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# Ten theses to explain five years of the 15M movement

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**How can we explain the 15M movement five years later, its consequences, its limits and its potential? It's not an easy task, but we must try, because the way we read it determines the political choices we make.**

These ten theses are not intended to give a concluded or final explanation but raise a number of issues that seem useful for political action which can transform things.

**15M is better understood looking at other European countries that have not experienced a similar movement.**

Toni Negri recently said that the 15M movement produced an antifascist rupture. This may sound a bit exaggerated as it presupposes an axis of conflict that is absent in Spanish society since there is no fascist regime with which to break, but it is very useful as a metaphor.

In 2011, the Spanish society was rapidly impoverishing, with a decaying middle class and a significant presence of migrant population that could easily become scapegoats for some demagogue. That is, a number of objective conditions were present which in other European countries have led to the material base for right-wing populists.

However, the spontaneous outburst of mobilization in the squares made clear what the problem was. As one of the most popular slogans was, "We are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers". From there on, the crisis did not become more pleasant, but less barbaric.

**15M was not merely a cycle of demonstrations, it was a movement**

Demonstrations often pose a set of concrete, defensive or offensive demands, which ought to be resolved by the institutions. 15M was mobilizing, but it was more than that. It proposed practices, forms, desires that were so vague and abstract that "did not fit in the ballot box."

The assemblies in the squares intended to replace parliaments as spaces of deliberation, direct democracy to replace the representative fiction, citizens aimed to regain politics, urban space became public again for a few weeks. Even though the movement never managed to go from being "anti-power" to being "counter-power", it left a cultural mark, a series of combative practical proposals that reappear when any sector of society erupts expressing their discontent.

**15M didn't get to constitute a political subject, but it disbanded the dominant social bloc**

The backbone of 15M were the children of the middle classes, that ideological construct based on the capacity of consumption and debt.

Built patiently for decades by the Spanish elite, the 2008 crisis involves the decomposition of the material of the material relations that supported this construct.

Tens of thousands of young university students (who, let us not forget, do not make up the majority of young people) suffer from the economic crisis as a crisis of expectations: the Spanish capitalism has not been able to produce jobs at the same pace as university degrees.

The social sector on which the '78 regime had based its stability came apart: starting by the children of the middle classes, the 15M movement quickly reached their parents, turning it into an inter-generational sentiment.

## **15M was not a class movement but indeed was "class struggle"**

The middle classes in the process of proletarianization did not fight during the 15M as "universal class" but resisted precisely this proletarianization.

Some social sectors such as the public sector workers related to health or education joined the movement through the "tides". Other social sectors such as the traditional working class or the metropolitan precariat looked at 15M with sympathy but did not collectively participate in the movement.

Although the 15M movement didn't get so far as to build a class subject, we can say it was an episode crossed by class struggle as it linked economics and politics, i.e. uncovering the links that bind profit to political power and vice versa.

Yes, 15M targets the consequences of the structural relationship between politics and economics that exist under capitalism but never gets to question the relationship itself.

## **15M was neither left nor right wing, but it had a radical soul**

I will tell you an anecdote to illustrate this thesis. In an assembly at 15M, after hours of debates between leftists, a girl picks up the microphone. Tired of so much verbiage, she says: "I don't know if I am left wing or right wing, but I do know how I feel when I wake up in the morning to go to work: I feel exploited."

I think this is an illustrative metaphor for the crisis of the left, their codes, their politics, their cultural expressions. What good is all the ideological apparatus of the traditional left if it isn't useful to express hatred against exploitation?

What was expressed in the 15M movement was diffuse and diverse, but also radical. So when 15M stated that "we are the underdogs against those above", there was no ideological waiver but a new radicalism was expressed here which the actually existing left was unable to carry.

# 15M was not anti-capitalist but was built around the greatest enemy of capitalism: democracy

Marxist theorist Ellen Wood Meiksins proposed in a famous essay that the axis of struggle for human emancipation should be "democracy against capitalism." That means that capitalism, as a historical construction, comes increasingly at odds with democratic approaches.

Neoliberalism has managed to subsume under the capitalist logic spaces that were partially outside of it, such as certain rights once considered fundamental in welfare Europe, i.g. health and education.

15M was a deeply democratic rebellion, as it tried to recover the thread between rights and citizenry, which was broken by the neoliberal counter-reform.

Although it never posed anything like a socialist alternative, with its practices and yearnings it was able to deeply question the neoliberal hegemony.

Unfortunately, the democratic rebellion of the 15M movement stopped at the gates of the workplace, allowing what Marx referred to as the secret of power relations to remain inaccessible.

## 15M was not inevitable, but it was necessary

Gramsci warned mechanistic Marxism that "it may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historic events; they can simply create a terrain more favorable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life."

This means that the occurrence of 15M was not inevitable, but that it was implicit in the situation. And it happened, it caused a mutation in the "crisis". Being it a crisis experienced with extreme hardness and in a dispersed manner, it became a regime crisis, a crisis of the political system.

15M did not resolve the question of organization but did raise that question

Far from seeing the movement as a moment of celebration, 15M was, to use an expression of the philosopher Daniel Bensaid, a moment of reopening of the strategic issue.

After bringing the crisis from the economic to the political: How to convert indignation into effective social conquests? How to organize when it became clear that the old political forms of the left are no longer useful? How to avoid falling into the "permanent happening" proposed by certain sectors of the movement and move on to a patient "war of positions", running counter to the tempo proposed by postmodern politics?

These are many questions, but an observation: no organization of the movement itself arises. Only this can explain our next thesis.

## Podemos is not 15M nor the other way around, but without 15M, Podemos would not

## exist

The 15M movement creates the conditions for the emergence of Podemos, but Podemos does not arise from it. Podemos arises from the exhaustion of 15M and its subsequent expressions like the Tides, unable both to achieve concrete gains and to make the leap to the struggle for power.

This combination between the possibility (15M creates an objecting social base) and disability (the social base is unable to self-organize in a stable manner) gives rise to Podemos.

This is why Podemos permanently lives in a relationship of tension: as an heir to the legacy of 15M it has been unable to develop beyond the electoral arena the social self-organizational capacities that 15M proposed.

15M is gone, but it returns again and again

If there was a turning point in the election campaign of 20D, it was the famous minute of Pablo Iglesias. Podemos arrived very worn out at that election campaign and during a debate between the leading candidates Pablo Iglesias appealed to the "loyalty" to the "Event" that was 15M, addressing millions of people via TV.

The appeal worked out. Although there is no longer any mobilization in the streets or self-organization in assemblies or tides, 15M remains a way of saying social justice and democracy.

One of the features of what Badiou considers an "event" is that it is unrepeatable. However, the 15M movement has proposed forms of struggle and organization that come back when the only thing that is foreseeable in the capitalist society shows up: the conflict.

Now, in a way, 15M is "the specter's smile".

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[1] This article first appeared in Spanish here <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/m...>