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Global Justice

# Part IV: Common features of the various 2011 mobilizations

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV444 - January 2012 -

Publication date: Monday 16 January 2012

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### **In 2011 we come across several common features when looking at the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street or the Indignados movements in various countries.**

1. Demonstrators reclaimed public space, they even settled there, they organized many marches. In the past radical actions have often started at places of work or study and involved their occupation. Although strikes and factory or school occupations did take place in some countries such as Egypt or Greece, the most common form of action consisted of reclaiming public space. For a significant number of protesters it was impossible to organize anything at their workplace, mainly because of repression and the dispersal of workers. Many are unemployed (this is one of the reasons for their involvement) or have to make do with some casual part-time job. In some countries we find many unemployed graduates among the demonstrators. In countries such as Spain, which was badly hit by the real estate crisis, or Israel, where there is a severe shortage of low-rent housing, many are the victims of the real estate crisis. Beyond these reasons, the determination to occupy city squares expresses the will to get together, to muster up forces in a show of strength to governments that are perceived in Tunisia, Spain, Greece, Egypt, or even in the US, as completely impervious to the needs and demands of the majority of their citizens. The demand for genuine democracy (*democracia real*) is at the very heart of those movements.

2. In several countries communication and mobilization partly relied on social networks such as facebook or twitter, though this should not be over-emphasized.

3. The reliance on 'meetings' has been another common feature. In the same vein we notice reticence or downright refusal to elect representatives. There is a call for direct participative democracy.

4. In many cases, civil disobedience has been systematically used as an act of resistance in the face of totalitarian governments (as in Tunisia or Egypt) or of a government that is so cut off from the people that it uses repression to evacuate public squares or prevent meetings (as is regularly the case in the US). This is a far remove from traditional demonstrations, that were more like processions than to protest marches.

In some respects the movement is the expression of a qualitative leap. Until now, the dominant ideology and repression had succeeded in splitting people up and making them feel isolated through fear of repression, fear of losing their jobs, lodgings, retirement benefits, savings, etc. But the depth of the crisis and the critical number of demonstrators have made it possible for many to break out of their isolation, feeling that there was not much left to lose. For many demonstrators this is the first time they have been part of a collective protest with a political dimension.

5. In most cases no list of demands was drafted, though the Indignados' working committees did produce proposals and declarations. In this respect we ought to underline the significance of the joint declaration of protesters on Puerta del Sol and on Syntagma Square (Sol-Syntagma): 'No to the payment of illegitimate debt. This is not our debt. We owe nothing, we sell nothing, we will pay nothing.'<http://www.cadtm.org/Appel-Sol-Syntagma> In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, they agreed on a central demand, namely that the dictator should step down fast: 'Dégage!'.

6. Protesters did not come together on any community basis, whether political, generational, religious, social, or ethnic. There is a real medley, even if some of the categories that are the most exploited are sometimes under-represented. The Occupy Wall Street slogan was soon adopted all over the world: 'We are the 99%'.

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We could add a seventh common feature: nowhere have the World Social Forum, the European Social Forum, or the Social Forum of the Americas served as reference. Nor is there any reference to an antiglobalization or global justice movement. In this respect the cycle that opened with the creation of the WSF in 2001 seems to be completely over, another cycle has started, we will see what it opens onto. What matters is to be part of it.

As well as these common features, there are glaringly obvious differences. In North Africa and the Middle East the main targets are dictatorial regimes (though the social issue is indeed present and even a triggering element). In more industrialized countries the targets are banks and lackey governments. Defending public goods is a demand they share. The social issue is voiced by refusing precarious jobs, rejecting the privatization of public services (education, health care, etc.), demanding a solution to the housing and mortgage crisis (particularly in Spain and in the US, where students also have to take out loans that amount to USD 1,000 billion), and more generally by refusing to pay for a crisis that was caused by 1% of very rich people...

Among industrialized countries there is also a marked difference between the radical Greek movement, with its similarities to the pre-revolutionary crisis seen in Argentina in 2001-2002, and the situation in Spain, not to mention the US. The diverging histories of the social movements in these countries and the different degrees of recognition of hard left political parties (the Greek radical left with the Communist Party amounts to 25 to 30% of voters and can thus have a significant influence on trade unions, as indeed in Portugal, while the situation is completely different in the States) have not been erased by the movement that emerged in 2011.

*Translated by Christine Pagnouille in collaboration with Vicki Briault*