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## #spanishrevolution

*Spurred by new technologies and by ongoing financial and political crises, innovative movements around the world are increasingly shaking up established orders. Here, Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Adolfo Estalella provide a narrative of what is currently happening in Spain. Editor*

Over the course of the past two months, thousands of people have gathered in plazas and other public spaces all across Spain, coming together in so-called ‘popular assemblies’. Theirs is a call to *tomar la plaza*: to take over the streets and squares and reclaim the *barrio* (neighbourhood) as a space of self-made political action, in a making visible of the circuitry of do-it-yourself associative work that animates neighbourhood life.

In this sense, the assemblies are very much experiments in grassroots democratic self-organization. Participants are not allowed to speak on behalf of political parties or partisan organizations. People attend in their own personal capacity, to speak in their own, individual voices. Indeed, the assemblies have even developed their own democratic sign language. In the name of ‘respect’, participants are expected to indicate their approval or disapproval of proposals by gesturing in an established etiquette. Proposals thus agreed are then put into practice by working groups staffed by volunteers. Through such groups and projects, each different *barrio* is realizing its particular potential and making use of its capacities.



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**Fig. 1.** A general view of Puerta del Sol in Madrid on the afternoon of 20 May, two days before Spain's municipal and regional elections. The plaza overflowed with people following the Electoral Board's declaration that all protest encampments must be dismantled.

**Fig. 2.** People came together in assemblies to discuss a variety of issues. Here the assembly hosts a performance.

These popular assemblies, to which we will return later, are a direct offspring of the movement known by its Twitter hashtag, #spanishrevolution: the street protests that took over Spain's urban landscape in the days prior to the municipal and regional elections on 22 May, and which originally drew some comparisons with the events in Tahrir Square in Egypt earlier this year. Although the historiography of

the events is of course still very much in the making, it may be useful to briefly survey this period before we go on to reflect on what it is we have been seeing and participating in.

### Take back the plaza!

On 15 May (known to activists as ‘15M’), the online forum ‘¡Democracia Real Ya!’ (Real Democracy Now!, or DRY) convened major



street protests in public squares across Spain. The demonstrations' organization was aided by a coordinated platform of social movements of which DRY forms a part, which includes the distributed collective Anonymous, Juventud en Acción (Youth in Action) and No les Votes (Do not vote for them). The platform's first public call to action had been made on 2 March, building on a culture of public spectacle that various groups had been developing over the previous months.

One of the most interesting aspects of the recent demonstrations has been the reclamation of public spaces for political engagement. The plaza has played a crucial role here. As early as 15 January, Juventud en Acción put out a call on its website for a flash mob to gather in a 'public and central space in Madrid'. A flash mob duly appeared in Madrid's central square, the Puerta del Sol, on 23 January, under the slogan 'Sacrificed by the markets!'

On 24 January, a day after the 'Sacrificed by the markets!' intervention, a much larger situated performance was announced for 13 February, on the occasion of the National Film Awards. Three days later, 'No les Votes' was registered as a web domain, and Twitter registered its first stream of messages around the anticipated film-awards flash mob. A central element in the Twitter exchanges was a call to protest against the 'Ley Sinde', the bill against internet piracy through torrent (peer-to-peer shared files) and webpage downloads, which was to be voted on (and passed) in parliament on 15 February.

In the event, the 13 February intervention was a success, with hundreds of people turning up in Anonymous masks and demonstrating in front of the red carpet at Madrid's Plaza de Oriente. The awards ceremony was an apt site for such a demonstration, its ceremonial opulence pointing up the contrast between the film industry, with its culture of extravagance, and the emergent sociability of internet-mediated peer-to-peer production. The awards' coverage by mainstream media also meant that the flash-mob performance received substantial attention.

