

Empowerment through Indignation - A Case Study of Spanish Indignados Activists

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates activists of the Indignados movement in Spain. It identifies and explores what empowerment mechanisms said activists use in order to overcome alienation. Alienation is the condition they are in, which is greatly shaped by globalization and the Spanish economic crisis. The name chosen by the movement 'indignados', meaning indignation, is the reason for the present focus on emotions in academic research on social movements. The movement finds itself in an alienated context, a result of globalization and crisis in Spain around 2011 until the present day (2017). The mechanisms identified to tackle these conditions are the following three. Unthinking in order to be able to think, empowerment through collective action, and embodied empowerment. This paper provides a testimony of five activists and their empowerment mechanisms. Empowerment in this context is a form of dignified life, which is not present in the alienated conditions they find themselves in.

Keywords

alienation, empowerment, indignados movement, activism, emotions, social movement

Introduction

The following article provides an introduction to the Indignados movement in Spain, and its forms of empowerment. It examines the question on empowerment mechanisms within the indignados movement, and especially the role of dignity within this framework. The starting point of this research is the assumption, that alienation, as coined by Bauman (1998) and Seeman (1959), is an omnipresent condition in today's post-modern consumer society, especially in the Global North.

"It is this novel and uncomfortable perception of 'things getting out of hand' which has been articulated (with little benefit to intellectual clarity) in the currently fashionable concept of globalization. The deepest meaning conveyed by the idea of globalization is that of the indeterminate, unruly and self-propelled character of world affairs; the absence of a centre, of a controlling desk, of a board of directors, of a managerial office." (Bauman, 1998: 59).

Bauman and Seeman's definition depicts alienation as a general sense of Kafkaesque purposelessness and powerlessness. Although alienation can be divided into various sub-aspects, as described by Seeman, this paper focuses on self-estrangement. It examines different aspects that result in disempowerment. All of the interviews with activists conducted in this research discuss the realization that they will not be able to save the world, which does, however, not limit their activism. Throughout their activist lives they have rather developed a realization to the contrary. This is, they can achieve small scale changes, especially in the preconceptions of individuals, starting by themselves. For instance Juan, one of the interviewees, introduced further

in the Methods section of this paper, says he wants to at least not make the world a worse place. This paper discusses the ways activists achieve and work towards this empowerment.

Using alienation as a context, and here especially its aspect of self-estrangement, the process to feel empowered is a driving motivation for individuals to engage in activism. This paper focuses on three main aspects of these empowerment mechanisms. Firstly, the role of emotionality in academic research, with a special focus on indignation is discussed. Secondly it looks at the positionality of the movement. The conditions that shape alienation are described by Bauman (1998), who mentions the importance of the socio-economic and political situation of Spanish youth in the locality of Spain in the beginning of the 21st century. Alienation has been marked by the crisis happening over the course of the last years, including high unemployment rates (52% by 2012) especially among young people, and the housing crisis (Caselias & Sala, 2017). Those are reasons identified as crucial in the devastating alienation process. Thirdly, the reality of the empowerment mechanisms employed, as analyzed in five case studies, is discussed. By creating alternative socialities, activists counter and often outweigh the self-estrangement experience, resulting in a more dignified life.

Emotions in Social Science Research

Throughout the existence of social sciences emotions have been neglected and devalued as the unimportant, irrational opponent to rationality, the only valid base of argumentation in modernity (Goodwin and Jasper, 2006). There have, however, been recent emancipations in the scholarly realm, which approach 'emotions' rather as rational, expanding the concept of rationality. Especially in research on social movements, emotions (experienced in groups, through collective action, or individually, e.g. during mobilization processes) can not be left out of the picture. Emotions are recognized as rational, as they are experienced, based on culturally and socially learned behavior. Jasper (1998) states, emotions primarily serve for humans as a way to learn and to adapt. They are connected to objects, and they are partly dependent on cognitive understandings and appraisals of those objects. If emotions are tied to beliefs and contexts, they are also partly open to debate as to whether they are appropriate or not at a given time. The evolution has been from the 'brainless mob' to a highly complex organism, with growing recognition of the multi-faceted motivations and experiences of activists.

