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# 'Que No Nos Representan'

*The Crisis of Representation and the Resonance of the Real  
Democracy Movement from the Indignados to Occupy*

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## **Introduction: Real Democracy Now!**

The year 2011 marked a watershed in the modern history of social movements. In the wake of the Arab Spring, a wave of popular protest washed across the globe: from the leafy squares of the Mediterranean to the concrete heart of the global financial empire at Wall Street, activists suddenly began to occupy public spaces everywhere. By mid-October, millions of people had taken to the streets of over 1,000 cities in more than 80 countries to express their indignation at the subversion of the democratic process by unresponsive politicians, big banks and powerful corporations. Following three decades of state

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retrenchment, growing inequality and rising indebtedness, the ongoing global financial crisis finally brought back to the surface the hidden reality of class conflict in democratic capitalist society. A deafening roar resounded from the squares of the world. After a long slumber, the 99 percent had risen, with one unifying objective: real democracy now!

From the very start, it was clear that the Spanish *indignados*, the Greek *aganaktismenoi* and the American occupiers were not the usual suspects of left-wing politics. Refusing to align themselves with any political party or ideology, the activists deliberately avoided making specific demands on the political class. Rather than recognizing the authority of those in power, participants in the movement challenged the legitimacy of prevalent power relations as such. At the heart of its call for real democracy, therefore, the emerging cycle of struggles not only revealed a profound legitimation crisis at the core of representative democracy (e.g. Zizek 2011; Hardt and Negri 2011), but also consciously prefigured the creation of a *different* democratic model, one characterized by popular assemblies, leaderless self-management, and consensus-based decision-making (Graeber 2011a). All of this leaves us with a key question, however: how was it possible for such a radical critique of representation and such an innovative and relatively unknown model of direct democracy to spread so rapidly across borders? Or, to paraphrase BBC Newsnight Editor Paul Mason (2012), why was it kicking off everywhere?

### **How Do Social Movements Spread?**

The literature on social movements has traditionally answered this question with reference to the concept of 'diffusion'. In the original definition by Katz (1968), diffusion is "defined as the acceptance of some specific item, over time, by adopting units – individuals, groups, communities – that are linked both to external channels of communication and to each other by means of both a structure of social relations and a system of value, or culture," (cited in McAdam and Rucht 1993:59). As such, diffusion involves (1) a 'transmitter'; (2) an 'adopter'; (3) an 'item' to be diffused; and (4) a 'channel' through which the item reaches the adopter from the transmitter. The channel of diffusion can be direct, through pre-existing personal contact between transmitter and adopter (*relational diffusion*); indirect, through the mass media (*non-relational diffusion*); or some kind of combination or interplay of the two (McAdam and Rucht 1993).

Tarrow (2005) notes that, apart from relational and non-relational channels, diffusion can also be *mediated* through a process of brokerage between two previously unconnected actors, where a third party assumes the role of broker. For Tarrow, relational diffusion transfers information along already well-established lines of interaction through “the attribution of similarity” and the trust-networks it produces (Lee and Strang 2003). McAdam and Rucht previously argued for the existence of a similar mechanism accounting for non-relational diffusion, which they described as “minimal identification of adopter and transmitter” (1993:60).

Building on these differential conceptualizations, the academic debate on diffusion has centered on two main questions: how movement ideas and practices are *transmitted* (through relational or non-relational pathways, through a combination of the two, or through a process of brokerage); and how movement ideas and practices are *adopted* (spontaneously or through conscious leadership). In the literature on the diffusion of the sit-ins of the US civil rights movement, for instance, there is a marked difference between the social movement participants, who largely stressed non-relational and spontaneous processes of transmission and adoption, and social movement scholars, who tended to emphasize the role of personal ties and social movement organizations in providing leadership (Andrews and Biggs 2006). In this paper we argue that, to the extent that the movement for real democracy can be said to have 'diffused' from one transmitting country to a series of adopters, the evidence suggests that this occurred through non-relational channels of social media and through a process of spontaneous adoption.

It is important to note here that by “spontaneous adoption” we do not mean to say that the movement acted in a random, disorganized or unconscious way. Indeed, the various local movements displayed a remarkable degree of internal organization and transnational coordination, while their individual participants demonstrated a profound level of awareness about the aims of their movement and the strengths and weaknesses of its organizational model. Rather, when we speak of “spontaneous self-organization”, we are referring to the idea of revolutionary spontaneity developed by anarchist theorists like Mikhail Bakunin, left-communists like Rosa Luxemburg, and autonomists like Cornelius Castoriadis, all of whom strongly criticized the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy of their time by arguing that revolutionary movements can and should act without the

leadership of a vanguard party. The core idea behind spontaneity, therefore, is not that action is unconscious, but rather that it arises organically from the grassroots, without the interference of centralized, hierarchical movement organizations. As Gramsci explained:

*The term “spontaneity” can be variously defined, for the phenomenon to which it refers is many-sided. Meanwhile it must be stressed that “pure” spontaneity does not exist in history ... In the “most spontaneous” movement it is simply the case that the elements of “conscious leadership” cannot be checked, have left no reliable document. It may be said that spontaneity is therefore characteristic of the “history of the subaltern classes,” (Gramsci 1971:196; cited in Leontidou 2012:299).*

Or, as Greek WWII Resistance hero Manolis Glezos put it during an explorative discussion on direct democracy and its prospects to be practiced on a large scale that took place at Syntagma Square during the days of its occupation:

*“They have characterized these popular gatherings as ... being ‘spontaneous’. Therefore they are degrading this participation of the citizens to the level of instincts ... But the action of your presence here is a conscious action,” (Glezos, at Syntagma Assembly, June 17, 2011, authors’ translation).*

## **Our Argument: The Resonance of Resistance**

That said, our argument goes further. What we propose in this paper is that the concept of diffusion as such – in its relational, non-relational and mediated varieties, as well as its spontaneous and centrally-organized forms – cannot capture the full complexity of how the movement for real democracy spread so rapidly across the globe. Even Tarrow's emphasis on the attribution of similarity between transmitter and adopter ultimately hinges on the assumption that there is indeed a clear linear relationship (in both time and space) between the transmitter and the adopter. Rather, we suggest that there were many cross-directional relationships between multiple transmitters and adopters, and that each national movement studied here at some point fulfilled *both* of these functions. In other words, each national movement was at once an adopter and a transmitter; both an imitator and an initiator. It follows that the occupations of Sol,

Syntagma and Zuccotti are better conceptualized as key nodes in a global network constituted by continuous interaction effects (Castells 2012).

