

# INDIGNADOS

## A FASHION PASSÉ?

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### article abstract

CAPTURED BY THE CONCEPT 'INDIGNADOS', THE VARIETY OF STREET PROTESTS THAT SWEEPED EUROPE IN 2011 ATTRACTED CONSIDERABLE MEDIA ATTENTION. THEIR MAGNIFYING LENS PLAYED CONSEQUENTLY SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN BOOSTING THESE PROTESTS' VISIBILITY, CASTING THEM AS A MOVEMENT IN THE MAKING, AND HAILING THEM AS A NEW QUALITY OF PROTEST OR SOCIAL MOBILIZATION. FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS THOUGH 'INDIGNADOS' PROVED UNSUSTAINABLE AS A CONCEPT. THAT THE DISCUSSION ON 'INDIGNADOS' CONTINUES IN SOME CIRCLES INDICATES EITHER THAT SOME REFUSE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE FACT THAT 'INDIGNADOS' ARE A FASHION PASSÉ OR THAT THE IDEA AND THE POWERFUL BRAND THAT THEY ACQUIRED ARE ABUSED FOR VERY SPECIFIC POLITICAL PURPOSES.

EUROZONE CRISIS, INDIGNADOS,  
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS,  
GREECE, MEDIA

### keywords

Different types of protests, actions, campaigns and other forms of social mobilization that swept Europe in 2011 were interpreted by the media as expressions of dissatisfaction with austerity policies implemented across the European Union (EU) in response to the eurozone crisis. By default, the same socio-political happenings have been linked in popular discourse with crisis of legitimacy and with the democratic deficit in the EU. At the source of these happenings was the Spanish May 15 (15-M) protest, which began as a demonstration against Internet piracy legislation scheduled to be implemented by the government. That it eventually turned into the occupation of Madrid's La Puerta Del Sol was inspired by the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2010/2011. Initially the gathering's purpose – apart from the Internet regulation – was to protest against mass youth unemployment and electoral politics. Eventually it developed into a defence of the right to occupy the Puerta del Sol.<sup>1</sup> According to some accounts, 30,000-40,000 protestors were mobilized in Madrid and 80,000 in Barcelona to march against high unemployment, the policies and conduct of Spain's political class, and to demand 'real democracy'.<sup>2</sup> Similar happenings, though of different size and scale, followed across Europe.

Captured by the concept 'indignados'<sup>3</sup> or an equally popular US-born term 'Occupy',<sup>4</sup> this variety of socio-political happenings attracted considerable media attention. Consequently, their magnifying lens played significant role in boosting these protests' visibility,<sup>5</sup> casting them as a salient social development, possibly as a movement in the making. The protests reached their peak in 2011; attempts to gather and occupy public space were evidenced throughout the summer of 2012. It is doubtful though that the year 2013 will bring new evidence of similar events. In this view, although initially a number of commentators praised the emergence of a new quality of protest or social mobilization, it seems that the efforts of keeping the idea alive notwithstanding, 'indignados' are a fashion passé. As a styled attempt at creating a new form of protest that failed, 'indignados' resemble a bubble that

1 Robinson, 2011.

2 Charnock, Ribera-Fumas, 2012.

3 The term 'indignados' was used by the Spanish press to refer to a wave of street protests in early 2011. As such, it identified the protestors with the best-selling book *Indignez-vous*, written by Stéphane Hessel. It is worth noting that a similar word, i.e. *Wutbürger* (enraged citizen), is frequently employed as a German synonym of 'indignados'. Voted the word of the year 2010, the concept 'Wutbürger' is entrenched in a slightly different context, see: (Kurbjuweit 2010).

4 'Occupy' serves as a reference to protests in form of occupation of public space. The first protest of this form 'Occupy Wall Street' took place at the New York City's Zuccotti Park in Autumn 2011.

5 Berseman (in Wolff, 2012) argues 'Occupy Wall Street' was actually silenced by the media.

burst. The objective of this paper is to dwell on this issue. To this end the first part explores the question of how it was possible to entrench ‘indignados’ in the discourse on the eurozone crisis in the first place, and accordingly to raise convincing claims about the relevance of their cause. The following section offers an insight in the academic debate on ‘indignados’ and dwells on their conceptualization entailed therein. Next, the phenomenon of *aganaktismeni*, i.e. the Greek version of ‘indignados’, is discussed against the background of the Greek crisis. In the final part, the question of why the protests proved short-lived is addressed.