The Indignados Movement

The Indignados movement in Spain has to be subdivided into the Indignados and 15M, where the first one refers to the Spanish phenomenon of the movement and call of people to become active with an anti-austerity motivation all over the world. They call themselves after a book by Hessel (2011), who coined the term. The second term is solely a Spanish phenomenon, the acknowledged source of the

former. It is based on its inception day, May 15, 2011. The protest movement started in May 2011, when a spontaneous encampment in Puerta de Sol, the most central square (plaza) of Madrid, gathered an increasing amount of people over the course of about one month. About 50 persons in the first hours, to hundred thousands towards the end, the encampment stayed for over one month. It combined for the first time various Spanish struggles. It served as a platform not only for exchange of criticisms, ideas and utopias, but also combined different movements for the first time into one visible and hence even more impactful event. Many squares all over Spain were occupied prior to the elections in 2011 (Errejón Galván, 2014). "With the onset of economic crisis and the edicts of austerity, protesters now engage with the fictionalization, speculative urbanism, and over alliance on the construction and housing industries that made up the 'Spanish model' of capitalism" (Gonick, 2016: 2). 2011 was a year particularly fruitful in a series of so-called 'mobilizations of the indignant'. It sprawled like a raging tide around the world. The condition of crisis and corruption have intensified the conditions to an unbearable degree. Waterman (2001) identifies various shifts in global circumstances as prerequisites for different social movements to emerge in the beginning of the 21st century. The seek for alternative concepts seems possible and necessary at the same time. Amongst them are a shift in relationality, from solely the national to the global space. This results in an increasing multiplicity of global contradictions, subjects and movements, which later adds up to the laying trinity of the values of diversity, peace and ecological care. The movement looked at in this paper takes an emotion, and puts it as their name. Indignation can be defined as a driving force for re-adjusting certain aspects of society, as discussed by the interviewees. Due to the fact that they put the emotion as their name, the movement and its struggles has to be dealt with in a way, that acknowledges their language. Instead of implementing external ideas to the struggle, its own framing is used as a tool to follow the shift in conceptualizations as experienced by members of the movement. I attempt to understand the movement from within, not from the outside, in the effort of decolonization of my academic work.

Methods

The interviews conducted in the course of this research disclose the paths the activists have discovered in order to live a more dignified life through activism. This path towards dignity is what is meant by the word empowerment. Dignity in this context is not to be measured by status or recognition, nor is it the happiness level measured by the Gross domestic product (GDP). It is a certain fulfillment achieved through engagement and re-politicalization in combination with meaningful connections and encounters with other activists.

"It ends with love, exchange, fellowship. It ends as it begins, in motion, in between various modes of being and belonging, and on the way to new economies of giving, taking, being with and for and it ends with a ride in a Buick Skylark on the way to another place altogether. Surprising, perhaps, after we have engaged dispossession, debt, dislocation and violence. But not surprising when you have understood that the projects of "fugitive planning and black study" are mostly about reaching out to find connection; they are about making common cause with the brokenness of being, a brokenness, I would venture to say, that is also blackness, that remains blackness, and will, despite all, remain broken (...)" (Harney & Moten, 2013: 5).

The authors talk about the brokenness specific to black history and black experience. These concepts and ideas, however, can be translated to the Spanish context as well.

This quote from Harney and Moten, their book on the Undercommons in general describes very vividly, what empowerment and dignity can look like.

The Interviews

The in-depth interviews of this research were conducted over the time period of 2 months, December 2016 and January 2017 in Madrid, Spain. The interviewees were five Spanish natives, originating from in and around Madrid. All names chosen are randomly assigned to the interviewees, and out of reasons of anonymity are not related to the real names in any way. All other information are presented in all conscience, collected at the times of the interview. The individuals have been chosen through snowballing.

Ariana is a 32 year old female originating from Madrid. She is a single mother of a 3 year old boy, and has been active in the left scene, since she was about 19 years old, when she entered university. She earns her money by teaching Yoga in different gyms and centros culturales. Her topics are centered around feminism, and here especially power relations between men and women are of interested to her.

Carlos is a 22 year old male, studying international relations in his fourth and last year of his Bachelor's degree in Madrid. He is a native from the Canary Islands and the initiator of the 'eco-aldea' at Universidad Complutense of Madrid, a student initiative drawing attention to climate change and environment related topics. He has been an activist since he was 16 years old. De-growth, eco-aldeas, and topics related to the environment are the core of his activism.