Over the next two months, DRY gathered momentum through intensive use of social media, and a couple of rather inspiring YouTube videos.<sup>2</sup> The 15M demonstrations were called in protest at the perceived corruption of the political classes, the rise in unemployment, the state's reduction of social and welfare benefits, and a general transfer of wealth to the rich. With overall unemployment running at almost 21% (including 45% unemployment among under-25s), a national deficit of more than 11% of GDP in 2009, and estimates of a total capital shortfall in the Spanish banking system of (potentially) €100bn, in 2010 the Zapatero government ceded to European pressure to impose austerity measures and restructure the country's labour market. This involved 'public-sector wages slashed by 5 per cent, benefits and pensions cut, investment projects cancelled, the retirement age raised, wage bargaining restricted, sackings made simpler'.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a manifesto produced for 15M concluded with the phrase, 'We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians

and bankers!'.<sup>4</sup> An additional focus of protest was the Ley Sinde, opposition to which had spawned the formation of No les Votes through the coordinated action of hackers, sympathetic intellectual-property lawyers, digital libertarians and a variety of 'copyleft' movements.<sup>5</sup>

On 15 May, the 15M crowd gathered in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid. The demonstration, which filled the whole square, ended in a tense, intermittently violent, encounter with the police, and some arrests. Once the police had left, a number of people lingered, wondering whether to spend the night in the square. A tweet went out marking their eventual decision: 'We have just encamped at Sol in Madrid. We are not leaving until we reach an agreement #acampadasol.' Some 30 to 40 people spent the night in the open air.

Next morning, the campers got together and called their first assembly, which was attended by around a thousand people. Within 24 hours, the internet domain name spanishrevolution.net had been acquired. On the second night, the number of people staying overnight rose to about 200, and a second domain, tomalaplaza.net, was purchased. Demonstrators began to organize into groups, including a 'communications' team, which wrote up the minutes of the first assembly. The team also convened and ran a 'course for spokespersons' aimed at helping demonstrators effectively address the media. At around 5am on the second night, the police arrived at Sol and evicted the campers. The demonstrators had anticipated the possibility of eviction and discussed various possible tactics. The Puerta del Sol, for example, forms part of an old 'royal pastoral way', a thoroughfare long used by shepherds to move their herds from the Castilian highlands to the lowlands. The demonstrators considering invoking an ancient convention whereby shepherds – and others – are permitted to spend up to three nights in the open air on the royal pastoral way. With this gambit failed, they were determined to produce as many video recordings as possible of the eviction when it did happen, and immediately after the police intervention, some demonstrators managed to upload video content directly from their smartphones onto YouTube. Particularly striking was the intensity of demonstrators' efforts to keep their main tent in place during the eviction. The police did eventually succeed in removing the tent, but the strenuous efforts to defend it signal the symbolic importance that was attached to the makeshift structure of the camp as an icon of political self-sufficiency. From the very start, demonstrators showed an acute consciousness of the various dimensions of their public action. Unsurprisingly, by early next morning, the encampment had been set up again.

The occupation of public spaces was quickly replicated across the country, and even among Spanish communities abroad. On 17 May, David Bravo and Javier de la Cueva, two well-known digital- and intellectual-property lawyers involved with the movement, drafted and posted online a formal notice of public demonstrations on 18 May (and thereafter), which demonstrators were encouraged to show to their local councils. Explaining the reasons for the

demonstration, the document echoed protesters' call for people to cast 'a responsible vote' in the forthcoming municipal elections.

On 18 May, Madrid's Municipal Electoral Board ruled that the occupation of the Puerta de Sol was illegal, and called for it to be dismantled. The decision provoked outrage, and served only to expand the crowd's numbers. *Indignados* (outraged) became the media label for the movement, echoing the title of the best-selling manifesto for peaceful resistance written by French diplomat and erstwhile Resistance fighter Stéphane Hessel.<sup>6</sup> Demonstrators began getting together in teams focused on particular sets of issues – social, legal, work-related, economic, environmental – which soon began operating as permanent 'commissions'.

Spanish electoral law provides for a 'day for reflection', in which all campaigning ceases, on the day before polling day. Judging the encampments to be contrary to the spirit of this day, on 19 May, the Central Electoral Board ruled that all demonstrator encampments must be dismantled. Again, the decision only served to mobilize and draw ever more people to the squares and social media. In an illustration of this effect, the largest volume of tweets with Twitter hashtags relating to the movement was recorded on 20 May. Twitter traffic relating to the demonstrations reached 967,231 tweets by 156,544 unique users between 15 and 22 May – the number of tweets on 20 May alone peaked at 200,198.<sup>7</sup> The crowds gathered at Sol in Madrid and Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona turned into multitudes on 21 May, with tens of thousands of people coming together for public manifestations of 'reflection'.