## 1. CONTEXTUALIZING DISCONTENT: ‘INDIGNADOS’ AND DISCOURSES ON THE (EUROZONE) CRISIS

The media played a fundamental role in shaping the image of protests inspired by the occupation of Madrid’s Puerta Del Sol. By placing these protests and demonstrations in context of the debate on the crisis and thus by presenting these happenings as crisis-related, on the one hand, the media were able to offer an alternative to the worn-off accounts of crisis and reform. On the other hand, anticipative of people’s compassion and thus interest, they were hopeful of improving their popularity and outreach. By successfully entrenching ‘indignados’ in discourse on the eurozone crisis, convincing claims as to the relevance of their cause could be made. This in turn increased the bearing of the media coverage on ‘indignados.’

That it was possible to anchor ‘indignados’ in the discourse on the crisis is related to the fact that the critical debate on the crisis and its management offered a wide range of arguments validating claims of the emergence of a new quality of protest. Two major threads can be distinguished in the critical debate on the crisis and its management across Europe. The economically-inclined commentaries focus on fiscal consolidation, austerity programmes, the reform process and the role of the EU institutions in addressing the crisis.<sup>6</sup> In this context, diverse facets of austerity policies implemented across Europe tend to be discussed. The second debate oscillates around questions of democracy, legitimacy and accountability, solidarity, social justice, and sovereignty and their condition in times of crisis.<sup>7</sup> The narrative on ‘indignados’ is located in-between these two debates, whereby the notions of austerity and democracy are particularly relevant in context of the discussion on social mobilization.

6 De Grauwe 2013; Gros 2013; Blyth 2013a.

7 Sen 2012; Habermas 2012; Mazower 2012.

The central tenet of the anti-austerity debate is that austerity policies cannot work.<sup>8</sup> “The worthy but narrow intentions of the European Union’s policy makers have been inadequate for a sound European economy and have produced instead a world of misery, chaos and confusion.”<sup>9</sup> In this debate, austerity is understood as government’s policies consistent mainly with cuts in public expenditure (mostly on health and education) for the sake of fiscal adjustment. It is argued that “savage cuts to essential public services, to aid to the needy and so on, actually hurt the country’s prospects for successful adjustment”<sup>10</sup> and that “these spending cuts are a case of inflicting pain for the sake of inflicting pain.”<sup>11</sup> Austerity policies, so the argument goes, are the source of ‘depression’ and people’s suffering in the eurozone’s periphery.<sup>12</sup> It is argued that austerity “is a dangerous idea, because it ignores the externalities it generates.”<sup>13</sup>

Given the social consequences of what tends to be referred to as austerity policies, Krugman<sup>14</sup> argues that “We’ve basically had an unethical experimentation on human beings going on across the world right now.” Therefore, austerity policies and their consequences for the society endow the citizens with the right to protest against purposeless policies. The following comment is exemplary in this context:

“Much commentary suggests that the citizens of Spain and Greece are just delaying the inevitable, protesting against sacrifices that must, in fact, be made. But the truth is that the protesters are right. More austerity serves no useful purpose; the truly irrational players here are the allegedly serious politicians and officials demanding ever more pain.”<sup>15</sup>

As far as the debate on democracy is concerned, it is driven by a conceptualization of the crisis seen as a threat and a major source of challenges to democracy and its functioning. On the one hand, the narrative points to a lacking legitimacy of the EU institutions and/or the EU’s elite to design specific policy responses to the eurozone crisis. This “technocracy without democratic roots,” this elite approach to managing the response to the crisis estranges the EU citizens from the idea of Europe and gives rise

8 Blyth 2013.

9 Sen 2012.

10 Krugman 2012a.

11 Krugman 2012a.

12 Krugman 2012b.

13 Blyth 2013: 2.

14 Krugman 2013.

15 Krugman 2012a.

to euroscepticism.<sup>16</sup> In other words, “Europe is witnessing the “bursting of a legitimacy bubble.”<sup>17</sup> The legitimacy problem leads to euroscepticism, which in turn “enables parties of the extreme left and right to become more mainstream.”<sup>18</sup>

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ARGUED IN THE DEBATE ON DEMOCRACY THAT ECONOMIC HARDSHIP CAUSED BY AUSTERITY POLICIES AGGRAVATES FEELINGS OF FRUSTRATION WITH THE CRISIS AND DISSATISFACTION WITH POLICIES IMPLEMENTED BY RESPECTIVE GOVERNMENTS ACROSS EUROPE

