

Occupational Options: The Political Trajectories of Social Movements in Southern Europe

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Since the advent of the economic crisis in 2008, a myriad of social movements has emerged across Europe. These movements are generally concerned with specific issues and are representative of relatively narrow sections of their respective societies. At the same time, however, they are composed of activists with a considerable level of expertise. Among these movements, we can cite the “anti-eviction platform” in Spain, volunteer health clinics in Greece, and the collectives of “retirees against austerity” in Portugal. At a certain point in their development, a number of these movements decided to shift their energies into the electoral arena and shake up the political landscape of their respective countries. Others, however, have preferred to keep their distance from national institutions and the electoral process. How can we explain these different strategies? The following pages take stock of the various trajectories of these social movements across southern Europe.

1 — SPAIN

The manifesto entitled *Guanyem Barcelona* (Catalan for “Let’s Win Barcelona”) was published in June 2014. It marked a decisive turn in Spanish political life even if, at the time, it received little coverage in the national media. As the municipal elections set for May 2015 approached, the first signatories – social activists, university professors, journalists – explained why they decided to extract themselves from the ranks of the social movements that had been developing since 2011 all across Spain, in order to enter the electoral arena: “The hour has come,” they wrote, “to reclaim the institutions so that they serve the majority of the people and the common good.” From Barcelona City Hall they hoped to orchestrate nothing less than a “democratic rebellion” that would serve as an example for Spain and Europe as a whole.

The text quickly gathered thousands of signatures. Its success attested to the accuracy of Ada Colau’s analysis. Colau was an important figure in social protests and initially gained recognition as the co-leader of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH: literally, “the platform for those affected by mortgages”), a campaign that aimed to block evictions. Colau was one of the architects of *Guanyem*. In order to justify her choice of joining the electoral fray, in October 2014 she explained to the French daily *Mediapart* that: “Democracy does not work. We have witnessed a very intense cycle of protests, starting with 15-M (the *Indignados* movement, which first appeared on May 15, 2011), the “tides” (sector-specific movements against budget cuts), and the PAH... Today, a majority of the population demands basic democratic guarantees [*mínimos*

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democráticos], but the institutions in place do not want to grant them. The institutions do not obey the public interest but rather the economic interests of the few.”

In June 2015, a year after the publication of the manifesto, Ada Colau won her bet. Riding the wave of success of Barcelona en Comú (“Barcelona in Common,” the new name of Guanyem), she became the mayor of Barcelona. The story of this Catalanian woman, born in 1974, is an example of the coming of age of the “Indignation” movement that spread throughout the public squares of Spain in 2011. Shaped by social movements, made legitimate by victories won with PAH alongside debtors facing eviction, she decided to build, with others, an alternative to the political parties that she considered outmoded. Her goal was to regenerate Spanish political life. At her side, she brought together members of Catalanian civil society (lawyers, university professors, journalists, etc.), representatives of various social movements (PAH, “tides,” members of the pro-independence movement in Catalonia, etc.), and also representatives of new political parties (including Podem, the Catalanian version of the anti-austerity movement Podemos) and more traditional parties (Initiative for Catalonia Greens, or ICV, for example). They all agreed to come together and put aside their respective party insignia.

Following Ada Colau’s example, dozens of well-known activists in Spain left their respective social movements and endeavored to take national institutions by (electoral) storm. Rafael Mayoral, a lawyer and another pillar of the PAH, became one of the main leaders of Podemos and is now a close advisor to the party’s leader, Pablo Iglesias. Thanks to transfusions such as these, the entire Spanish political landscape has been shaken up and renewed. Joan Subirats, an academic and a loyal supporter of Colau has observed “a shift from an approach seeking to unseat those in power” (by means of social protests and denunciation) “to one that attempts to constitute something new” (namely, to “occupy” the institutions rather than the streets and squares). He calls the latter approach the “constituent hypothesis” of 15-M. This strategic shift is synonymous, in his eyes, with “an extension of the domain of democracy.” Some other activists however, were critical of this move; in a context of enduring social crisis, they worried that the shift would amount to a “desertion” of the streets and a weakening of the citizens’ counter-power which the social movements represented.

At the European level, Spain seems to be an isolated case. The so-called “constituent hypothesis” or “process,” which involves the continuous reinvention of the 15-M legacy, has few equivalents elsewhere on the continent. However, since the beginning of the sovereign debt crisis in 2010, social movements have gained in intensity nearly everywhere. Whether it is the volunteer health clinics in Greece, a campaign against the water tax in Ireland (Right2Water), the rallying of social centers in Italy against the labor law reform “jobs act” that is led by Matteo Renzi, or the movement of retirees against budget cuts in Portugal, the range of protests has grown wider across Europe. At the same time, however, very few of these movements have decided to change course and enter the electoral arena.

