

Spain's 'Indignados' at the Vanguard of a Global Nonviolent Revolt

By Pablo Ouziel

Last night Madrid's city centre offered a glimpse of what Western democracies have become, as thousands of unarmed nonviolent civilians with their hands up in the air shouting "these are our weapons" and "this is a dictatorship" were beaten by police commandos in full riot gear. This event was the culmination of a month of intense mobilizations across the country by the popular movement known as the 'Indignados'. People, whom despite being ignored by the government have made their voices heard, as banking cartels, European bureaucrats, rating agencies and the country's elites continue in their frantic push to sell-off Spain's remaining public wealth, and persist in the implementation of drastic cuts to the welfare state.

The 'Indignados' are fully aware of the fact that their government does not represent them, whenever they congregate they shout that loud and clear. They know that only popular unity will salvage them from the train wreck, which complicit speculators and politicians have created, and as they read the financial news, they know things can only get worse. When the EU announced today that the economic crisis is no longer restricted to the Euro-zone periphery countries, people in the movement understood that this could only mean bad news for them. The same was clear when the New York Times began to speculate about a double-dip recession in the United States after reporting 60,000 job cuts in July. Or when Scott Miner, CIO of Guggenheim Partners, said that Europe was on the brink of a major financial collapse. The 'indignados' understand that in the game of global speculation they are always the losers. So as financial 'experts' in Spain speak of the impossibility of an economic recovery, the media speculates about a possible bailout, the country's borrowing costs surge, and Moody's speaks of Spain as being on the verge of 'shock', the 'indignados' understand that mobilizing is their only defense.

The indignation on Spanish streets has not risen out of ignorance, when newspapers announced last week that the airport of Ciudad Real had joined the growing list of airports in Spain closing because of lack of flights, the 'indignados' understood that it had only been constructed during the building boom so that speculators could receive huge sums of public subsidies which will never be returned to the Spanish people. That is why they were not surprised a few days ago when the IMF recommended that the country cut salaries of public servants and raise VAT, or when Spanish Finance Minister Elena Salgado suggested that the nation might need to endure even deeper spending cuts than those approved by Parliament. Nor was there a sense of surprise when the Catalan Government announced yesterday that it would sell-off 37 of its government buildings at a loss of 42,4 million Euros. Nothing shocks the 'indignados,' they just hope that one day they will have enough critical mass to stop these incessant attacks from the financial and political elite, on the country's citizenry.

A few weeks ago, Norman Birnbaum, Emeritus professor of the Law Faculty at Georgetown University, said that on both shores of the Atlantic the only thing that is clear is that something bad is going to happen; the 'indignados' have been witnessing this for a while. At around the same time, Timothy Garton Ash, professor of European Studies at Oxford University published an article in which he concluded that the United States and Europe are in an all out struggle towards decadence, and that

Western politicians are like drunks dancing on the edge of the abyss of bankruptcy. The 'indignados' understand that politicians will pay for this bankruptcy by mortgaging the people's future; the problem is that through the current political structures they have no hope of avoiding this. The governing socialist party, PSOE, has demonstrated that it responds only to the banking cartel, and although the prime minister has called for early elections in October, if the right-wing Partido Popular comes into office, things can only get worse. This was made clear in a recent Reuters interview in which senior advisers and members of the party acknowledged that presidential candidate Mariano Rajoy, will implement a "shock plan" if he wins the general elections.

Since May 15th, when 'indignados' camped in city squares across the country inspired by the so called 'Arab revolts', they have engaged in a parallel strategy consisting of nonviolent civil disobedience aimed at denouncing the injustice of the political and economic system, together with a constructive program aimed at reaching out, educating and organizing the Spanish public in an attempt to gain critical mass. Throughout this process, the 'indignados' have attempted to present the government with proposals for change, which the government has done everything possible to ignore. Even as recently as July 6th, the then First Deputy Prime Minister, and now socialist candidate Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, refused to receive a document from the 'indignados' highlighting their demands.

These past months, 'indignados' in every major city of Spain have endured police charges, evictions from city squares, beatings and arrests; yet, the movement has remained persistent, creative and engaged. Across the country, 'indignados' have organized and made decisions collectively through popular assemblies organized in city squares, they have stopped families from being evicted from repossessed homes, they have stopped the police from arresting 'illegal' immigrants in poor neighbourhoods, they have attempted to stop the closing of public hospitals following drastic public spending cuts, and they have organized neighborhood committees aimed at rebuilding the social fabric destroyed by the last two decades of rampant neo-liberal economics.

A recent survey conducted by the Instituto de Investigación de Mercados IPSOS, highlighted that between 6 and 8.5 million people have participated in the movement, and that 76% percent of those surveyed think that the demands made by the 'indignados' are reasonable and that they have a legitimate and democratic right to protest. In addition, The Economist magazine has suggested that the 'indignados' with their nonviolent practices are the most serious demonstrators in Europe. Yet, the Spanish government is bent on beating them instead of listening to their legitimate demands for a just economic and political system.

Last night's beatings in Madrid represent a low point in Spain's young representative democracy, the actions of the police are a tragic reminder of how little progress has been made institutionally, since the country's transition from dictatorship to democracy. Yet, the perseverance and commitment apparent in the nonviolent actions of the 'indignados', demonstrates to what extent Spanish social movements have interiorized the true meaning of democracy and are spearheading the West's move from a stage of low-intensity democracy to one of highly intensified democratization.

In a truly Gandhian manner, a group of Spanish ‘indignados’ is currently walking from Madrid to Brussels in order to make their voices heard by the bureaucrats of the European Union. They aim to get there before the global protest they have called for to be staged on October 15th. Perhaps by the time they get to Brussels, their indignation will have rubbed-off on those in other European nations who have understood the farce of our imperialist representative democracies, and the Spanish ‘indignados’ will not find themselves camping alone in front of the buildings of the European Union.

Pablo Ouziel's articles and essays are available at pabloouziel.com