In a similar fashion, it is argued in the debate on democracy that economic hardship caused by austerity policies aggravates feelings of frustration with the crisis and dissatisfaction with policies implemented by respective governments across Europe. Therefore, it fuels xenophobia, racism, and intolerance, while at the same time affecting solidarity among the EU member-states. The question of democracy in this way is related in the discourse on the crisis with the policies of austerity, whereby the latter is seen as undemocratic and anti-democratic. The anti-democratic nature of austerity is linked in the debate to the (lacking) legitimacy issue. Its anti-democratic character is derived from the notion that austerity – as it is argued – undermines societal well-being. Since in this sense it also contradicts the idea of a democratic Europe,<sup>19</sup> it is austerity that is held responsible for failures of democracy such as xenophobia, racism, and radicalisation of politics. In this context, Krugman<sup>20</sup> labels the proposition that the “crisis can be solved by technocratic governments imposing structural reform and austerity” as insanity. Implicitly a case for unorthodox measures to navigate the crisis is made, legitimizing in this way discontent and protest. Likewise, when Habermas<sup>21</sup> eloquently suggests that Europe is trapped in a dilemma of legitimacy and accountability, whereby difficult political and economic reforms need to be introduced to preserve the euro, he also acknowledges that unpopular policies will “meet with spontaneous popular resistance.”

16 Habermas 2013.

17 Weiler 2013.

18 Weiler 2013.

19 Sen 2012.

20 Krugman 2012a.

21 Habermas 2013.

Overall, at the core of the anti-austerity and pro-democracy debate rests the argument of lacking legitimacy and porous accountability. By pointing to recession, the impact of austerity policies on the economy and the society is highlighted, whereby at the same time a nexus between austerity and threats to democracy is established. In this context, social mobilizations (protests, demonstrations) are portrayed as expected, justified, and a spontaneous expression of peoples’ dissatisfaction with austerity seen as a wrong method of addressing the crisis. The popular discourse on ‘indignados’ – several variations of which have been reproduced by the media – taps into these arguments and employs them as a conceptual leverage to validate claims of the emergence of a new form of social mobilization. As images of (frequently irrelevant to the austerity issue) protests and demonstrations had been commonly employed in reporting on the crisis, ‘indignados’ became a recognizable item in the popular discourse on the crisis. The question is how real a phenomenon it is and how to conceptualize it. The following sections deal with this issue.

## 2. CONCEPTUALIZING ‘INDIGNADOS’

The literature on ‘indignados’ and ‘occupiers’ depicts them as mobilizations gathering seasoned activists and individuals driven by apolitical motivation. For instance, in the case of Madrid, “the net-based piracy campaigns were catalysts.”<sup>22</sup> They were joined by anti-globalization anarchists and radical collectives as well as by a variety of individuals, mostly in their 20-30s. In contrast, political parties, such as the communist Green Left Unity, as well as trade unions were absent from Puerta del Sol. The protests in Germany,<sup>23</sup> Greece and other European countries followed the same pattern of participation. Taking into account the diversified population of protestors and the variety of incoherent claims they raise, the question is what are they an instance of.

In the academic debate, these protests – seen as a unique, new form of social mobilization – are said to be representative of ‘*subterranean politics*’.<sup>24</sup> That is, they are displays of “phenomena that are not usually visible in mainstream debates.” ‘Subterranean politics’ depicts therefore the differences of the new form of mobilization and other forms such as social movement and civil society.<sup>25</sup> “Unlike previous mobilizations and protests, [subterranean politics] generate a sense of public excitement wherever they

22 Robinson 2011.

23 Kaindi 2013.

24 Kaldor, Selchow 2012: 1, 8.

25 Kaldor, Selchow 2012: 2.

happen,” thus creating a specific resonance in the mainstream political debate.<sup>26</sup> “The protests and demonstrations, the new political initiatives and the new parties, are not necessarily a reaction to austerity. They were and are about a profound loss of trust in current political élites.”<sup>27</sup>