More than an imitator attributing similarity to the struggle of an initiating Other, something much deeper and pre-existing therefore seems to be at play: the activation of a latent potential for mobilization through a social phenomenon of “resonance”. Simply put, a movement may take off in one place not just because activists attribute similarity, but because the emotional grievances of a movement elsewhere *resonate* with their own, and because the perceived successes of that movement provide other activists with the inspiration to activate dormant potentialities back home. This concept of resonance first arose in the work of the Tiqqun Collective and the Invisible Committee, most notably in the latter’s 2008 manifesto, *The Coming Insurrection*, which remarked that “revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination, but by resonance. Something that is constituted here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something constituted over there,” (Invisible Committee 2008). A budding revolutionary wave, in short, “is not like a plague or forest fire – a linear process which spreads from place to place after an initial spark.” Rather, such an emerging movement “takes the shape of music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythms of their own vibrations, always taking on more density,” (*ibid*).

In this conceptualization, then, the emphasis shifts away from the linear model of causation that sees transmitter movement A as responsible for causing the mobilization of adopter movement B, and instead focuses on the endogenous potentiality for mobilization that was always-already present in B and that was merely actualized by the building wave of mobilizations that previously passed through A. In other words, the concept of resonance explicitly differentiates between the proximate cause of mobilization – the ‘waves’ passing through and amplified by movement A – and the deep causes for mobilization, which already lay hidden underneath the shared surface of A and B in the form of structural conditions, cultural factors and local movement experience. As Gaston Gordillo summarizes, “this is not a linear spread, but convoluted, unpredictable dispersion ... involv[ing] rhizomic, non-linear, vibrating patterns of dispersion resembling sound waves.” A few years earlier, John Holloway had already described this process in reference to the influence of Mexico's Zapatistas (EZLN) on the Global Justice Movement:

*There is no linear progression here. It is not the spread of an organisation that we are speaking of ... Neither is it really a question of the spread of an influence from Chiapas. It is not that the decisions of the EZLN have an influence on struggles in Rome or Buenos Aires. It is rather a question of resonance and inspiration. The Zapatista uprising has had an enormous impact in the cities of the world because the themes that the EZLN raise and the orientations they suggest have resonated strongly with the preoccupations and directions of people in the cities (Holloway 2005).*

We therefore argue that:

- a) To the extent that the Real Democracy Movement can be said to have “diffused” from Spain to Greece and the United States – and beyond – it did so mostly through non-relational channels of transmission and spontaneous forms of adoption.
- b) The linear concept of diffusion, however, cannot capture the full complexity and multi-directionality of interactions between the various nodes in the global network of movements. We propose the the idea of “resonance” as an alternative way of conceptualizing the spread of the movement across the globe.

## **Methodological Approach**

We believe that the best way to modify or elaborate on an existing concept is by adopting the methodological framework proposed by its proponents and showing why – even on its own terms – the concept fails to adequately describe a substantively important social phenomenon under investigation. In our approach, we therefore follow Tarrow and McAdam and Rucht (1993:62) in shunning a narrow emphasis on case studies and instead study our movements in a holistic sense as a 'cycle of protest' or a 'movement family', rather than as a series of distinct national movements. We consider the occupations of Puerta del Sol, Syntagma Square and Zuccotti Park to belong to the same movement family, in the sense that they do not only display an ideological similarity in their commitment to autonomy and direct democracy, but they also emerged as part of the same cycle of protest. As participants in demonstrations and occupations in over half a dozen countries, we always considered ourselves to be part of a *global* movement – a sentiment that was shared by many of our comrades and informants. In this paper, we will

refer to that movement as the Real Democracy Movement (RDM).

Building on the methodological framework provided by the diffusion literature, we will try to identify the following elements as the movement spread from one country to another: a) timing; b) common elements in the struggle; c) similarity between 'adopter' and 'transmitter'; and finally, d) the means through which 'diffusion' took place (McAdam and Rucht 1993). To distill these elements from the vast mass of information that exists on the RDM already, we will adopt a process tracing approach focusing on some of the "fateful moments" (Giddens, as cited in Jasper 2005), "critical junctures" (Hall and Taylor 1996), "turning points" (Abbot 1997, as cited in Blee 2012), or "transformative events" (Della Porta 2008) of the RDM that helped it jump borders and spread from one country to another: #15M, #25M and #17S. These dates constitute, respectively, the start of the occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid; the start of the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens; and the start of the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York. Our discussion of these fateful moments is by its very definition much too superficial to do justice to the diversity and complexity of the different local movements, but we nonetheless argue that such a "big picture" approach is useful for identifying the global patterns of resonance that allowed the RDM to spread so rapidly across borders.

Our research data has been accumulated through extensive fieldwork in Greece and Spain, involving participant observation and interviews with movement participants. In particular, during the summer of 2011 we participated in 56 out of the 72 Popular Assemblies at Syntagma Square, while we were also present in a number of general strikes in the months before the occupation of Syntagma. During the same spring and summer of 2011, we were also present at Puerta del Sol for two weeks and participated in demonstrations in Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and Rome. In March 2012, we returned to Athens to conduct interviews with key activists in the Greek movement, some of which were featured in a short documentary, 'Utopia on the Horizon', and we traveled back to Spain numerous times for the production of our next documentary, 'Fighting for our Future'. In December 2012, we returned to Athens and Madrid to conduct additional interviews for this paper. Moreover, as volunteers for the Take the Square collective, we were directly involved in attempts to coordinate the movement at the transnational level, most importantly for the global days of action on September 17 and October 15, and have as such been in contact digitally with organizers in the Occupy movement in New York as

well. Furthermore, as the editors of ROARMAG.org, we actively tried to facilitate the spread of information between countries, especially from Europe to North America.