Given that most regions of southern Europe were subjected to similar austerity programs, and that inequalities had soared everywhere, what can explain the divergent strategies of European social movements? What conditions led moral entrepreneurs and activists, who at the outset of the 2008 crisis championed specific issues, to decide that it was necessary to forge common ground with other social movements and seek wide-ranging responses to their interlocked concerns? Guillem Vidal, a Spanish scholar who studies the political consequences of the “Great Recession” at the European University Institute in Florence observes: “There are of course certain common features across the continent, especially in southern Europe: a growing mistrust of the traditional political parties, the harshness of the social crisis, etc. But the forms that the political and social responses took in the various countries differed greatly.”

2 — PORTUGAL

One often forgets that Portugal was the first European country to develop an “indignant” movement. The manifesto of the *Geração a rasca*, the “generation left behind,” was published in March 2011, two months before the 15-M movement in Spain. From the beginning, the Portuguese precursor of the *Indignados* defined itself as “non-partisan, secular, and peaceful.” It opposed austerity measures and sought the renewal of political practices – especially in the realm of participatory democracy. Then, in the wake of the banks’ bailout plans, organized by international creditors and purported to keep Portugal from defaulting on its debt, the tenor of *Geração à rasca* changed; the movement declared: *Que se lixe a troika! Queremos as nossas vidas!* (“The Troika can go to hell! We want our lives!”); it gathered steam and culminated in a one million person strong demonstration on September 15, 2012. In other words, about 10% of the whole Portuguese population marched that day. Although this massive demonstration left a mark on the Portuguese people, it never led to the construction of a new political entity capable of competing electorally and thus of entering the realm of institutional politics.

Three years later, the campaign for the legislative elections of October 2015 saw the emergence of an *ad hoc* citizen platform called LIVRE/Tempo de Avançar (L/TDA) and comprised of “green” activists and left-libertarian militants. In terms of its political agenda and its mode of operation, L/TDA bore some resemblance to the hybrid coalitions of social movements and “old” parties that had proven successful in the May 2015 Spanish municipal elections. Initially, the Portuguese platform gathered together communist collectives, the descendants of 1970s Eurocommunism (such as the organization Fórum Manifesto), the militants of LIVRE, which were set up to enter the 2014 European elections, as well as several thousand citizens who were not affiliated with any party or organization but identified with the project of L/TDA.

That L/TDA opted for a “horizontal” construction of its program – as opposed to a top-down process controlled by the party’s leadership – and held open primaries (long before those organized by the Portuguese socialists). These practices, which are similar to the *modus operandi* of Ahora Madrid and Barcelona en Comú, are proof that similar kinds of political experiments are

circulating throughout the Iberian Peninsula. Professor Boaventura de Sousa, who has been involved with L/TDA, is a frequent guest on Pablo Iglesias's web-TV show in Madrid. He is also a close associate of Xosé Manuel Beiras, a mentor of Iglesias and an inspirational figure for the so-called *confluencia* movement in the northwestern Spanish region of Galicia. L/TDA's horizontal practices and alliances resemble the intersectional approach to politics epitomized by Barcelona en Comú.

Organizational and intellectual similarities notwithstanding, however, L/TDA, contrary to its Spanish counterparts, turned out to be an electoral failure. The collective only managed to get 0.7% of the vote (even less than the 2.2% won by LIVRE in the 2014 European elections). Meanwhile, the institutional left (the three political forces that existed well before the crisis: the Socialist Party, the more left-leaning Bloco de Esquerda, and the Communist Party) made important gains and, much to everyone's surprise, was even able to form a "progressive" government. Rather than joining L/TDA, important figures in the Portuguese social movements found a place either on the Bloco's list of candidates or even on that of the Socialist Party. This was the case for Maria do Rosário Gama, the president of APRe, one of the collectives fighting for the rights of retirees and against austerity; she was elected in Coimbra, in central Portugal, on a Socialist ticket.

