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“The 15-M movement: Formed by and Formative
of Counter-mapping and Spatial Activism” by
Stephen Luis Vilaseca

Eugenia Afinoguénova

Marquette University, eugenia.afinoguenova@marquette.edu

The 15-M Movement: Formed by and Formative of Counter-Mapping and Spatial Activism

Eugenia Afinoguénova

*Foreign Languages and Literatures, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

While it may be too early to recast 15M as heritage, the 2011 wave of the *indignados* movements in Spain has undoubtedly set a trend: a methodic mass action in, and on, “lived space” (Henry Lefebvre’s term) that the author of this article relevantly calls “spatial activism.” Recent actions by the Gamonal Neighborhood Association in Burgos, which has succeeded in paralyzing the costly construction of an underground parking lot, and the wave of solidarity protests that the inhabitants’ fight spurred all around Spain, suggest that “spatial activism” is becoming an important form of political struggle. The tactics range from violent clashes with police (as in Gamonal) to peaceful anti-eviction manifestations and “occupations” of the entrances to apartment buildings, carried out by the members of “Afectados por la hipoteca/Stop desahucios.”

Uncovering a common thread that connects these multicolored actions and agendas to other ways to question capitalist space, the author of this article engages with the genealogy that the ideologues of 15M have established for their own movement, which they present

as a descendant of the late-Francoist experiments in space-based democracy carried out by neighborhood associations. The author, however, goes beyond a straightforward quest for sources, focusing on the ideas that unite 15M to two creative practices of questioning space through art: counter-mapping and memory-writing. By doing so, this article opens a possibility for writing a biography of 15M as a thread of thought engaging with the most fundamental dilemmas of capitalist space and time and their contradictory solutions in Western democracies. The author's reading thus reveals the relevance of 15M as a phenomenon whose cultural and intellectual importance far surpasses its immediate political outcomes.

The author's is a bold proposal: reconsider the questioning of neo-liberal space by the participants and followers of 15M alongside two artistic projects—a counter-mapping project in La Barceloneta and live-size folded prints of spaces marked for destruction by the artistic team known as Gómez+González. The parallels with 15 M are telling. Beyond questioning space and memory, the participants in the artistic projects that this article examines voice important demands for a “renewal of radical democracy.” If we now remember that the very notion of radical democracy originated from the European neo-Marxist quest for new ways of doing politics in neoliberal states (as exemplified in Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Social Strategy*), new approach to 15M may result from this article.

The author's recasting of artistic practices as a creative quest for democratic participation (or at least a creative exploration of the present limits to it) reveals what exactly the political philosophy of the 15M explosion has taken from the neighborhood mini-democracies of the 1970s. In the political climate of the 1970s, “democracy” tended to mean “participatory democracy” only. Outside of Spain, participation has long lost its cache and has been integrated into a farther-reaching packet of the “radical democracy” claims. Recovering from their own participation dream, Spaniards are now also coming to terms with the insufficiencies (or the illusionary nature) of a democracy so narrowly defined that had fueled their struggles for so long. Pepa Picas, one of the author's interviewees, merely criticizes the show of “participation” into which the authorities lured the inhabitants of La Barceloneta; yet she does not seem to be aware of any other, less alienating, type of “democracy”.

If creative space-based activism that the author describes indeed questions the limits of democratic participation, could one also consider 15M as a wake-up call aimed at leaving behind the illusion of democracy, as Spaniards have known it after Franco? The practices and products that the author of this article examines and the movements mentioned above are equally concerned with the effects of capitalism on space and politics; they demand more agency for (and attention to) individuals against the monetary and market concerns, as exemplified in the manifesto of "Democracia real ya." The importance that the feeling of exclusion from the market-dominated space has had for the participants of 15 M is, perhaps, best expressed in the famous slogan "Sin trabajo, sin casa, sin miedo."

While the parallels between the questions raised by the 15M movement and the answers that the artists offer are thus telling and relevant, the position of the "creative class" in the political economy suggested by the 15M is not clear. The author does not hide the contradictions in Gómez+González work, whose contestation is paid by Caja Madrid, yet ultimately redeems them, stating that "change cannot potentially take hold of a wealthy, conservative museum-goer if González+Gómez's (sic) art is not placed in front of them." This is an honest claim, yet one with which the supporters of 15M, who persist in identifying alternatives to both the banks and the exhibiting spaces that they provide, would disagree. At the end of the day, the more successful a following 15M generates, the less likely exhibitions such as Gómez+González's are to take place.