As for our interviews, apart from the informal discussions in which we unavoidably took part during our extensive fieldwork, we also conducted formal semi-structured interviews with key informants; “key” referring to the interviewee having played an important coordinating or facilitating role in the movement (Blee and Taylor; in Klandermas and Staggerborg, 2002). Our key informants were either members of some of the movement working groups (media team, artists team, assembly coordinators) or members of the movement in the days of its very diffusion from one country to another (Thisio group in the case of Syntagma, for instance).

### **#15M: 'Noone Expects the Spanish Revolution'**

On May 15, 2011, an independent and decentralized citizen platform called *Democracia Real YA* (DRY), constituted by a loose coalition of over 200 social groups and civil society associations, organized a large march in Madrid and 57 other cities throughout Spain to protest the handling of the country's devastating financial crisis, the structural power of big banks over government, and the unwillingness of political representatives – and the inability of the political system more generally – to respond to the needs of the people. Under the slogan “we are not goods in the hands of bankers and politicians,” up to 130,000 people took to the streets and made their voices heard in the single biggest popular mobilization since the start of the financial crisis. Deliberately unaligned with any political party or ideology, DRY effectively functioned as a digital organizing platform for a leaderless convergence of pre-established movements and organizations aimed at coordinating broad-based citizen mobilization.

Up until that moment, the Spanish population had already suffered tremendous hardships as a result of the deflation of a massive housing bubble. More than one in five Spaniards and almost half of the country's young people were out of work, over 11 million people were at risk of falling into poverty, and hundreds of thousands of families had been evicted from their homes – many of them ending up with nowhere else to go but the street. Meanwhile, bank executives got away with huge bonuses as their banks or *cajas*



were bailed out by the government after toppling over like dominoes. Moreover, by mid-2010, the Socialist government of Prime Minister Zapatero had made a U-turn in its economic policies, shifting from a 'heterodox' stimulus package to an orthodox austerity budget, putting further stress on the already embattled lower and middle classes (Hardiman and Dellepiane 2012). With an allegedly 'leftist' government now pursuing right-wing economic policies, the structural conditions for widespread indignation were in place: the market-imposed shift towards austerity took away the last remnants of the system's legitimacy in the eyes of its people.

On May 15, following the official DRY demonstration, some clashes broke out between protesters and police during a sit-in in Gran Vía, after which a group of around 100 protesters marched on the city's iconic central square, the Puerta del Sol. Once there, around 20 of them formed a circle to discuss what to do next. At some point, one of the activists assembled in the square suggested to his companions that they should act like the Egyptians and camp out in the square that night. Deciding that a coordinated march was not enough, the group accepted this proposal, which some later said could have been made by anyone else in the group, as it just seemed to be like a logical evolution to the day's events. That night, some 30 protesters camped out in Sol, and the next day, on May 16, the first official assembly was held with some 200 highly enthusiastic participants. As the #spanishrevolution hash tag went viral on Twitter, word reached Barcelona, where a group of 200 protesters decided to occupy Plaça Catalunya.

In the early hours of May 17, however, the authorities of Madrid made what turned out to be a fateful mistake: they tried to remove the protesters – whose numbers had swelled to 150 – from the square. The forceful *desalojo*, during which two people were arrested and one was injured, immediately backfired. Independently from DRY, the protesters who had camped out in Sol disseminated a viral call-to-action via Facebook, Twitter and SMS: to gather in Sol at 8pm that evening in defiance of the authorities and in anticipation of an indefinite occupation. That evening, over 12.000 people gathered in Sol, 200 of whom organized into an impromptu assembly in which the decision was made to set up camp and occupy the square. As the protest grew, Twitter and Facebook were abuzz with a straightforward imperative: *¡Toma la Plaza!* Take the Square! That night, the assembly set up its different working groups and committees, appointing a communication team which quickly established links with the 30 other cities in which occupations were

already underway. Again, some 300 people stayed the night as a large tarp canopy was set up marking the start of a genuine Tahrir-style tent camp. AcampadaSol was born. The sheer pace at which the camps spread and grew took even participants by surprise (Van Houten 2012). As one sign proudly proclaimed, “noone expects the Spanish revolution!”

Another sign, held up by a teacher, summed up everything that needed to be known about the movement's stance on traditional representative politics: “the young took to the streets and suddenly all the political parties got old.” According to a reporter for *El País* who was embedded in the protest camp at Sol from the very beginning, that Tuesday, May 17, “revealed the magic of spontaneity. The miracle of communication. The power of spreading the message through social networks. The strength of a new generation,” (Elola 2011). Certainly these masses were conscious of what they were doing, but as we personally experienced throughout our attempts to 'direct' or 'coordinate' the movement through Take the Square, it was impossible for any one individual – or even any group of individuals – to deliberately change its course. Much more than individual leadership, there appeared to be some sense of collective consciousness driving the movement's evolution. As one friend and organizer with Take the Square would later put it on Syntagma Square, “we may look like a chaotic swarm of bees to some, but we all share the same hive mind.” And so, the *El País* reporter went on, “Tuesday the 17th was magical. Magical because nothing had been prepared. Fed by social networks, a spontaneous demonstration bloomed into existence. The 15-M protests, by contrast, had been the fruit of conscious and conscientious labor. Three months of preparation. Tuesday was something else. Something new. Something different,” (Elola 2011).