How can we make sense of the contrast between the outcome of the elections in Portugal and in Spain – especially considering that before the vote, the Socialist Party was in the opposition, nationally, in Lisbon as well as in Madrid? "In addition to the social and economic problems borne out by several years of austerity, which are equally severe in both countries, in Spain, the political regime is also in a state of crisis, and that makes a big difference," argues Rui Tavares, a former member of the European Parliament from Portugal (2004-2009) and one of the founders of LIVRE. "In Portugal, we don't have the equivalent of the Catalanian question, which calls into question the institutions and the very identity of the country. To the contrary, in Portugal, everybody on the left, from the center-left to the communists, has always been proud of the 1975 Constitution, which came out of the Carnation Revolution, in particular because it has given a constitutional grounding for important economic and social rights."

In Spain, on the other hand, the pro-independence movement in Catalonia, which has picked up a lot of steam since 2012, is often perceived as proof that the constitution of 1978, distinctive of the transition from the Franco regime to the Constitutional Monarchy (1975-1982), is in part obsolete. This fundamental law, which was adopted by consensus at the time, sealed the bipartisan system whereby the Partido Popular (right) and the PSOE (left) are meant to fill the political space. This balance, however, began to crumble with the blow of the financial crisis. The legislative elections of December 2015 further accelerated the decline of the post-Franco regime. The two newly created parties – Ciudadanos on the right and Podemos on the left – together received about 35% of the votes and called for a "second transition."

The comparison of the two countries suggests that from the perspective of institutional change, Portugal is not at all in the same situation as Spain and nothing dramatic is likely to happen on that front in the foreseeable future. “Culturally, linguistically, and socially, Portugal is much more homogenous than Spain. In Spain, Catalonia and Galicia have a degree of autonomy that makes them prone to political experimentation, which in turn spreads to the rest of the country. There is also no Portuguese equivalent to the television channel La Sexta, which helped launch Podemos early on,” observes Rui Tavares – whose own party, LIVRE, was largely ignored by the Portuguese media during the election campaign.

In Portugal, the Constitution was used as a tool in the struggle against austerity and in facing the Troika. In the summer of 2014, the Supreme Court ruled against austerity measures adopted by the Parliament because they were deemed unconstitutional. Similar rulings have occurred with some regularity. This instance transpired when the government decided to reduce the salaries of certain categories of civil servants by 12%. This fundamental law is even popular among the youngest generations, who were born after the Carnation Revolution.

Rui Tavares, however, refuses to speak of an L/TDA “defeat.” Although the platform proved unsuccessful in the voting booths, and it hardly met the objective of representing a social majority, Tavares believes that L/TDA’s campaign served to stir up the public debate. It forced a discussion on the key aspects of its agenda and compelled the traditional parties to amend their own. “It has always seemed clear to us that the majority in Portugal leans to the left, and we were the first to speak about the need for the different ‘lefts’ to converge, at a time – at the beginning of the campaign – when no traditional party wanted to talk or even think about any type of alliance,” he insists. “The social movements, on the one hand, and the political parties, on the other, function in different ways, which is something that one must respect,” he continues. “For us, it seemed more coherent, more transparent, to say: here are the causes we support, and here is the ideological space which we consider under-represented in Portugal and we want to occupy; now it’s up to you to see if this appeals to you.”

3 — GREECE

At first glance, the political landscape in Greece has more in common with the Spanish than with the Portuguese experience. Common features include the deterioration of the bipartisan system in which the PASOK, the Socialist party, and the conservative party New Democracy are alternatively in power; the destruction of the social fabric wrought by corruption scandals and cronyism; the implementation of neoliberal policies leading to greater inequalities, and – in a much more pronounced way than in Spain – the exhaustion of the social-democratic party whose supporters have been siphoned off by the new party Syriza, which is further to the left than PASOK. However, these similar ingredients produced a markedly different outcome, namely the three historic victories of Syriza at the polls – in January, July, and September 2015. For their part, the Greek social movements, while undeniably very present throughout

the recent period – sometimes spectacularly so – never tried to have a direct impact on the electoral process. Syriza’s ability to adapt and to welcome the movements’ agenda in its own program proved decisive in that respect.

“In Spain, since 2011, the prominent role played by new actors is evident. It all began with the appearance, out of nowhere, of a collective named ¡Democracia Real YA! (A Real Democracy Now! – one of the *Indignados* collectives). The collective was created by activists who didn’t belong to any organization or political party up until that point and who rejected institutional politics altogether. Greece also had a strong “indignant” movement, as well as many protests and strikes, but the role of traditional institutional actors remained important,” observes Guillem Vidal; for the Spanish scholar, “this can be explained by the fact that ‘the enemy’ was not exactly the same in the two countries. In Greece, the enemy primarily came from outside: he had the face of the ‘men in black’ of the Troika – the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In Spain, on the other hand, the various strands of the 15-M movement always focused on problems, such as corruption, that were internal to the Spanish democratic system.”

