

#spanishrevolution

You might have read this May that there were protests in Spain. This is hardly earth-shattering news. Social unrest in the countries so endearingly named the PIGS has been rife since the European Union (EU) departed from its early policy of public-spending its way out of the crisis, to offer them a grim choice between so-called ‘austerity measures’ without a bail-out and a bail-out followed by even more austerity measures. So the international press largely ignored these protests, and more annoyingly, when they became too big to ignore, they were repeatedly described as ‘anti-government’, wilfully narrowing their focus. In the aftermath of the local elections on 22 May, when the Socialist Party (PSOE) was defeated by the right-wing People’s Party (PP), some confused commentators went as far as to suggest similarities with the Orange Revolution. Some background is clearly needed.

One could go back to the Madrid bombings on 11 March 2004. Despite mounting evidence that al-Qaeda had carried out the attacks, the ruling PP government insisted on blaming ETA. The people who had marched in vain a year earlier against the Iraq War took to the streets again. A spontaneous movement organized itself via SMS, culminating three days later with the crowds surrounding the PP headquarters, the night before an election that gave an unexpected victory to the Socialist candidate José Luis Zapatero. Less than a month later, Spanish troops were recalled from Iraq. For a brief moment his voters loved Zapatero. There is a clear link between the people who were then moved to vote against the PP government and those protesting today. For since 2009, Zapatero, under the mandate of the EU, has been cutting public-sector salaries, freezing pensions, raising the retirement age, cutting down on social provision, cutting all aid to the long-term unemployed (unemployment is at 21 per cent), privatizing public companies and pushing forward the toughest of labour and pension reforms. Meanwhile subsidies to the construction and banking sectors continue unabashed. The honeymoon is most certainly over.

But still, as the slogan goes, ‘whoever wins, we lose’. The mainstream media in Spain and abroad have had a hard time grasping the fact that no political parties, unions or large-scale organizations were behind these protests. In early March, inspired by protests elsewhere, including those in the UK, the first call for a demonstration under the slogan ‘Real Democracy Now!’ spread like wildfire through web-based activist networks. It helped that in the last few years these networks had grown beyond their traditional confines to engage with a constituency that includes the unemployed, immigrant collectives, homeowners struggling with repossessions and asphyxiating debts, and web-users fighting the unpopular and misguided law on intellectual property.



On 15 May, nearly 60,000 people marched in over sixty Spanish cities. In Madrid, some decided to stay the night at the Puerta del Sol. But what initially sounded like a bit of one-upmanship – much like the attempts to turn Trafalgar Square into Tahrir Square – took an unexpected turn. In the early hours of the morning, protesters were forcefully evacuated by the police and this, in turn, generated a mass call for everyone to occupy their local squares, which thousands all over Spain took up. More than seventy public squares were occupied, #spanishrevolution became a trending topic and before the sobering election results, some appeared to believe in the possibility of overturning the system by conquering Twitter.

But this is not to underplay the significance of what's happening. The camps were quickly and efficiently organized both as temporary lodgings and campaign headquarters. In most cities the atmosphere was festival-like, although there were constant warnings against confusing the protest with an all-night party. As a use of urban space it seemed quasi-utopian: by placing themselves in the heart of the city they became truly public events; discussions ran for hours and were drenched in a mixture of fascination and disbelief. Several manifestos and lists of demands were agreed, but it would be unfair to judge the success of this movement on its ability to realize them.

As I write (11 June), the Madrid camp is packing up and preparing for another national march on 19 June. Elsewhere, police officers have been charging against peaceful protesters. But a profound change has been effected. People are emboldened and outraged and the terms of the debate have radically shifted. After the 15M another side of the story has been told, on the squares and on the Internet, people are reading avidly and coming to terms with a 'system' that had until then appeared inscrutable. This, then, is not an anti-government protest; it is an anti-capitalism protest. And while it hasn't quite amounted to a #spanish revolution, its aims remain revolutionary.



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