In an attempt to capture the specificity of these displays of social dissent, Kaldor and Selchow<sup>28</sup> point to their following characteristics. First, they are said to express general frustration with the failure of the political elite and with political practices. They are also said to express frustration with the lack of meaningful participation. Second, they are of emancipatory, rather than of populist, nature. Third, they pioneer their own forms of participation as well as techniques of dialogue and democratic practice. Fourth, the participants place emphasis on the subjective experience of participating in politics in a new way. Alternative forms of protest are seen as an attempt to reconstruct democracy out of the participants’ own actions. Fifth, experimenting with different forms of participation such as daily assemblies and consensus decision-making, results in horizontality and ‘leaderlessness’ of these mobilizations. Sixth, marginal emphasis is placed on ‘Europe’ as a political community or as a public space. Except for a small ‘expert minority,’ Europe is invisible. Seventh, mobilizations of this sort tend to be smaller, less widespread, less joined up, more localized and less interconnected than similar phenomena in previous years. Most importantly, it is suggested in the same report that the 2011 and 2012 protests expressed dissent with failures of democracy, rather than represented a case against austerity policies.<sup>29</sup>

If a kind of kinship between ‘indignados’ and ‘Occupy’ can be established, then an interesting view on ‘indignados’ emerges from quite recent volumes published in the US on the ‘Occupy’ protests.<sup>30</sup> One of their distinctive features is that ‘Occupy’ “foreswore a concrete political agenda – a choice that in the eyes of Occupiers themselves was vindicated by the course of events.”<sup>31</sup> Although they would raise a number of complaints against the political and economic order, they did not offer any ideas about how to address them; nor did they present any political postulates to the authorities. It is argued that the fact that the Occupiers did not present a “reasonable set of demands ... was precisely about disobeying that kind of conventional

political grammar [that would require them to do so].”<sup>32</sup>

This instance of “political disobedience” is another feature of ‘Occupy’. That is, in contrast to traditional civil disobedience understood as “accepting the consequences of breaking selected laws in order to highlight the injustice of those laws,” “political disobedience” is about refusing to engage with the existing political order at all.<sup>33</sup> Another frequently noted feature of ‘Occupy’ is diversity. It is said to positively condition their power and political impact.<sup>34</sup> From a different angle, similarly as the ‘indignados,’ Occupiers seem to be excited by the allegedly new forms of participation, including assemblies and consensus-based decision-making process. The notion of subjective experience and the process of reconstructing democracy out of their own actions blend with the “festive, expressive and artful”<sup>35</sup> nature of Occupy and ‘indignados.’ As one of the commentators phrased it though,

“The aesthetic, self-expressive value of the Occupy movement is undeniable – and clearly inspiring for many. If those disempowered by the political rot and economic false dawn that led to the crisis found Zuccotti Park to be a place of therapy, of re-empowerment, that is something to celebrate.”<sup>36</sup>

Another take on ‘indignados’ sees them as large-scale action-networks. In this view their defining feature is the innovative way they use digital media. Research suggests that it goes beyond sending and receiving messages. Networks of this kind employ modern communication technologies to enable personalized public engagement. Communication becomes in this context “a prominent part of their organizational structure in stark contrast to social movements and issue advocacy.”<sup>37</sup> The phenomenon of ‘indignados’ is seen as a large-scale action-network. In this view it is “based on connective action, i.e. based on personalized content sharing across media networks; dependent on it; introducing digital media changes thus the core dynamics of the action.”<sup>38</sup>

The academic debate triggered by the ‘indignados’-style protests across Europe, as well as by the ‘Occupy’ demonstrations in the US, is very

26 Kaldor, Selchow 2012: 5.

27 Kaldor, Selchow 2012: 8.

28 Kaldor, Selchow 2012: 1-16.

29 Kaldor, Selchow 2012.

30 Graeber 2013; Lasn 2012; Mitchell 2013.

31 Sandbu 2013.

32 Harcourt 2013.

33 Harcourt 2013.

34 Wolf 2012.

35 Lasn 2013.

36 Sandbu 2013.

37 Bennett, Segelberg 2012.

38 Bennett, Segelberg 2012.

consistent in its depiction of the basic characteristics of these mobilizations. A coherent picture of ‘indignados’ emerges where diversity, vaguely defined interests and a plethora of incoherent complaints, lack of concrete political postulates, are expressed in a festive and artful manner. Rather than on politics, their focus is directed on the process of debating and re-inventing democracy. Europe and its policies remain nevertheless largely absent from the “interminable debates on procedure that run into the early morning.”<sup>39</sup> In some respects, the academic debate endows ‘indignados’ with unfounded gravity and validates claims of their alleged transformative role in modern society. As a result, a one-off event (even if spread across the continent) is cast into a social phenomenon, a new form of social mobilization; prematurely so. The following section, by reference to the case of Greece, adds empirical focus to this discussion.