On the day after the elections, the various camps across the country assembled to decide on their own future as social and political installations. The consensus countrywide was to remain encamped. On 7 June, Sol's General Assembly agreed by consensus to dismantle the camp on Sunday 12 June. After the physical camp was taken down, however, the 'Sol General Assembly' continued as an umbrella assembly to which *barrio* assemblies report, and a space where common issues are discussed.

### #acampadasol

The occupation of the plazas of Spain amounted to much more than a simple spate of demonstrations. The word *acampada* (encampment) elegantly encapsulates the sophisticated gesture of political innovation that has transformed the social fabric of Spanish cities over the past two months.

The *acampada* forms part of a long and still-vibrant national tradition of *okupaciones* (squatter occupations). Indeed, in the case of Madrid, Sol is only walking distance from some of the city's most famous 'squatter labs' and 'urban hack spaces', such as El Patio Maravillas and La Tabacalera. The spatial innovation of #acampadasol lay perhaps in the boldness with which it brought this invisible periphery of squatter action onto centre stage in the country's most prominent public space. Hence the symbolic importance attached to the main tent on the day of the eviction. The struc-

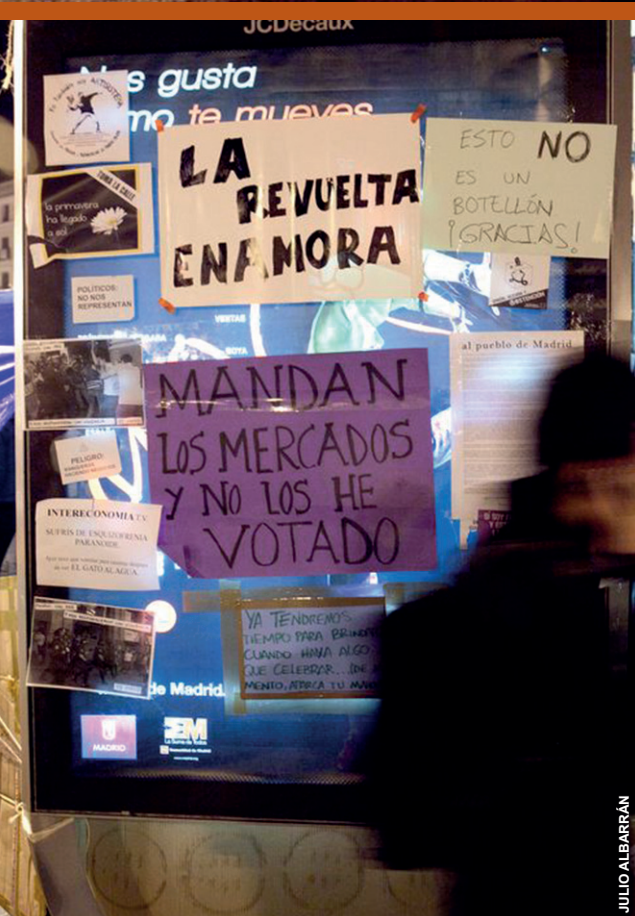




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Fig. 3 (top left). Throughout their stay, campers placed great importance on keeping the encampment clean.

Fig. 4 (top right). The assemblies developed and agreed on a sign language used. A raised hand indexed agreement with a proposal.

Fig. 5 (above). A variety of posters cover an advertisement. The purple slogan reads: 'Markets rule and I have not voted for them.'

Fig. 6 (right, second from top). A building's facade covered-up by posters and slogans, some of which read, 'Bankers, thieves, responsible for the crisis' and 'They [politicians] do not represent us.'

Fig. 7 (right, second from bottom). Making posters.

Fig. 8 (right). People slept in the squares both in tents and out in the open.





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Fig. 9. Up front, an infirmary tent set up within days of occupying the plaza. The encampment included too a nursery, a library and a reading room.

Fig. 10. Demonstrators at Puerta del Sol on 19 May, following the Board's call to dismantle the camps. Police vans guard the Regional Government's headq uarters.

