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Spanish state

Indignad@s versus Parliament

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The day of June 15 (15J) was one of those that leave their mark. 24 hours that amounted to much more than that. Time accelerated and condensed. Undoubtedly it marks a turning point, of uncertain outcome, in the history of the movement born on May 15 (15 M).

The mobilization before the Parliament of Catalonia came a month after 15 M, propelled by the success of the camps and occupations of squares, but also after several months of mobilizations against social cutbacks in Catalonia, led by health workers. The objective was clear: to show a firm rejection of anti-social budgets cutting basic public services, which were to be discussed in the first parliamentary session. This 15J was one step more in the attempt to halt destructive budgets faced with a government determined to push forward the cuts at all costs.

On 15J, the movement decided to step on the accelerator. The result was a massive action of civil disobedience, unprecedented in the city of Barcelona. In terms of disruptive ability, of setting the agenda for the day, of being heard, the balance sheet of the mobilization leaves no doubt. The Parc de la Ciutadella, inside of which the Parliament of Catalonia is located, was closed by the government for two days. The parliamentary session of 15J was substantially altered. The President of the Generalitat, after several failed attempts to get there by car, opted to arrive in Parliament by helicopter. As did several councillors and the President of the Chamber. The meeting began late and had to change agenda. A large group of deputies, given the impossibility of access to the site, had to be taken to Parliament in a police van and entered via the zoo located next to the Parliament... quite a metaphor! Definitely 15J was not a day to the liking of the supporters of "law and order".

"Normality" was one of the words fetishized by the opponents of the mobilization. "We must restore democratic normality" screamed the authorities and media in unison. What "normality", one might ask? That of five million unemployed? Of thousands of evictions every month? Of the immunity of corrupt politicians? Of the neoliberal steamroller which uses the crisis as a pretext for relentlessly undermining social rights? It is precisely this false "normality" that the movement of 15M puts in question. "We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers" was the slogan of the demonstration of 15M.

Since the epoch of the rise of the anti-globalization movement, there has not been a mobilization with as much determination and courage in its desire to challenge the established regime as 15J. Images of the delegates to the third ministerial meeting of the WTO at the Seattle Summit, blocked by the demonstrators with tactics of nonviolent direct action, came to mind for many. But the international institutions were barely known to citizens before the movement targeted them, and lacked any legitimacy or democratic symbolism. Given its very nature it difficult for supporters of the current economic model using demagogy on behalf of democracy to defend the World Bank, IMF, WTO or the EU, as has happened now.

Unlike in Greece, the siege of the Parliament did not have a context of popular uprising, but rather that of the rise of a movement which enjoys wide sympathy, but that has not yet been transformed into a militant commitment to struggle, and still with a restricted social base in terms of mobilization. 15J, being of great magnitude in terms of civil disobedience actions involving perhaps about three thousand people, was not a day of mass mobilization. This explains the strength of the attack against the movement by a political regime that desperately fights to prevent the flow of popular sympathy for the camps and occupations of squares becoming a mass movement.

Opponents of the movement, beyond some irreducible voices, had been up to now rather passive, overwhelmed by a movement they did not expect and the sympathy aroused. But the acceleration of 15J, raising the bar on the level of confrontation, has provoked a counterattack of a magnitude not foreseen, perhaps mistakenly, by the movement.

After several weeks of developing in quite a favourable political and media environment, for the first time it faced widespread attack from the government and the media in order to isolate it, weaken it and destroy it.

The attack more or less deliberately mixed two arguments: the alleged illegitimacy of a mobilization presented as undemocratic and its alleged violent character. Both arguments lack strength.

The demagogic argument that the protest was a “kidnapping of the Parliament” and an “attack on democracy” is unacceptable. It is not the demonstrators who have kidnapped the Parliament, but economic and financial power. It is the interests of big business who did so long ago. And, it must be said, without finding much resistance from the “honourable members”, prisoners with a clear Stockholm syndrome in relation to economic power.

Those who intone the mantra that Parliament represents the sovereignty of the Catalan people and that its members are the sole legitimate representatives of the people and that organizing civil disobedience action to symbolically “halt” Parliament is undemocratic, have “forgotten” many things.

First, they forget that a very significant part of the citizens of Catalonia (abstentionists, those who cast blank ballots or supported extra-parliamentary options) have never voted for any of the options present in the Parliament. And there are many more citizens who did not vote for the ruling party, CiU, than those who did.

Second, they do not seem to take into account that many of the voters for some of the parliamentary options do so as a lesser evil despite a growing disaffection and that they fully share the demands of the movement.