### 3. AGANAKTISMENI, I.E. GREEK ‘INDIGNADOS’

The crisis in Greece attracted considerable attention worldwide and over time acquired the status of an icon in the discourse on the crisis. It represented many (social, political, economic) problems and challenges that other countries tried by recession are facing today, Greece represents a laboratory of the crisis. As the sovereign-debt crisis and the ensuing recession worked as catalysts for the Spring 2011 protests, a glimpse at the Greek *aganaktismeni* should be informative of certain features/tendencies inherent in the ‘indignados’-style happenings elsewhere in Europe.

Accounts on the sources of the sovereign-debt crisis in the Greece and the ensuing recession are numerous in the literature. Essentially, a set of endogenous (including delayed structural reforms, overregulation, an abusive role of the state in the economy) and exogenous (including the secondary consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis) variables led Greece to the brink of losing access to financial markets in early 2010 and contributed to the escalation of the crisis onwards.<sup>40</sup> As a means of avoiding default, the Greek government requested financial assistance from the EU and the International Monetary Fund. Since May 2010 three financial assistance and reform programmes for Greece were launched. Two generous debt restructuring schemes followed. The major objective of the two Economic Adjustment Programmes was to restore Greece’s fiscal balance, ensure its solvency, modernize its economy and revive growth. However, since the official level

of unemployment in Greece reached the dramatic level of at least 27% at the end of 2012 and macroeconomic indicators displayed a fifth successive year of economic recession (-7.1% GDP in 2011 and ca. -6.4% GDP in 2012), the appropriateness and efficiency of the assistance and reform programmes for Greece remains an open question. In this context of enduring recession, rising unemployment and poverty, faced with parliamentary debate on additional fiscal austerity measures, a peaceful 40-days gathering took place on the Constitution Square in front of the Greek Parliament in Athens in May-June 2011.

The media eagerly drew comparisons between the events in Madrid and those in Athens, hailing the return to democracy.<sup>41</sup> “The public debates of the outraged in Athens are the closest we have come to democratic practice in recent European history.”<sup>42</sup> The 40-days gathering represented a spontaneous grassroots mobilization that involved individuals of different interests, such as unemployed, students, public employees, pensioners etc. that shared the same vague and general resentment toward the government and the parliamentarians. This peaceful street demonstration sought to reproduce the methods of protest employed in Madrid, with one or two tents set to “occupy” the square and with some groups of demonstrators engaging with activities like dancing, chanting and performing etc. The attendance would decrease day by day, however, and eventually the Constitution Square emptied. No similar event has taken place in Athens since.

Of course, some argue that the Greek *aganaktismeni* did not disappear; that they returned to their neighbourhoods to engage with other forms of activism. In this line of argumentation, the June 2011 gathering served as a catalyst and a social setting necessary for the surge of localised, grassroots activism.

“...two years on, local people are attempting to help those worst affected by the crisis, those who’ve slipped off the bottom rung. ... [Constitution] Square’s occupiers forged strong networks of thriving – if underfunded and under-equipped – neighbourhood assemblies that provide the services the state has cut.”<sup>43</sup>

By means of clarification, assistance to people in hardship is not necessarily a form of activism, particularly – as it is the case in Greece – where help and support networks are organized first and foremost by the

39 Robinson 2011: 8.

40 Visvizi 2012a.

41 See also: Visvizi 2012b.

42 Douzinas 2011.

43 Wilshire 2013.

Church, by the municipalities, by private TV stations and by some political movements/parties. From a different angle, although *aganaktismeni* disappeared from the Constitution Square, attempts at keeping the concept alive can be identified. Though not very successful, these attempts have a lesson to offer in that their genuine character needs to be questioned. For instance, a website *aganaktismeni*<sup>44</sup> has been launched as a platform of mobilization. The website's logo displays a slogan typical to the left-wing organizations, i.e. "United for the world change." The same website features a link to an amateur film<sup>45</sup> that seeks to re-create 'Greek indignados' as a valid and functioning form of social mobilization. In this production, Athens' meat market is employed as a metaphor of social butchery being the outcome of austerity measures implemented by the government. – Even if, under certain circumstances, the artistic value of the production could be derived from its references to naturalism, the value of the arguments (displaying ignorance, lack of knowledge, and bias) presented therein cannot be defended. The point is that the website – and for that matter other sites<sup>46</sup> of similar content – and the film, as well as networking that frames these sorts of activities, are not representative of the spontaneous grassroots mobilization of May-June 2011. On the contrary, the idea that spurred the mobilizations of 2011– as well as the 'brand' that they acquired – is abused for political purposes.