Fig. 11. Do-it-yourself politics.

tural frailty of the camp was a radical exposure of the notion of democratic organization: it exposed the entrails of democracy as a circuitry of do-it-yourself actions and a patchwork of craft and handiwork politics. It made the infrastructural stuff of politics radically visible.

An interesting side effect of this emergence into view of the political as an infrastructural assemblage has been the reaction of traditional social movements and 'alter-globalization' groups. Over the past weeks it has become common to hear representatives of older social movements express surprise and uncertainty: 'Who are these people?' 'What and whom do they represent?' Their bewilderment indicates the extent to which the encampments signal a shift away from identity politics and the spatio-temporalities of traditional urban social movements.

'Who are these people?' is a question that has also exercised political commentators and the mass media. The latter quickly responded in derogatory manner, labelling protestors *perroflautas* (a compound of the words 'dog' and 'flute', an allusion to the stereotypical image of the vagabond) and describing the encampments, in classical 'purity and danger' fashion, as states of nature; sites of filth and degeneration. Some conservative media believed that behind the protestors lay the invisible hand of left-wing parties (the PSOE and the IU) trying to agitate the electorate in the days prior to the elections.

Another common representation has been of the movement as run by a young 'wired' generation, heralders of a 'network democracy'.<sup>8</sup> While it is true that young people have played a prominent part in the setting-up and maintenance of the encampments, and that social media have helped speed up the grammar of 'disobedience and exit' that the camps have enacted,<sup>9</sup> it is important to draw attention too to the infrastructural spatiality of the camps and the *barrio* assemblies in their own terms. These gatherings have been amply attended by people of all ages, in a wide variety of degrees and capacities. At #acampadasol it was common to see local residents, often older women, bring gifts of food and drink to the campers. Many assemblies are experiencing serious networking problems, with local residents not knowing how to subscribe to email lists, edit wiki pages or simply use Gmail, and having to improvise IT lessons for beginners. People return from virtual spaces to the physical plaza, both to continue the protest, and to seek solutions to their network problems. Even the hackers, who quickly organized a 'HackSol' virtual plaza where people can swap solutions to their technical difficulties,<sup>10</sup> are themselves experiencing coordination problems, as they grope their way towards working out how best to network platforms, web domains and lists that mushroom spontaneously across neighbourhoods and assemblies.

If the appearance of the camps signalled an exit route from the panorama of traditional politics, the plazas have opened up new points of entry. With Albert Hirschman, we might say that the political form of the *acampada* has expanded not only our political *language* (with new voices for 'respect', 'reflection',



or simply the etiquette of silence), but our political *landscape* as well.<sup>11</sup> Hence our interest in the political as an infrastructural assemblage, whose spaces and times are dictated by the vagaries of do-it-yourself action. Early on in #acampadasol, protestors drew attention to this when they explicitly referred to the encampment as a ‘city’: the fragility of the tents and cardboard installations notwithstanding, the campers quickly organized an urban infrastructure in miniature. Within days, the camp had a library and a ‘reading room’, a kitchen, a nursery, a reception desk for gifts of food and drinks, a legal desk, a cleaning squad, and a medical-emergencies space. The nursery in particular provoked many candid responses, as local residents drew biting comparisons with the lack of public nurseries in their neighbourhoods.

The constitution of the encampment as a space of infrastructural politics was sanctioned by the protestors themselves as they stressed what the encampment was *not*. Thus, in demonstration posters, slogans and online media, there was explicit reference to the gathering not being a ‘*botellón*’, or open-air drinking party. Much investment too went into thinking what the encampment *was*, into problematizing the event, or movement, that had brought us here.

Our own ethnographic encounter with #acampadasol intersects at this point. For almost two years now we have been working with digital and new-media artists, intellectuals, hackers and activists of various provenances at Medialab-Prado (MLP), a digital art and culture centre run by Madrid City Council. MLP has become an important hub for discussions about the future of digital and creative commons in the Spanish context. For more than four years, MLP has been convening a ‘commons laboratory’, to which some of the leading voices of the copyleft movement, including intellectual-property lawyers and members of La Tabacalera and El Patio Maravillas, have contributed projects. Many of these people have taken an active role in providing #acampadasol with organizational, infrastructural and philosophical equipment. To us, then, the rise of the *acampada* as a figure in our contemporary imaginary offers a powerfully engaging image with which to think through the intertwining of artistic and academic practices with urban hacktivism, digital-commons movements and relationships in new forms of political wireframing.