Contrary to Greece, Ireland, or Portugal, early in 2013, Spain managed to avoid, at the last minute, a bailout plan imposed by the Troika. Although the denunciation of EU austerity programs has been one of the main resources of “indignation” movements since the beginning of the 15-M, from that point on, the fight against domestic corruption and for the renewal of democratic practice at the national level has emerged at the forefront of the agenda. Pablo Iglesias, the head of Podemos, who was a European deputy in Strasbourg for a year, regularly denounced German hegemony in Europe. However, he has remained favorable to the euro and has made regular appeals for an inflection of the ECB’s monetary policies. He has also supported, at every turn, his ally Alexis Tsipras – even after Tsipras signed the Third Memorandum of Understanding with Greece’s creditors and accepted a mandate that forces the Syriza government to pursue the program of budget cuts and privatization initiated by its conservative predecessor.

In Greece, much more than in Spain, the EU and to a lesser extent Germany under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, were the main targets of the protests. One can roughly identify three stages in the chronology of the Greek movements. First, there was the December 2008 protest that followed the death of a 15-year-old student by a policeman in Athens. The protest was a general expression of outrage, and although it had no particular message, it was underwritten by the youths’ frustration with the cronyism of the political class. At the time, all political parties, including the communist KKE, distanced themselves from the violence that accompanied the protest. Only a budding party at the time, “Syriza was the only political force in Greece that showed a sincere understanding of the movement, which, at the time, seemed to have cost them some percentage points in the polls,” recalls Gerassimon Moschonas, Professor of Political Science at Athen’s Panteion University. (Moschonas observes some similarities between this protest and some elements of the 2005 “riots” in the French suburbs.)

Then in 2011, the “indignant” movement took over public squares in Greece, and particularly, the Syntagma Square in Athens. Starting in 2012, a succession of general strikes against the measures dictated by the Troika followed. This second phase thus involved more traditional types of mobilization and was largely orchestrated by the sizeable Greek trade unions. Parallel to these developments, there appeared a number of solidarity networks. The first was that of the free health clinics which purported to make up for the social and political desertion of the Greek welfare state. “In the Greek case,” Moschonas notes, “what is surprising is that no figure capable of representing these thriving social movements managed to emerge.” This set the stage for Syriza, which was built on the ruins of the old leftist parties in 2004, to become the main opposition party. In 2013 Syriza was reconfigured through a big party conference (where it adopted the name Syriza-EKM, for “United Social Front”) and succeeded in striking a delicate balance: it established a kind of virtuous coexistence with the social movements without ever trying to exploit them. It created an informal alliance with the grassroots activists without ever going so far as to absorb them into the party apparatus.

The electoral victory of Réna Doúrou, who became governor of Athens in September 2014, was a turning point in Syriza’s rise to power – and the inaugural moment of the third stage in the recent history of Greek social movements. Doúrou’s success, similar to that of Ada Colau and the PAH in Spain, proved to skeptics that Syriza was capable of further political success. The PAH first started with stopping eviction and helping indebted families get off the streets; it proved that it could win elections and bring change to people’s daily lives, and consequently helped restore the faith of thousands of disillusioned Spanish citizens in politics. Similarly, Réna Doúrou’s victory in Athens served as the local groundwork and the inspiration of Syriza’s national campaigns and victories the following year.

In contrast to the crisis of the political regime in Spain, in Greece, as in Portugal, there was no question of changing the Constitution (the neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn are the only group to have demanded such a thing). Another element that contributes to the Greek institutional continuity – despite the chaos in Athens – is the comparatively shorter history of authoritarianism and longer history of parliamentary tradition. The Greek dictatorship lasted seven years (1967–1974) whereas the authoritarian regimes in Spain and Portugal went on for much longer. Greece is one of the first countries to establish universal male suffrage (beginning in 1864) and celebrates a long parliamentary tradition that remains lively to this day.

4 — ITALY

Surprisingly, it is in Italy that the dynamic of Spanish movements finds its closest kin. “People emerging from social movements and moving into alternative local governments is something we saw happen at the end of the 1990s, alongside the anti-globalization movement. In a sense, it was a precursor to what is happening in Spain today,” says Beppe Caccia. The Italian activist spent seventeen years on the Venice City Council, at first as an affiliate of the Green Party

SEL, and then since 2010, as a candidate of the leftist independent group Venice in Common (which of course calls to mind *Barcelona en Comú*).