Clearly, media coverage on Greece gives reasons to believe that protest is inherent in the Greek crisis. On the one hand, the media may have accustomed foreign viewers to images of demonstrations, protests, and riots as being the day-to-day reality of Greece. On the other hand, the demonstrations and riots – usually accompanied by pictures of violence – used to be interpreted by Western media as voices of social discontent and resistance to austerity measures introduced by the government since 2010. The point is that the specific to the media 'selective reporting' on developments in a country, reporting driven by 'highlights' and 'breaking news,' like a false mirror produces dysmorphic images of reality. The Greek reality is more complex than that. That is, apart from the 40-day *aganaktismeni* demonstration of Spring 2011, two more groups of protesters should be distinguished.

First, there are demonstrations and marches recognizable in the media coverage for their frequently provocative eye-catching banners. These demonstrations are organized by trade unions representing, depending on the context, different cohorts of the public sector employees. Owing their

44 <http://www.aganaktismenoi.com>.

45 Menditto, Ricca, 2012.

46 <http://www.crisis-scape.net/about>

privileges, power, fixed assets, and frequently political careers to the socialist PASOK, the unionists remain unwilling to give up any of their privileges for the sake of restoring fiscal balance and possibly implementing some structural reforms. As ever, the degree of politicization of these mobilizations is very high. Today, in contrast to protests of the last 10 years or so, their major political affiliation is that of SYRIZA rather than of PASOK. Second, the broader international audience may be familiar with images of bursting Molotov cocktails, fire, and devastation of the city. Riots in Athens are not anything new. For the last 15 years or so, anarchists have been organizing violent disturbances in the centre of Athens once or twice per year with or without any specific justification. The scale and the magnitude of these kinds of violent riots fluctuate over time. For instance, the scale of the riots of May 2011 – misinterpreted as something exceptional and directly related to the EU/IMF rescue package – was of an average intensity.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, Greek 'indignados,' albeit inspired by developments in Madrid the same year, substantiate an argument of failed mobilisation. The Spring 2011 gathering in Athens was not matched by similar street happenings afterwards; *aganaktismeni* prove to have been a short-lived phenomenon. Interestingly though, the powerful 'brand' that this mobilization acquired thanks to media interest, has outlived the idea itself. Today, it is being misused as a means of attracting interests, support and participation in mobilizations serving very specific political interests. The following section will dwell on the question of why the protests proved short-lived, but also offers an insight into this issue.

#### 4. A FASHION PASSÉ, I.E. REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF 'INDIGNADOS'

'Indignados' brought a wave of fresh air into the overly technical debate on the crisis largely incomprehensible for a layman. Spontaneity, enthusiasm and diversity served as the engines behind the gatherings and the source of their popularity. Although the media, and to a large extent the academia, embarked on a project of validating the relevance of 'indignados' casting them as a novel form of social mobilization, the mass street protests that peaked in Spring 2011 proved a short-lived phenomenon. A nexus was established by the media between the protests and the way of managing the eurozone crisis. Research suggests nevertheless that the protests served as an expression of overall frustration of the society with the political elite, not so much with the crisis. The debates on austerity and democracy in times of crisis offered arguments to legitimize the displays of popular dissent,

47 Visvizi 2012a: 26.

which then were cast by the media and some academics as a new form of social mobilization. As the case of Greece suggests, after initial outbursts of enthusiasm the protestors returned homes. Similarly, the protests in Italy serve as a case of failed mobilization.<sup>48</sup> Even in Spain, La Puerta del Sol, “is a relic of the past.”<sup>49</sup> In this view, ‘indignados’ was a one-off event and people’s participation in demonstrations of this kind was a matter of a fashion.

Against this backdrop, to address the question of why ‘indignados’ proved short-lived it is useful to consider the following hypotheses: Were ‘indignados’ unified by dissent or rather were they carried away by naïve enthusiasm and delusion? How should one interpret diversity, ‘leaderlessness’ and horizontality identified as their defining characteristics? How novel are the forms of participation that ‘indignados’ embarked on? How democratic is their attempt at re-creating democracy out of their own action?

