearing that the so-called “ni-ni”(young people who neither work nor study) might drift towards extremism, even more so as the main target of the *indignados* movement remains largely invisible, concealed as it is within a body of financial power which is intangible or hard to define. Of course, it is important to keep a watchful eye on the eventual outcomes and the political assimilation of such movements. It would be equally quite wrong, even dangerous, to see them as simply a reactive, populist form of protest, and to dismiss their very serious underlying demands.

### **“Toma La Plaza”: The Number, the Image, and the Generations**

The double meaning of the *indignados*’ main slogan “toma la plaza,” take the square, should be seen as a desire by some to regain some autonomy in their lives and some form of self determination, however minimal, both on the personal and political level. Of course, in its most basic sense it refers to the occupation of the Plaza Puerta del Sol, Madrid’s main square, reminiscent of the famous Tahrir Square a few months earlier. But more symbolically it also represents the call for the individual take a place (plaza), to stake a claim in society that has been long called for, but up to now denied on the political front. One element of the movement is critical of the widening gap between society and its young people and the very form taken by the movement provides a visible reminder of its main compass, that of re-empowering the individual. By relying on social media to spread the rallying call, the movement avoids the traditional political channels and the need to relay information via named leaders. With an acute awareness of the role of the media, the *indignados* have played on the visual power of mass effect by their prolonged and peaceful occupation of a central Madrid square: by using Facebook, they themselves are able to follow almost simultaneously the development of the mobilisation. The transmission through technology and media gives it international resonance and means that each individual has a real impact on the development

of the movement. In other words, we are faced with a generation that is becoming aware of the power of protest. In this sense, and only in this sense, these movements can be seen to resemble those of the Arab Spring. One can only suppose that, by opening the horizon to what is actually possible, the demonstrations in the North African countries where the spark that triggered this generation to rise up in the visual form of the *indignados* movement; indeed they explicitly affiliate themselves with the young people of Tunisia and Egypt. These demonstrations mark the emergence of new forms of social expression and both have their roots in a fertile breeding ground of economic frustration and disillusionment with the political system. The comparison ends there however, since these demonstrations are defined by their historical imperatives.

### **What Sort of Internationalism? Humanity, Capitalism, and the State**

The question is whether the *indignados* movement is likely to continue its course or find an echo in other demonstrations further north in Europe. Many young people in Europe share the same social frustrations, caught as they are between the pressure to be independent and the material inability to achieve it. However, the various forms of alliance between state and marketplace still allow the hope of a personal future and sense of adherence to the system to remain, however limited that may be. All international research surveys show that young people in northern Europe remain among the most confident in the future and in the place that society can provide for them. In Scandinavian societies, social democrat oriented politicians spread out the state safety net in response to the economic crisis, which then reinforced the accompanying rise in youth unemployment; thus the social movement of young people in these countries is destined to remain compartmentalized. Within these essentially liberal systems, the question of student debt has begun to arise along with that of the financial constraints that hinder career development. In this respect, one should note the recent demonstrations of young people in the United Kingdom, even more striking because they are so unusual. Nevertheless, these liberal ideologies still manage to inspire hope for change or some upward social mobility. In France, although the sense of loss of social status is felt across the social spectrum, it is also particularly focussed in the “meritocratic” and stress-inducing race for professional qualifications. The crisis has resulted in even greater pressure being placed on academic success and integration into the work world. There is however a

sense of bitterness and rejection emerging amongst those who have to some extent lost out in the educational race, a resentment that could rapidly ignite to become a rallying force for mobilisation.

Thus the outrage is the response to a set of problems currently existing in southern Europe, Ireland, also affected by austerity plans, and, to a lesser extent, France. Nevertheless, these social uprisings should not be considered as being specific to a certain generation; far from being merely a reactive awakening by young people in an aging society, these movements raise fundamental questions about the role of humanity and state within the capitalist financial system and how much room for political manoeuvring remains in the context of the crisis. Looking beyond the incidental and spontaneous nature of the *indignados* movement to a time several years hence, it is this very aspect that could well be carried forward by future generations. While lives are treated as commodities and the political establishment is powerless, and because it responds to some deep-seated existential and social issues, this form of social censure is likely to take root in other forms of political expression, depending on the different societies and the will of the precipitating forces that exist within them.

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