### Prototyping political action

On 24 May, just over a week into the establishment of #acampadasol, some MLP friends and informants who had been following and participating in the encampment met for lunch at a restaurant near Sol. An Argentinian collective of ‘militant researchers’, whose production of grassroots indigenous theory is well known in the Latin American context, were visiting Madrid as ‘thinkers-in-residence’ at a contemporary art centre, and MLP was interested in recruiting their help in conceptualizing the encampment. Over lunch, we talked about the encampment as a prototype of/for political action.



Fig. 12. Anonymous enjoying a public performance at #acampadasol.

There was not much consensus on what sort of prototype the encampment might be. But the image of the prototype did nevertheless enable a focus on certain practices of infrastructural politics: it helped us zoom in on a particular form of political action, one centred on circuits of exchange (of food, building materials, wires, cardboard, digital objects); on certain do-it-yourself and artisanal kinds of collaboration; and on the provisional, open-ended and ultimately hopeful temporality of engaged action. One might argue that the frail silhouette of the original camping tent stood as a prototype for new forms of residence in the contemporary *polis*.

On 28 May, the encampments essayed a first attempt at decentralization and went local. Popular assemblies were called at *barrios* all over Spain. Thousands of people assembled in the open air and ‘helped made the *barrios* visible once again’, as Alberto overheard some attendees at his local assembly put it. The assemblies have replicated the structural organization of the *acampadas*, with a variety of ‘commissions’ being created in accordance with residents’ needs and capacities. As we write this, the assemblies in Madrid are meeting every one to two weeks, and reporting back to the Sol General Assembly.

It is too early to say what the 15M movement will accomplish or where it is headed. Thus far, what we can say for certain is that collective and associative life in the *barrios* has been reinvigorated. The internet activity, the assemblies, the flash mobs and encampments, all seem to be converging as the reinvention of a municipalist tradition: a tradition of open (street) associative politics. We submit this article on 19 June, when thousands of people all over Spain have taken to the streets once again, using the *barrio* as the launch platform of their associative mobilization. Perhaps it

does make some sense after all to speak of the advent of new forms of political action. ●

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1. The website announcement defined a flash mob as ‘an organized action where a group of people makes a sudden and improvised performance at a public space, only to disband quickly thereafter’.
2. See for example Kaos7852 2011. ¡El 15 de mayo la calle es nuestra! Manifiesto común protesta 15/05/2011. YouTube. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAq273qwnZw&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAq273qwnZw&feature=player_embedded).
3. López, I. & E. Rodríguez 2011. The Spanish model. *New Left Review* 69(May-June): 24.
4. The phrase is featured in Kaos7852 2011. ¡El 15 de mayo la calle es nuestra! Manifiesto común protesta 15/05/2011. YouTube. A more current version of the same manifesto can be found here: ¡Democracia real ya! 2011. Manifiesto. <http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifiesto-english/>.
5. Copyleft licences are a novel modification of copyright law, in which a work is made free to be copied or modified, on condition that further reproductions, modifications or extensions of the work are also made freely available.
6. Hessel, S. 2011. *Time for outrage!* London: Quartet Books.
7. Barri Blog 2011. Del 15-M a la acampada de Sol. 22 May. <http://www.barriblog.com/index.php/2011/05/19/del-15-m-a-la-acampada-de-sol/>.
8. Castells, M. 2011. #Wikiacampadas. Lavanguardia.com, 28 May. <http://www.lavanguardia.com/opinion/articulos/20110528/54160922879/wikiacampadas.html>.
9. Virno, P. 2004. *A grammar of the multitude: For an analysis of contemporary forms of life* (trans. I. Bertolotti, J. Cascaito & A. Casson) (first US edition), pp. 70-71. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
10. <http://hacksol.tomalaplaza.net/>.
11. Hirschman, A.O. 1970. *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations and states*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.