In the media narrative on the protests, ‘indignados’ were cast as a uniform movement, i.e. unified by discontent with the policies of austerity and their alleged negative impact on the state of democracy in the EU. Berseman<sup>50</sup> suggests that diversity inherent in ‘Occupy’ served as a source of their power. In this view, diversity was linked with an open character of the mobilization, which in this way was particularly attractive to a variety of supporters. As the critical mass of protestors gathered, their bargaining power increased. However, evidence presented in the literature suggests that since diversity requires complex interaction, rather than constituting a source of power it served as an obstacle to mobilization and its efficacy.<sup>51</sup> As diversity led to internal breaks, the inability to bypass differences and political divides, had undermined the protestors’ ability to employ their potential efficiently. The study of the Spanish case confirms this: That is, the Spanish ‘indignados’ split into “activists from alternative social movements and the other emerging around the ‘young indignados.’”<sup>52</sup> As a result, “a drift [emerged] ... within the movement from merely citizenist positions towards others which [were] more clearly anticapitalist.”<sup>53</sup>

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HOW DEMOCRATIC IS THEIR ATTEMPT AT  
RE-CREATING DEMOCRACY OUT OF THEIR OWN  
ACTION?

48 Zamponi 2012.

49 Robinson, 2011: 8.

50 Wolff 2012.

51 Zamponi 2012.

52 Taibo 2013.

53 Taibo 2013.

Diversity and mass require discipline and organization. These two are, however, incompatible with ‘indignados’ claims about ‘leaderlessness’ and horizontality. On the one hand, attracting considerable numbers of participants required a form of coordination, be it via social media. On the other hand, making the masses of protestors occupy the squares demanded at least a minimum form of organization. In this view, ‘leaderlessness’ was a delusion. In a similar manner, the existence of internal breaks in mobilizations<sup>54</sup> suggests that claims to leadership were not alien to protestors. Thus, the argument of ‘leaderlessness’ may suggest that people who steered the mobilizations remained unknown. In this way, however, a shadow is cast on the alleged spontaneity of the protests.

Reflecting on the forms of participation implemented during the occupations and on ‘indignados’ urge to re-create democracy triggers the following thoughts. On the one hand, the forms of participation such as popular assemblies and consensus-voting are not new to history. Let alone that abuses of the free and democratic character of these methods of participation were reported in ‘Occupy.’<sup>55</sup> However, the fundamental problem with ‘indignados’ claims about democracy is that by seeking to re-construct it out of their own subjective experience, in essence they are undemocratic. In other words, by voicing the argument ‘real democracy now,’ they express a belief in the superiority of their take on democracy as compared to the existing democratic system. By occupying public space, thus making it inaccessible to others, they ignore the principles of the democratic process to induce change. This is not democratic.

At the discursive level, ‘indignados’ (or maybe we should say their certain politicized factions) talk about the establishment of a new form of decision-making that prospectively would replace the existing one. In this view, ‘indignados’ are quite authoritarian in their claims, whereby the legitimacy of these claims, so it seems, is derived from the mass of protestors. The point here is that the sheer mass of those who demonstrated neither makes their arguments valid nor gives them the right to impose them on the rest of the society. Let alone that the June 2011 protestors raised a plethora of claims. The virtues of democracy should not be derived solely from majority rule. That the majority of voters may be right about a given issue does not derive from the fact that they outnumber their counterparts. Likewise, the counterparts are not wrong because there are less of them.<sup>56</sup>

54 Zamponi 2012; Taibo 2013.

55 Sandbu 2013.

56 Visvizi 2012b.

Protests and demonstrations may serve as a way of expressing dissatisfaction but in order for it to be valid eventually protestors need to succumb to the democratic process. Since the ‘indignados’ did not, their impact on politics was doomed to be very limited. Overall, it seems that ultimately, diversity – so crucial to their popularity – proved the biggest weakness of ‘indignados.’ In this context, attempts to portray the ‘Occupy’ or ‘indignados’ failure as their deliberate withdrawal to political disobedience<sup>57</sup> or to other forms of activism<sup>58</sup> are not convincing enough for one to overlook the fact that they vanished into thin air. That the discussion on ‘indignados’ continues in some circles indicates either that some refuse to acknowledge the fact that ‘indignados’ are a fashion passé or that the idea and the brand are abused for very specific political purposes.

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