So where did this sudden rush towards spontaneous mass mobilization come from? And why did it assume the leaderless form it did, with its emphasis on direct democracy, horizontal self-management and mutual aid? Numerous commentators and activists have rightly stressed the precedent of the Egyptian revolution and the occupation of Tahrir Square. As one of our friends in Take the Square put it, “Of course Egypt inspired us! The Egyptians showed us that it was possible to have a revolution without leaders. That it was possible to overthrow a regime through a non-violent occupation of a square. Of course that inspired us.” But while Tahrir clearly played a seminal role in inspiring the decision to occupy Puerta del Sol, the idea that the 15-M movement was therefore “diffused” from Egypt – merely adopting a set of ideas and practices developed

and transmitted from elsewhere – seems overly simplistic. After all, the practice of occupying public spaces was not new to all the early participants in AcampadaSol, many of whom came out of the city's thriving *Okupa* movement. Squats like Patio Maravillas, which describes itself as a “multi-purpose autonomously governed space” and which contains a so-called 'HackLab' that was seminal in building up AcampadaSol's communications resources, have been experimenting with the occupation of public spaces for years. These hubs played a key role in providing experience and resources for the occupation of Sol.

Similarly, the idea of *autogestión*, or leaderless self-management, is well-established in Madrid, and in Spain more generally. Apart from the country's well-known anarchist tradition of the 1930s, which continues to live on today in the anarcho-syndicalist union CNT, the 1960s saw the blossoming of a strong movement of neighborhood associations in Madrid. Although these associations have since lost most of their radical flavor, the idea of neighborhood assemblies survived and was later reincorporated by the 15-M movement following the voluntary disbanding of the protest camp at Sol (Sánchez 2012). The consensus-based model of decision-making thus did not arrive at Sol out of a vacuum, nor was it adopted from abroad. Rather, it was endogenous to local movement experience and already institutionalized at an early stage in the decision-making model of the DRY platform, as well as the movements and associations that constituted the platform. One of the core groups in DRY, *Juventud Sin Futuro* (JSF, Youth without a Future), was created in February 2011 and brought together dozens of movements and associations that had been involved in the student resistance against the Bologna process in 2008-'09. Many of these groups had been organizing through assemblies for years.

Furthermore, to think that Egypt was the sole source of inspiration for the movement would be a mistake. First of all, the protesters derived their name – the *indignados* – from a short pamphlet by the 93-year-old French resistance hero Stéphane Hessel entitled *Indignez-Vous* (2010). Secondly, Fabio Gándara, the 26-year-old lawyer who set up the digital DRY platform with two friends, has claimed that he looked to Iceland for inspiration, as did two of the key organizers of Take the Square, one of whom subsequently chose to move there in a kind of voluntary exile. Not surprisingly, despite an unspoken ban on political symbols, Icelandic flags were ubiquitous at Sol. After all, when Iceland's banking sector collapsed, the country had a mini-revolution of its own, ousted its government, re-wrote its constitution, and imprisoned the politicians and bankers

responsible for the crisis. “We saw that the public could change things,” Gándara told *El País*. Iceland thus was a major source of inspiration. Does that mean that the movement diffused from Iceland, and that Spain merely adopted Icelandic ideas? Clearly such an assertion makes little sense. Rather, just like Egypt's leaderless struggle for democracy resonated with indignant Spaniards, so did the Icelandic treatment of its bankers.

The story of the PAH is another example of the multiple sources of inspiration that fed into the 15-M movement. The PAH had already been fighting for the rights of homeowners since 2009, when bank-sanctioned home evictions began to skyrocket. In late 2010, it started one of its most visible campaigns, *Stop Desahucios*, which was aimed at stopping or paralyzing foreclosures through direct action. The PAH, in turn, emerged out of the CONADEE – the National Coordination of Ecuadorians in Spain – which had been fighting for the rights of poor Ecuadorian migrants, many of whom were about to be evicted from their homes, since early 2008. We interviewed Aida, spokeswoman for CONADEE and a key organizer in PAH, who told us that she had fled Ecuador in the early-2000s in response to that country's devastating debt crisis, only to arrive in Spain in the build-up to yet another debt crisis. This time, however, as the bank was about to evict her from her home, Aida decided to fight back. She helped set up the PAH on the basis of what she describes as the values of the indigenous peoples of Latin America: a communitarian, leaderless ethos revolving around consensus-based decision-making. Assemblies have formed the organizational backbone of the PAH from the very start, and when the PAH joined DRY two months before 15-M, PAH spokesman Chema Ruiz recounted that in DRY, “we found an assembly-like movement without leaders, a heterogeneous group of people, hopeful of changing things.” They were not alone. In Spain, all the elements were already in place for the birth of the Real Democracy Movement. All that was needed was a spark.

### **#25M: ‘Be Quiet, or You’ll Wake up the Greeks!’**

February 23, 2011. Yet another general strike is taking place in Greece, and yet another demonstration reaches its final destination at Syntagma Square, and – as such demonstrations normally do – starts dismantling after a short clash with riot police and the usual teargas bombs, stun grenades, and Molotov cocktails that fill the picture. Greece

is at the beginning of her self-destructive dance with the Troika of foreign lenders – the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary fund. The start of this dance was signaled by Prime Minister Giorgos Papandreou with a simple televised message from Kastelorizo island, and the second step was taken on May 5, 2010, with the signing of the First Memorandum of Understanding. That day, Athens, and other main cities of Greece, witnessed a massive amount of protests that ended with the tragic burning down of the Marfin Bank in Stadiou Street, where three workers were burnt alive.

As one Athenian anarchist later told us, the tragedy of Marfin temporarily took the lifeblood out of the Greek resistance movement, provoking a period of soul-searching and relative absence of the anarchists from the movement. Nevertheless, protests and general strikes continued throughout 2010 and 2011 as the Troika demanded ever tighter austerity measures. This time, however, during the demonstration and general strike of February 23, 2011, there was something different in the air: inspired by the example of the occupation of Tahrir Square that took place earlier that year, a group of people from a newly-established small extra-parliamentary leftist party (MAA, Solidarity and Overthrow Front), started encouraging the protestors to “stay in the square like the Egyptians.” The call, after some initial confusion that it spread amongst the protestors of the other blocks and parties, was not successful and the demonstration started dismantling, to the disappointment of the members of the MAA. The demonstrations and the general strikes continued, however, with at least two more taking place thereafter (May 11 and 18, 2011).