Third, they overlook a fundamental “detail”: the cuts, the bank bailouts, and so many other outrages, have never been approved through the ballot box. They were not in the election manifestos of the parties in the government. It is precisely the movement which has formulated proposals for a referendum on the cuts and adjustment measures, as in Greece or Iceland. It is the movement which makes democratic proposals, which asks for a voice for the people of Catalonia. And it is the government and the Parliament which refuses. The same Parliament and government which over and over again approves reductions in rights, gifts for the privileged and attacks on the environment. Few lessons of democracy can be taken from those attacking fundamental civil rights and restricting freedoms.

Finally, to reduce the idea of democracy to “Parliament” and “elected positions” indicates a simplistic and superficial vision of what democracy is. It isn’t just synonymous with “Parliament” and “elections”. Democracy is also participation, self-organization, demonstrations... definitely their idea of democracy is not ours!

There is no doubt: the decision to “stop the Parliament” is perfectly legitimate. Where is the outrage in booing the members? Or trying to hinder the discussion of budgets that pose a serious violation of social rights? After long months of protests in health and education, camps and occupations of squares and a government that moves like a steamroller, mass civil disobedience was one step more in a long struggle. Some claim that the 15J action is illegal. They forget that not all that is legal is right, nor that all that is illegal is illegitimate. History is full of demonstrations and struggles out of which emerge laws, laws that are not neutral but the result of relations of power between classes and social groups.

The argument of the “attack on democracy” is mixed with the criticism of the “violence” of the demonstrators. The media and political campaign against the movement magnifies deliberately isolated incidents on a day of mobilization which, following the criteria of the organizers, was essentially of a non-violent and peaceful character. Talk of “low-intensity kale borroka” [a reference to the street fighting tactics of Basque nationalist youth], “urban guerrilla tactics”, “behaviour of extreme violence” formulated by President Artur Mas and the Interior Minister Felip Puig is absolutely out of place.

Despite the media frenzy, the reality is that the 15J protests were characterized by little violence from the demonstrators, beyond isolated events. The more aggressive violence, as on so many occasions, came from the police action, leaving forty wounded (not to mention the detainees and the threats of further arrests), which is hardly referred to. A police action, by the way, which took place in the framework of a strangely inadequate provisions for handling the mobilization. Incompetence of the police officers? A deliberate attempt to facilitate tensions between protesters and members of Parliament to delegitimize the protest? There will always be doubt, but the second possibility seems rather likely.

The reaction of all parliamentary parties to 15J was monolithic. Frontal opposition to the protest. We saw an appalling example of group solidarity among the political class and the professional politicians, everyone made uncomfortable by this annoying eruption of the movement. There is no doubt that professional politicians work best with a demobilized people glued to the television. But most regrettable of all was the performance of the parties of the "left", despite a formal position against social cuts, who did not hesitate to sign a joint statement by all parliamentary groups condemning the mobilization and stubbornly defending (its) institutional normality. The performance of the coalition of the ICV (an organization affiliated with the European Greens) - EUIA (the coalition controlled by the Party of Communists of Catalonia) was particularly unimpressive.

Seeing the sad role of ICV-EUIA and the left in Parliament in general on 15J, we more than ever miss the lack of an anti-capitalist political reference point that would break the parliamentary consensus: a courageous left that would have announced its refusal to participate in the plenary sessions, to seek its suspension and to demand the reversal of the cuts. That would have helped break the consensus of those who rule in favour of the enterprises and the privileged and bring legitimacy to the movement. This is not, however, the policy of the Catalan parliamentary left whose initial unconditional alignment with the parties of the right, against the movement and with a criminalizing rhetoric has shown once again its fundamental renunciation of any horizon of social transformation.

After 15J we are immersed in a battle for legitimacy. It's now up to the movement to explain what lay behind the mobilization before Parliament and answer the demagoguery. It is time to deploy a smart strategy against criminalization, to avoid isolation and alienation from the movement's natural social base. We must engage in a well argued policy discussion with those social sectors, organizations, journalists, who genuinely have been victims of the anti-movement hysteria and the arguments that this "had gone too far", to make them swing back towards the movement.

The day of demonstrations next Sunday, June 19 will be a crucial test. The demonstrations that will take place in various cities of the Spanish state, and in particular Barcelona, should serve to mobilize the sympathy that the movement has awakened from 15M and now more than ever, show its broad social support. After the acceleration of 15J, what is required is a massive mobilization which can be a bearer of legitimacy. A mass mobilization is now fundamental for the future of a movement that has only just begun.