While there was no “indignant” movement in Italy, the country has been the scene of numerous political mobilizations since 2008. The height of this wave of activism coincided with the triple referendum of June 2011: the electorate was to rule, at the same time, on Silvio Berlusconi’s immunity from prosecution, on going back to nuclear energy, and on the privatization of water resources. The last measure was the focal point of the protests. A few weeks before the referendum, local elections translated the momentum created by social movements into victories for several citizens’ candidates who were, in some instances, supported by the leftist environmentalists of SEL. The victories included the mayors’ seats in Naples and Milan. The former was won by Judge Luigi de Magistris and the latter by Giuliano Pisapia, a lawyer who had worked on the case concerning the death of Carlo Giuliani, the activist killed by the police during the G8 meeting in Genoa in 2001.

“We all share the idea that city government and local executive power are an appropriate site from which to lead an efficient fight against the austerity programs imposed by European institutions,” suggests Beppe Caccia. He is part of Blockupy, a collective that combines NGOs, labor unions and political parties from all over Europe and takes action against the EU’s economic policies. “That said, what we did in Venice in the 2000s was to join larger coalitions still dominated by the traditional center-left, namely the Democratic Party.” The Democratic Party (PD) led by Matteo Renzi is currently in power; its Venice section was badly shaken by a huge corruption scandal in 2014. Referencing the coalitions that are on the rise in Turin, Bologna was in the lead up to the June 2016 municipal elections. “Turin in Common” and *Coalizione Civica per Bologna* (“Civic Coalition for Bologna”), Caccia suggests: “What we are seeing in Spain, on the other hand, and which also seems to be brewing in many cities in Italy, are more radical experiments, involving a clean break with Matteo Renzi and the PD’s strategy.” Along the lines of the Catalan model, the initiatives in Turin and Bologna combine alternative social movements, such as the so-called “social centers,” and the “old” political parties together around a strong local figure.

Guillem Vidal, of the European University Institute in Florence, remains cautious as to the possibility of transposing the successes seen in Spanish local elections to the June 2016 elections in Italy. “*Barcelona en Comú* was created at a very auspicious moment, and was able to ride the wave of 15-M. But there has been no such visible and radical movement in Italy. It will not be easy for the Italian platforms such as those in Torino and Bologna to gather the same momentum as their Barcelona and Madrid models,” he predicts. In short, the powerful matrix of 15-M is still the key to understanding the specificity of the Spanish case.

As fledgling as they are promising, these Italian initiatives at the municipal level stand in stark contrast with those at the national scene where the left-leaning alternatives to traditional parties are greatly hindered by the competition that they face from the so-called Five Star Movement (M5S). This anti-euro

party launched by the comedian Beppe Grillo in 2009 is the only new political group to have successfully entered the national political arena since the onset of the crisis. In the European elections of 2014, the M5S finished second; with 21% of the vote, it came out far ahead of the “Other Europe with Tsipras” coalition. The latter is an electoral list to the left of the Democratic Party, which, despite support by renowned civil society figures, such as Barbara Spinelli, one of the co-founders of the daily *La Repubblica*, obtained a mere 4% of the vote. In that respect, the Italian political landscape resembles its French counterpart. Although France’s National Front and the M5S have relatively little in common, in their respective countries, both parties manage to occupy the political space where protests against austerity and EU dictates are voiced, thereby preventing the emergence of any new alternative coming from the left.

At this juncture, while the “indignation” initially expressed in 2011 keeps regenerating so as to create new forms of political activism, the specific initiatives which emerge vary greatly from one country to the next. Spain, without a doubt, provides the most seamless and successful example of transitions, whereby activists groomed in social movements have not only entered the electoral process, but have also managed to create new structures, and to claim victory. They have done so with the support of the more traditional parties on the left, whose members have agreed to keep a low profile, so as to preserve the citizen-centered dynamic of the platform. In Italy, meanwhile, more classic alliances have taken shape: they are generally less ambitious with regard to the renewal of political practice, yet also strive to combine, in more or less equal parts, the rank and file of traditional parties and civil society figures. In Greece, a form of peaceful coexistence between Syriza and social movements has hitherto prevailed, with the latter accepting, more or less tacitly, representation by the former. The looming strikes against the implementation of the Third Memorandum, however, are likely to bring about a new phase in the relations between the Greek social movements and the Syriza government. In Portugal, the L/TDA campaign has done little more than to serve as an impetus for “old” parties to evolve, as it has been unable to reshape the political landscape by way of siphoning off the electoral base of social movements.

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