Then, on the 15th of May 2011, the Spanish *indignados* occupied Sol, Catalunya and dozens of squares throughout the country. The news spread to Greece, initially through the social media, and later through the mainstream media as well. From the very first days, a number of Greeks involved in the Global Justice Movement and the December Uprising of 2008, and others who had personal contacts with people in Spain, started following the Spanish mobilizations, and the idea of something similar occurring in Greece slowly starts appearing – first as a distant prospect, an idea. From that moment onwards, discussions on how a similar move could take place in Greece begin amongst activists and average citizens. Not necessarily in order to “imitate” the Spaniards, but rather because there is a widespread feeling that the structural conditions are even worse in Greece, and that a massive reaction of the people is an absolute necessity. Yet, undoubtedly, 15-M was to become the ‘resonator’ that set in motion the relevant mechanisms for the birth of a

mass movement – culminating 10 days later in the occupation of Syntagma Square.

While the news on the Spanish *indignados* continues to spread in the Greek social media, and the mass media (mainly some newspapers) also start making the first references to them, a group of Spanish expats living in Greece – mainly students but also workers who had not directly participated in 15-M – organize the first demonstrations in solidarity with their compatriots outside the Spanish embassy of Athens. Similar solidarity protests are being held across the continent, but despite active efforts by Take the Square, these continent-wide solidarity protests do not really give rise to an endogenous movement anywhere. In Athens, as elsewhere, the call-to-action is made through Facebook, and the first to join the solidarity protests are some Greeks who happen to be in the Spanish community networks (students, friends, and co-workers), and some activists from the anarchist groups of Athens. The first action takes place on May 20, 2011, and soon moves to a nearby area, Thisio, transforming itself into an assembly where decisions are taken in a horizontal and direct democratic form:

*“For two/three days there was an assembly outside the Spanish Embassy. It starts on the 20th, and on the 22nd it moves to Thisio. I heard about it through the internet – I was taking Spanish classes back then, and the call was made in Greek by Spanish Erasmus students and workers.”* (Interview with N. December 2012)

On Sunday, May 22, 2011, the “Spanish Embassy Solidarity Assembly” moves to nearby Thisio. There, the Spanish-Greek assembly is set up – “the Spaniards insisted that we should have the assembly in two languages, and not only in Spanish,” – and they divide into thematic groups. Some of the participants also bring their tents and spend their nights there, forming a small *acampada*. The big issue is how to attract more people, how to make the “scale shift” as it is called in social movement studies. In that direction, they decide to set up a website, they discuss on the best domain name of those available, and they pick “real-democracy.gr”. Within a day, the website is set up and immediately attracts 6.000 visitors on the first day (Kyriakopoulos, *Eleftherotypia* of 9 June 2011).

On the same day, a marginal nationalist group called the “300 Greeks” («300 Έλληνες») – who from the first day had also unsuccessfully tried to approach the Thisio group – also makes a call for the occupation of Syntagma Square through Facebook. Their

call is equally unsuccessful, and the maximum they manage to do is to set up a stand on the square through which they subsequently run a signature campaign requesting a referendum on the cancellation of the memorandum and the debt, as well as the “exit from the IMF”, the convocation of a constitutional assembly, the claiming of an Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean Sea, and the cancellation of Parliamentary immunity and a new legislation safeguarding Ministerial immunity that had been passed through Parliament recently. At the same time, what Harsin (2012) would later call a “rumor-bomb”, starts circulating in the social media: apparently, the rumor had it that one of the banners – say some – or slogans – say others – of the Spanish *indignados* said: “be quiet, or else you'll wake up the Greeks!” No photograph or any other form of proof of this claim ever appeared anywhere, but the mass media (TV channels and newspapers) of Greece soon picked up on the story and reproduced the news, proving that the new media are just as likely to set the agenda for the old media as vice versa (ibid), even through circulating rumors. As Koopmans notes: “Errors, false rumors, misunderstandings, and inconsistent behaviors not only have a much larger potential impact during intense waves of contention; they are also more likely to occur under these circumstances,” (2004:33).

It worked. After a little known group from Thessaloniki created a Facebook page for the occupation of Lefkos Pyrgos and another one for that of Syntagma and other squares throughout the country (Indignants at Syntagma – Αγανακτισμένοι στο Σύνταγμα), their call went viral. Its anonymous organizers called on all Greeks “to protest against all those who led the country to this point. Spontaneously, without political parties, groups or ideologies,” (*Keep Talking Greece* 2011). A few days later, on May 25, Syntagma square was occupied. The occupation of Syntagma was to last for 72 days and nights, from May 25 until July 30, 2011. An 18-year-old fateful of the Syntagma movement who would later participate in the occupation of Puerta del Sol and the *indignados* March to Brussels as well, defined the occupation to us as a “spontaneous manifestation of indignation and opposition to the system.” When asked why he participated in the movement, Dimitris, a gentle and soft-spoken mathematics tutor and playwright who would later evolve into a respected facilitator of the Popular Assembly, told us that “because it wasn't a call from a political party, let's say, or from a union, I thought here there might be something happening *from the people*. That's why I participated. I participated in demonstrations and strikes before – okay, I did all that – but always it was under someone's flag. Now, it wasn't.”

