

SPANISH DREAM

AMIRA BOCHEŃSKA

essay

BARCELONA ATTRACTS PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD; I'M ALSO ONE OF THOSE WHO FELL IN LOVE WITH THIS CITY. I'D ALWAYS DREAMT OF LIVING CLOSE TO THE BEACH, EATING SEAFOOD, DRINKING GOOD SPANISH WINE AND LIVING THAT MAÑANA-KIND-OF-LIFESTYLE.

FOR THAT REASON I DECIDED TO MOVE TO SPAIN, DESPITE NOT SPEAKING A HINT OF SPANISH, KNOWING ONLY A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE THERE AND NOT HAVING ANY WORK LINED UP.

It turned out that I moved there just before the social movement known as “15M” (the protest was launched with a gathering on the 15 of May, one week before local elections) or “Spanish Revolution” had begun. Plaza Cataluña, once filled up with tourist and pigeons, was suddenly occupied by thousands of people gathering in open debates, banging on pots, raising tents, drawing slogans, sitting in and around the square, talking and talking – what were they talking about? I didn’t have a clue, but it was evident that something very important was taking place.

I kept returning to Plaza Cataluña with my friend Alberto, who was trying to explain me - in Spanglish - what was going on. I kept listening and watching. People of all ages, from all social backgrounds were uniting together working towards a common goal. They were angry at the current political, economical and even social crisis, they wanted change, believing that none of the current governmental representatives were necessary, as we – together – could all work as one, think and discuss issues in a truly democratic way, and would be able to make real change.

That was so exiting! Could we really change this system that had failed to serve those it was created for? And if we could - which way would



photo by A. Bocheńska

People gathering for open debate, Barcelona, May 2011

it all go? Well, most of those questions today remain unanswered, but in order to facilitate any change, it's important to participate.

Returning to the square every day, watching those people acting in solidarity; helping each other and distributing as much guidance and information as possible inspired me. I could not stay passive. The only thing I could do - given my language limitations - was to document the events by making videos and taking pictures.

I started taking pictures and sending them to Poland. I tried to explain what was happening, to get people interested and spread information that could not be found in mass media. However, my terrible Internet connection combined with the lack of fully comprehending the situation I was capturing meant I was forced to seek assistance. The day I was at that point, I decided to visit one of the tents that had a hand written note on the front that read: 'Media International Commission.'

15M INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Inside that tent, which by the time of my visit was barely standing and vulnerable to wind and rain, there were people working, eating and sleeping in central Barcelona just as there were in other cities where squares were occupied. This is where the new Independent Media were created.

People in the "International Media Commission" tent were friendly, I was a stranger but at that moment it didn't matter who you were, where you were from and what you had been doing before. As long as you could help with disseminating information you were welcome. My contribution was limited, as I didn't understand Spanish and therefore could not translate debates, manifestos or proposals, but the fact that I wanted to help and that there was another laptop 'on board' was good enough.

I've always heard that Spanish people are disorganized, lazy and clash with others, depending from which part of Spain you are coming; but my experience of working with many of them could not have been any different. In the *Pl. Catalunya* tent city, organization was treated with the upmost importance: maps, work schedules, debate progresses - were

“

I'VE ALWAYS HEARD THAT SPANISH PEOPLE ARE DISORGANIZED, LAZY AND CLASH WITH OTHERS, DEPENDING FROM WHICH PART OF SPAIN YOU ARE COMING; BUT MY EXPERIENCE OF WORKING WITH MANY OF THEM COULD NOT HAVE BEEN ANY DIFFERENT

all documented and explained in detail. In the media commissioning tent the main issue was to organize the wave of information for specific websites and social networks, to make it easy for everyone to access wealth of information. It was under the roof of this wobbly tent I met Hector who used to write novels describing his vision of a better world. And then all of the sudden found himself applying his vision to everyday life. From that moment on, Hector was structuring and spreading the knowledge acquired and information being produced. I asked him how he envisioned the progress of such independent media.

Hector - The use of the media in the 15M Movement is widely understood because the majority of its content is composed by qualified but unemployed youth. From the moment on that Indignados showed up on the streets, the most common tool used was technology. And this, coupled with the need to maintain constant communication has created a powerful alternative system. Various collectives have been researching and using alternative technologies to create their own media and form of democracy. In other cases they have dealt with existing platforms such as blogs, Twitter or Facebook for organizing themselves itself and informing others about what was happening.