So why did the movement adopt its leaderless and direct democratic model of decision-making? Dimitris is unequivocal about the movement's sources of inspiration: "what happened in Egypt, what happened in Spain – it's not irrelevant of what happened here in Greece. Or what's happening now. Or what's going to happen." But asked what the Egyptian revolution and 15-M movement meant to him, Dimitris did not give us any reason to believe that he simply adopted their ideas and practices. Rather, he stressed how the struggle of the Egyptians and Spaniards resonated with the revolutionary desires of many Greeks: "It inspired us. In a way, when you see such radical images, think of the people on the bridge in Egypt, with the police attacking them, and suddenly the people return and chase the police away. You cannot forget these images. They change you." Asked how these images from Egypt changed him, Dimitris' answer was simple and straightforward: "They woke us up." A similar idea was resonated in the Greek response to the alleged Spanish slogan not to wake up the Greeks: a large banner was unfurled outside the Spanish Embassy – and later in front of Parliament – reading:

*"¡Estamos despiertos! ¿Que hora es? ¡Ya es hora de que se vayan!"*

*"We are awake! What time is it? Time for them to go!"*

The reference here was clearly not only to Spain, but also to the famous slogan of protesters in Buenos Aires during the Argentinian crisis of 2001-'02: *¡que se vayan todos!* Away with them all! A balloon was hoisted carrying an Argentine flag in honor of that country's decision to defy foreign creditors and default on its debt. Meanwhile, the crowdfunded Greek documentary, *Debtocracy*, was being screened in the square, detailing the experience of Ecuador and how the pressure of social movements there helped the country to repudiate its odious debt. That summer, Athens became the base of the next flotilla to Gaza, bringing in activists associated with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), while Syrian migrants marched on the square every Friday in defiance of Bashar al-Assad. Multiple sources of inspiration and resonance thus converged upon the square. And more than just recognizing their multiple sources of inspiration, there was also an active attempt by the indignants at Syntagma to fulfill their own role as a 'catalyst' for further protests in Europe, calling on their fellow Europeans to follow the Greek example:

*"Zitti che svegliamo gli Italiani"*, read one Italian flag and makeshift banner.



*“Be Quiet, or else we’ll wake up the Italians”*, without having the same results, on their neighboring country, though.

Within days, the nightly protests in front of Parliament swelled to over 100.000 protesters for multiple nights on end. Although it is very difficult to calculate, it is estimated that as many as 2.6 million people either “occupied” or “passed by” – but in any case experienced – Syntagma in those days, constituting half of the population of Attica (Sotiris, 2011; as cited in Leontidou, 2012). From the very first day of the occupation of Syntagma, a general assembly was organized. The group of Thisio, having the experience of the previous days, played a protagonist role in it: they provided the microphone setup and the first coordinators, setting the standards for the future assemblies. The decision to move to Syntagma created a small conflict within the Thisio group. As one Spanish participant told us in an interview, “the Erasmus students wanted it to be a movement of solidarity to Sol. And when they saw it was being localized, creating its own Greek identity they were not very happy about it.” This issue was later resolved, however:

*“Our assemblies at Thisio would start at 8, but the call for Syntagma was for 6 in the evening. So we decided to go and check, because we feared that the call was made by somebody who wanted to manipulate the movement. But when we saw how many people had gathered there, we decided to move ourselves to Syntagma too. The first microphone and speakers were ours, too. They belonged to a Spanish musician who was in our group: it was his small microphone and amplifier. The anarchists of Thisio brought a better sound-system later on,”* (Interview with I. January 2013).

The General Assembly of Syntagma, and its thematic groups, summarised their demands in two claims: (a) the cancellation of the Memorandum of Understanding and the prevention of the voting of the Mid-Term Agreement of 29 June 2011; and (b) the need for “real, direct democracy” in the country, since the representative parliamentary system was considered to have become submissive to local and foreign financial interests. Although the first demand was restricted to the Greek political reality of the time, the second transcended national borders. It was a pan-Mediterranean concern at the time, and would later become a global one. Of course, the General Assembly of Syntagma Square was not fully aware of what direct democracy exactly was, how it could be achieved, whether it could be practiced on a large scale – beyond a small village or a

square – but what they knew for sure was that the current system was not representing them. So, in their quest for real democracy, and in between other initiatives directed towards the more urgent first demand, the indignants embarked on a journey to ‘discover and explore’ a new model, through practicing it directly in the horizontal decision-making processes of the assemblies, as well as through organizing relevant initiatives exploring the experiences other direct democratic movements. It was like Holloway (1996) summarized the Zapatista motto: *preguntando caminamos* – asking we walk.

One such initiative was organized on June 17, 2011, the “Day of Popular Information and Discussion on Direct Democracy”. Apart from the academics invited to speak on the issue, there were also two speakers who had some empirical experience with direct democratic experiments: Manolis Glezos, who had practiced direct democracy in his village Aperathou of Naxos island while he was the mayor there, and Professor Stavros Stavridis, who had come in touch with the Zapatista reality while involved in the campaign “A School For Chiapas”. It is particularly interesting that the speakers – who also played the role of “educators” – were related with one local and one foreign direct democratic experience. The main question in this particular context was: “can direct democracy be practiced on a large scale, beyond a small community or a square?” The Zapatista experience was discussed at least once more at Syntagma, on July 8, 2011, with the main speaker, via Skype, being Gustavo Esteva. Given this recurrent interest in living examples of direct democracy, the Assembly of Syntagma, while building a strategy on how to cancel the austerity measures already taken and stop the ones ahead, also actively explored the possibilities for the type of direct democracy it was seeking.

### **#17S: 'Anarchic Swarms' and 'America's Tahrir Moment'**

At some point in early July, while we were embedded in the Multimedia Team at Syntagma Square, we received an email on the Take the Square account. It was Micah White, co-editor of the Canadian anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*. Micah had an important piece of information to share with us: together with co-editor Kalle Lasn, he was about to launch a "tactical briefing" to the 90,000 strong *Adbusters* network calling for the occupation of Wall Street. Kalle and Micah now needed advice from European activists on how to bring about the kind of scale shift required for such an occupation. In a way, we

were not surprised with *Adbusters'* initiative. Not only did it seem wholly fitting with the global spirit of the time, but it also seemed to be a logical response to the financial crisis and a logical continuation of the emerging resistance within the United States itself.

The direct backdrop to *Adbusters'* call-to-action was the fact that the financial crisis of 2008-'09 had never truly been resolved, merely moved around: the losses of the big banks had been socialized, while individuals and households remained mired in unaffordable student, mortgage, credit card and medical debts (Harvey 2011). Meanwhile, as inequality had skyrocketed in the past 30 years while social mobility all but stagnated, the political system as such had ceased to function as a representative organ of the sovereign people: Washington had long since been captured by powerful Wall Street banks (Johnson and Kwak 2011). Even though the Federal government remained committed to a mild form of fiscal and monetary stimulus, at the municipal and state level austerity measures were increasingly starting to bite, feeding into the fiscal squeeze of individuals and households around the country. As in Egypt, Spain and Greece, in other words, the structural conditions for widespread popular outrage were already in place.

This is why, on June 9, a month before Micah contacted us and launched the call to occupy Wall Street, *Adbusters* had already emailed its followers arguing why "America now needs its own Tahrir." Around the same time, a coalition of NGOs and movement organizations called New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts made a call-to-action to set up a protest camp – nicknamed 'Bloombergville' – in City Hall Park on June 14, vowing "to stay till Bloomberg's budget is defeated," (NYABC 2011). The Bloombergville initiative, in turn, was inspired by the Walkerville occupation by workers in Wisconsin that had been set up earlier in June, which in turn emerged from the 100,000 strong labor union protests that rocked Wisconsin in February, following Governor Walker's move to abolish collective bargaining rights as part of a radical new austerity budget. This national cycle of protest had emerged principally in response to domestic grievances about austerity and the subversion of democratic processes by powerful corporate and financial interests.

Nevertheless, Tahrir and Sol had clearly managed to resonate across the Atlantic. When it finally launched its call to occupy Wall Street on July 13, *Adbusters* noted that "a worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics is underway right now that bodes well for the future." Indeed, according to Micah and Kalle, "the spirit of this fresh tactic, a fusion of

Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain,” was captured in the quote by Pompeu Fabra Professor and ROARMAG.org contributor Raimundo Viejo: “The antiglobalization movement was the first step on the road. Back then our model was to attack the system like a pack of wolves. There was an alpha male, a wolf who led the pack, and those who followed behind. Now the model has evolved. Today we are one big swarm of people,” (*Adbusters* 2011). The idea of the “anarchic swarm” as a mobilization tactic was to return in numerous other *Adbusters* calls, highlighting an emphasis on revolutionary spontaneity. Meanwhile, Micah and Kalle deliberately distanced themselves from the organizing process in New York, so as to avoid being seen as ‘leaders’. Early on, Micah told David Graeber, the activist, anthropologist and anarchist who participated in the preparatory meetings for OWS from the very start, that “we are just getting the meme out there, getting the people on the streets. We are not trying to control what happens,” (Schwartz 2011).

Graeber has in turn recounted in great detail the process that led up to the actual occupation (2011c). In the early days, on August 2, to be precise, Graeber responded to an invitation of a Greek anarchist to join a ‘General Assembly’ at Bowling Green, where a discussion was to be held on how to respond to *Adbusters’* call and organize for 17-S. Once he arrived there, however, he found a meeting that had been “hijacked” by a group of veteran protesters associated with the Worker’s World Party (WWP). Far from being interested in a genuine leaderless assembly, the group imposed its own hierarchical structures and demands on those assembled. Speech after speech was held dictating participants the rules and terms of the protest that was to be held. Fed up, Graeber and a number of friends that he recognized from his time in the Global Justice Movement decided to break away and form their own circle at the margins of the meeting:

*I quickly spotted at least one Wobbly, a young Korean activist I remembered from some Food Not Bomb event, some college students wearing Zapatista paraphernalia, a Spanish couple who’d been involved with the indignados in Madrid... I found my Greek friends, an American I knew from street battles in Quebec during the Summit of the Americas in 2001, now turned labor organizer in Manhattan, a Japanese activist intellectual I’d known for years... My Greek friend looked at me and I looked at her and we both instantly realized the other was thinking the same thing: “Why are we so complacent? Why is it that every time we see something like this happening, we just mutter things and go home?” – though I think the way we put it was more like, “You*

*know something? Fuck this shit. They advertised a general assembly. Let's hold one."*

Eventually, this group of 'horizontal' managed to draw most participants in the meeting away from the WWP, with its hierarchical and centralized leadership, and organized itself into the New York General Assembly (NYGA), which was to become the key decision-making platform for the emerging Occupy Wall Street movement. The assembly quickly made a couple of key decisions that were to determine much of the movement's nature and course over the months to come. It was decided that *Adbusters'* idea to focus on "one demand" would be jettisoned in favor of a more open-ended approach emphasizing direct action and prefigurative politics, instead of petitioning elected representatives for redress. In addition, the NYGA agreed on the movement's main slogan, "we are the 99%", in reference to the concentration of wealth and power in a tiny and unaccountable elite. Also, during the NYGA's regular meetings in Tompkins Square Park, which featured "a smattering of activists who had been connected to the Global Justice Movement" and a large group of younger participants "who had cut their activist teeth on the Bloombergville encampment" earlier that summer, it was decided that "what we really wanted to do was something like had already been accomplished in Athens, Barcelona, or Madrid: occupy a public space to create a New York General Assembly, a body that could act as a model of genuine, direct democracy to counterpose to the corrupt charade presented to us as "democracy" by the US government," (Graeber 2011c).

As a result of this rejection of representative institutions, numerous participants and observers have noted the anarchist roots of the Occupy movement, as well as its relation to the similarly anarchist-inspired Global Justice Movement (Graeber 2011a; 2011d; 2002). Sociologist Dana Williams (2012) agrees, writing that "the most immediate inspiration for Occupy is anarchism," and even going so far as to claim that anarchism forms the very "DNA" of the movement. Perhaps this, then, is the greatest underlying source of inspiration connecting all the different local movements? As we already saw, the Spanish *indignados* were profoundly influenced by anarchist modes of organizing dating back to the Civil War and the resistance to Franco. The Greeks, meanwhile, have since the overthrow of the military junta in the 1970s built up one of the strongest anarchist movements in the world. Occupy built on similar principles and modes of organization. What this seems to indicate is that the process of financial globalization – which reached its apotheosis in the ongoing crisis of global capitalism – has given rise to a structural

crisis of representation, which has in turn fed into ever denser patterns of resonance between anarchist ideas and practices on the one hand, and a globally-shared desire for real democracy on the other.