It is not uncommon nowadays to find virtual meetings rendered dynamically with surgical precision usually to identify the group experience that had been assembled in the streets. Indeed the interaction between the virtual world and the street is one of the great achievements of the movement, such as the great post-15M (15th May) mobilizations like 25S (25th September) or 23F (23rd February) convened by the network through online meetings and networking. In the field of communication there exist mixed projects combining technology, communication and the street. For example "Peoplewitness" is a network of live streamers that begun organized work since November 2011. They help to spread the voice of communities strongly hit by austerity measures, while

traditional media only offer an official version of Europe's recession and blame the most disadvantaged collectives while protecting banks and politicians. Members of "Peoplewitness" have recently toured in countries like Algeria, Poland and Portugal with a series of workshops on media activism.¹ The movement is also building its own archive, its own Wiki. 15Mpedia is a collaborative Wiki where the young history of the movement is written and additional actions are updated with an amazing speed.²

Democracy 4.0 includes blogs for citizen participation like "Propongo"³ where collectives or individuals may add topics up for discussion and voting. There also exists a site for participatory democracy that includes meeting rooms and a custom detection system to prevent fraud.⁴ In the meantime the organization Web 4.0 democracy explains why we should use these new democratic practices.⁵

VIRTUAL AND OTHER WAYS OF COMMUNICATION

An important element of the communication in the 15M movement is that it's very 'horizontal' as it does not have any leader. During assemblies every participant has the opportunity to submit a proposal that later is agreed or disagreed upon with the people gathered at that time. During those meetings all sort of subjects are discussed, both prepared speeches and spontaneous ideas.

It was during one of those assemblies that someone proposed the idea of organizing marches from various cities

1 More info can be found on: <http://rising.globalvoicesonline.org/microgrants2013/spain-peoplewitness/>

2 For those interested see: <http://wiki.15m.cc/wiki/Portada> (The site is available in multiple languages.)

3 Source: Propongo 15M_

4 Source: Virtual Pol_

5 Source: Demokracia 4.0.

towards Madrid. The concept was to walk on foot across the land and meet with people along the way to bring them information and ideas that being were discussed in cities and to hear other opinions and contributions to movement. It was a beautiful idea that reminded me of folktales of people crossing the land to discuss philosophy, politics or new innovations. But in the current context of the Internet era, this seemed an even more exciting concept. In this way no one would be excluded and one does not need to live in the big city, or be a member of social networks to take part of the "Spanish Revolution."



Cold morning during marching towards Brussels, October 2011

“ BOTH OLD AND YOUNG, INDIVIDUALS AND WHOLE FAMILIES WALKED AND ORGANIZED OPEN DEBATES IN THE TOWNS ALONG THE WAY TO MADRID

of the People”⁶ as a gift to the Parliament. The aim was not only that the Parliament should consider those postulates as it was conceived for people themselves. What mattered more was to activate people and help them to communicate verbally and virtually in a bid to make changes at a local scale that sooner or later would become global.

The weeks on the road that followed were challenging. With little access to internet, no mobile phones or any other devices to obtain information it was hard to tell if anyone apart from us – the walkers and the people we met along the way would actually know about this march. But when we arrived in Paris we discovered the government had been following us. Peacefully protesting, walking and talking, was somehow deemed a potential threat. Could modern day *Don Quixotes* be seen to be terrorists? Warily entering Paris with backpacks and heads full of ideas, we were treated as criminals, immediately surrounded by the police. With our long days and short nights we were too busy getting from town to town and organizing assemblies, we hadn't factored in enough time to find out how the organization of the independent media had been functioning. I spoke to Oli, who participated in the 'media international commission' tent in Barcelona as well as in all events related to the marches. He explained how the organization of the independent media looked like at the time.

Oli Bourgeois Garcia & Ben Karl Tanswell – When the marches left Spain in early August, a new window opened on the *indignados* planet. The first New-Yorker Indignados that had spent weeks camping in Zucotti Square, proposed a Global date, on the 17th of September 2011 (known as 17S), against international financing, banking and the Stock Market.

This new frame of international dialogue encouraged us to find reliable channels to consolidate and develop open ways to internationalize the movement. From e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, Bambuser through smart phones, our own local networks, public networks, and hacking signals... we jumped to exploiting Skype, swiftly stopping the use of webcams and limiting ourselves to chat, with a moderating system and possibility for

⁶ Source: *Marches indignees a Bruxelles*.

each person to use its turn to speak, recalculated to our own assembly methodology.

The marchers had been walking for more than a month, and they were already toppling the technical limitations of these channels especially with the added difficulties of connections and equipment available to the walkers. In extreme cases they ended up going to the few using mobile phones or far away cybercafés. The coordination with Spain to the other international platforms for the marchers was vital – sending articles, pictures, audiovisual messages, giving voice to their actions and their route.

The preparation of the 17S, synchronized with the arrival of the marches and the planned big demonstration (*indignados* style) in celebration of the opening of the public assembly known as **Agora Paris**. We were totally co-ordinated with the communication and international platforms of Paris, and Brussels. The relationship Occupy Wall Street (OWS) skyrocketed with the global success of its international calling and the foundation of the new powerful American movement.

The first technical problems with the online assemblies were resolved when we discovered and optimized Mumble and pads (titan pad), creating the dynamic international relationships of the movement. The organization of big events like 17S and Agora Paris, and afterwards 15O (manifestation of 15th October) and Agora Brussels (international open debates that took place in Brussels)⁷ irremediably drove us to develop a team of international legal advisers and lawyers, which was built up by autodidacts. Since more than 300 arrests and a few wounded during the *Events of Paris* from 17th to 23rd September 2011, ended up being badly defended by a reduced and improvised legal team, more support was needed as this team was immediately submerged in an avalanche of work regarding press relations and legal advice.