On September 17, during a global day of action against the power of the banks, this resonance culminated into the occupation of the heart of the global financial empire. With 5.000 protesters storming into Lower Manhattan and occupying Wall Street, the stage was set for the Real Democracy Movement to go truly global. Two days after a protest camp was set up in Zuccotti Park, on September 19, Kalle Lasn and Micah White wrote an op-ed for *The Guardian* with a title that said it all: “The call to Occupy Wall Street resonates around the world,” (Lasn and White 2011). The rest, as they say, is history.

### **Conclusion: The Sun Is New Each Day**

The above discussion raises a number of conceptual and theoretical questions. If the Occupy movement in the US drew on multiple sources of inspiration, as did the Spaniards and Greeks before it, to what extent are we justified to identify one, and not another movement as the principal ‘transmitter’? If, in turn, the Occupy movement “resonated around the world”, helping to inspire protests in over 1,000 cities in more than 80 countries on October 15, 2011, to what extent does it still make sense to pose a stark division between the conceptual categories of the transmitter and the adopter? If Occupy was at once an adopter and a transmitter, how useful can these analytical concepts at the core of diffusion theory really be? And, perhaps most importantly, if the distinction between transmitter and adopter becomes blurred, to what extent does it still make sense to conceive of diffusion as a linear process between the two? The above analysis has shown that the alleged adopters are not so much passive imitators as active participants; rather than being mere adopters, they were *adapters*, each building on extensive local movement experience to initiate their own repertoires of action, thereby helping to disseminate new ideas and practices and further amplifying the strength of the movement’s global resonance. It therefore makes more sense to conceive of the local movements as nodes in a global network constituted by complex interaction effects.

In our analysis, we have explained the spread of the RDM as that of an intensifying

shockwave resonating with shared concerns and desires and thereby activating a latent potential for mobilization that already lay dormant underneath the surface of Spanish, Greek and American society. To the extent that we can talk about the adoption of practices and ideas transmitted by other movements, such adoption occurred through a process of *conscious spontaneity* and through non-relational channels, most importantly social media. But since we are talking about interconnected *local* responses to a global structural crisis, the RDM has unavoidably built on grassroots movements experience, acquired through participation in the Global Justice Movement and other, more localized struggles, as well as through inspiration provided by older movements from all over the globe, with the Zapatistas and the worldwide anarchist movement being the most prominent examples.

As the RDM reached its peak in late 2011, Sydney Tarrow wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* in which he described Occupy Wall Street rather disdainfully as a “we are here” movement. “By their presence,” Tarrow argued, “they are saying 'recognize us!'” We believe that Tarrow, by characterizing Occupy as a simple demand for recognition, greatly underestimates the much deeper meaning behind the movement. Because the present conceptual framework of diffusion does not allow for a genuine understanding of how deeply Occupy resonated with the hearts and minds of millions of people around the globe, Tarrow is unable to see the spontaneous manifestation of the profound underlying legitimization crisis of representative democracy. From its inception, Occupy has articulated very clearly what it wants: Real Democracy. And like the Spaniards and Greeks, it wants it Now. While it may be true that there is an element of dissatisfaction with what Tarrow calls “a system of economic relations that has lost its way” – a system we simply call neoliberal capitalism – what lies beneath the RDM is much more profound: it is the failure of the model of representative democracy; a system of governance that has been distorted by powerful private interests to become what Crouch (2004) has called *post-democracy*.

For Crouch, the post-democratic condition is one in which, “while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams.” In this model, the mass of citizens is deliberately turned apathetic and, behind the scenes, politics is really decided in private between political and economic elites. Even when the elites do not get a say and

elected politicians do try to bring about social change, the structural power of globalized finance capital greatly constricts their policy options. To overturn this system, and the rules upon which it is based, the RDM – the mass of previously apathetic citizens – has come up with a simple proposition: a return to democracy in its purest and most direct form – the horizontal mode of self-organization that has found its expression in the autonomist and anarchist movements, as well as among the Zapatistas and the Global Justice Movement (Castoriadis 1991; Graeber 2002).

In order to realize their vision that real democracy is possible, RDM activists decided not to wait for political elites to build a better world for them. Rather, they engaged in prefigurative politics to design their own concrete Utopias in the squares of Madrid, Athens, New York and beyond. Thus, a new world briefly came into being inside the belly of the old. Through direct action – defined by Graeber as “acting as if one were already free” (2011a) – the RDM liberated and built its own “free spaces” (Johnston 2011), where an alternative direct democratic and non-capitalistic way of life could flourish be actively experimented with; to explore and deepen what Holloway (2010) has called the “cracks” in the capitalist system. Such “free spaces”, such “cracks”, were the squares of the RDM, as well as the occupied squats, social centers, neighborhood assemblies, mutual aid initiatives, and countless other autonomous and self-managed projects that survived the protest camps.

The immense global resonance of these efforts is probably the RDM’s single most important legacy, even if the squares have long since been cleared and “winter” has dawned upon the movement. Yet, as one of the activists in Greece – who remains engaged by organizing the well-known Syntagma ‘solidarity kitchen’ – put it to us, there is no need to regret this phase in the movement’s evolution. “Imagine a tree,” he said, as we stood under the trees of Syntagma, roughly one year after the eviction of the protest camp. “It was cut down right when it started to blossom, but as it fell down, the cool summer breeze took its leaves and seeds and planted them in all the squares and villages of Greece. Syntagma never died – it spread.” The story of the tree is not just the story of Syntagma; it is the story of a global struggle for real democracy. As the dark of night threatens to envelop the world anew, we are gently reminded of the words of Cornelius Castoriadis, the philosopher of autonomy who inspired countless activists in Greece and beyond:



“night has fallen only for those who have let themselves fall into the night. For those who are living, says Heraclitus, *helios neos eph’ hemerei estin* – the sun is new each day,” (1991).

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