The international platforms soon equipped the press and coordination department with assistance of the legal team. The input of writers, legal advisors, video editors, photographers, translators, etc. was reflected in the excellent coordination and preparation of 15O and Agora Brussels. Organization was built up partly from improvisation and also experience from the squares. Computers were found, volunteers appeared, the media centres gathered information to make more decentralization possible and promote overall internationalization, and people came

⁷ Source: *The Marches to Brussels*.

to charge batteries and download/upload material. Connectivity was vital from here on. In Brussels we came to develop two media centres: one technical, hidden and fully equipped, another in situ, improvised with connection problems. During the Agora Rome connection problems and infrastructure reached their limits, which resulted in a gap in international communication.

The outcomes of the events in Paris and Brussels were positive: marching had been monitored and people were interested and provided the opportunity to discover more information and ways to get involved. We walked on the streets and information flowed above us in the airwaves. When we eventually reached Brussels and connected with people from other marches, we were very happy but also exhausted. The fact that police welcomed us with notifications that we could not camp in the park further complicated our situation. Instead, City Hall allowed us to stay in abandoned building that used to belong to a University. Some people insisted on their right to stay in the park, but I didn't, the prospect of staying inside the building, with a roof above us didn't sound like such a bad idea to me at all. The reality of human nature quickly hit home though, having a bit comfort made some of us lazy, long and tiring weeks of marching caught up with us when all of the sudden we could rest.

But other people that come over to Brussels, from all parts of Europe, to help out with the organization of 15O (manifestation for the 15th of October) did not rest. From morning till evening they held meetings and assemblies in different rooms. It was difficult to reach common decisions as there were so many people and we all communicated in three languages – English, Spanish and French.

At the time, with the action going on in the USA there was plenty of new motivation. That was probably the biggest mobilization organized through Internet and verbal communication, which did not get mass media



photo by A. Bocheńska

In one of the rooms in the University where we stayed, *Brussels*, October 2011

coverage in my experience. Something changed after October the 15th, it wasn't just the Spanish Indignados or people in OWS anymore, but people were questioning democracy and our future across hundreds of countries now. Mass media could no longer stay silent about this global movement.

Many people that took part in the marches moved to the countryside and tried to stay away from the struggles that they could face in cities. Others decided to keep marching, this time towards the mother of democracy –



photo by A. Bochenńska

Athens – to organize an agora in Acropolis. My friend Alberto and I decided to go back to Spain and edit all the recorded material. My Spanish dream appeared to be much more interesting than I could ever have dreamt.

Since then I also moved away from the city, to islands, first Tenerife and now Malta. Life is simple, without many expectations, no intrusive advertising in my face, no vast supermarkets but also far away from witnessing how creatively people are working in order to make some changes. Over the past year I visited various cities a few times to record bigger protests and I was amazed at how independent media networking has developed.

Internet TV, radio and plenty of websites are giving constantly updated information. Newspapers, blogs, films and reportage can easily be found for anyone looking for them. Informative websites that I often visit are “Toma la Tele”⁸ where I search for visual and written sources, and for more general web I recommend ROAR (Reflections on a Revolution).⁹ This website provides a great source of information for everyone that wants to read about the struggles of societies in crisis and for those who agree with the outraged people on the streets. I would say, don’t just read about it, get involved – anyhow – anyway, as together we can make change happen.



photo by A. Bochenńska

⁸ Source: *Toma le tele.*

⁹ Source: *Roar Magazine.*

— **Amira Bocheńska** is a photographer, documentary filmmaker and author of a feature documentary “La Marcha Indignada” (2012). She lives in Malta. Her photographic works have been shown in Poland and abroad, including exhibitions in places like: La Viande, Hoxton Square (London, 2006), Bar Vinyl, Camden (London, 2007), the London College of Communication (London 2009) and Nizio Gallery (Warsaw 2011). She published her photographs in “Magazine of Art,” “Krytyka polityczna” and “EleWator.” Her articles appeared in the largest Polish newspapers like “Rzeczpospolita,” “Gazeta Wyborcza” (“Wysokie Obcasy”) or periodicals like “Krytyka Polityczna.”

WEB REFERENCES USED IN THE ARTICLE

Demokracja 4.0	http://demo4punto0.net/en/node/16
Propongo 15M	http://propongo.tomalaplaza.net/
Roar Magazine	http://roarmag.org/
Marches indignees a Bruxelles	http://issuu.com/agorabrussels/docs/libro_de_pueblos_final
The Marches to Brussels	http://webarchives.cdlib.org/wayback.public/NYULTLL_ag_1/20111007011328/http://www.walktobrussels.eu/
Toma le tele	http://www.tomalatele.tv/web/
Virtual Pol	http://www.virtualpol.com/

find out
where are we from

**R/evolutions: Global Trends &
Regional Issues,**
Volume 1, Issue 1, June 2013.
Copyright by R/evolutions Research
Center, Poznan, 2013
r-evolutions.amu.edu.pl