Diego is a 37 year old male from Getafe, a smaller city in the South of Madrid. He is a married father of two small children, and at the point of the interview an unemployed chef. He has been active since the campsite of 15M, and mainly focuses on the community of his neighborhood. He is implicated in struggles for housing and how to create a sense of neighborhood and belonging in the area. They organize parties, which also include activities for children, and other educational programs, which aim at various topics, ranging from feminism, to family topics, and community living.

Juan is a 36 year old male, originating from Getafe. He has been doing short term employments in various fields, but has an education in IT, and is currently working in various retirement homes as an IT administrator. He does the same for some NGO's. In addition, he is the main editor of an online magazine, and publishes articles on freelance base. He is in a relationship with a woman, and has been an activist since 15M. His main point of focus was joining the campsite of 15M in 2011, investigative journalism, joining different Europe wide marches, and occasionally joining activities of different offspring groups of the indignados moment in and around Madrid.

Samuel is a 27 year old male from Getafe, writing his PhD on the occupy movement in the same faculty of political science where Carlos is enrolled in at the moment of the conduction of the interviews. He is single, and has been active since entering university. He mainly focuses on activities related to his life in Getafe. He and Diego are main initiators of housing projects, but are also joining different demonstrations and work in their local community.

The Indignados as a Space of Empowerment

The findings of the analysis of the five in-depth interviews of Indignados activists in Madrid and Getafe in Spain proposes the emotions connected to indignation not only a driving force of mobilization. Activists stay active, even though they might face high costs to their activism for various reasons. The increasing understanding and framing of factors that constitute the

structures and forces oppressing them, results in a sense of empowerment to a degree of no return. This is the reasons why they keep on going in their activism. This does not mean, that the intensity and forms of involvement stay the same. Rather the contrary is the case. The learned provides a base, from which the individual activist can start to move around and experience in different fields of their lives. Some may take their activism from the streets to their homes, they might try to adapt the concepts and frames on a more personal level. Their thoughts are changed and now they try to implement it into their own freeing from suffering of not fitting into the categories provided by a modern society. The three aspects of empowerment identified are: (1), *Un-thinking as Empowerment* (2), *Empowerment through Collective Action*, and (3) *Embodied Empowerment*.

The first empowerment mechanism is the cognitive realization processes happening in every activist. Those go hand in hand with changes and adjustments in ontologies and paradigms. It is a move away from a point of ignorance called colonialism (including, but not limited to the historical happening), to a point of knowing, called solidarity (de Sousa Santos, 2015). Social injustice is based on cognitive injustice. As the first part of the paper established, emotions are rational, hence they are included in the understanding of the cognitive in this context. The activists in this research try to reframe the cognitive analysis of the conditions they find themselves in. Only through this, they recognize, social justice can happen. Hierarchy and patriarchy are frames used by the interviewees. Ariana states: "There was a moment in which you say: lets see, I can not possibly be entirely useless, and I can not be as completely incapable, and that there is a way, there is a society which puts you, which focuses on the capacities, or which is emphasizing male capacities, of men, that they treat them differently." They give an insight into the movements subjects, where the analysis results in a need to learn to re-think.

The second empowerment happens through collectivity. Collective identity, collective action, and community as described throughout the paper are its building blocks. The Indignados movement focuses on re-connecting people. The 15M encampment was by all interviewees who joined experienced as a life changing and community building experience. Juan states in this context: "The 15M, for example, when, before 15M, for some years in which everyone had that feeling that no one can change the things, but in general, because of history, you can not change anything, but I lived that experience, in which we all got together, about 40 persons, in a plaza, alone, without anything, it was ridiculous, it was absurd, it was not for rational thinking that we where there, and how this, the next day, turned into 100 people, and later there where thousands, and later 200.000, and this has changed a lot (in me). For this reason, I can not be entirely pessimistic, because I have experienced something as powerful as this." Next to centros sociales, working circles, and other activities, the 15M has a leading figure in the movements history and identity. To experience collective action as empowering is, however, not only limited to these life changing experiences. They are even more present in the 15M culture, based on assemblies, regular meetings and planning that focuses on the medium- and long run. The planning provides a space of certain trust of coming back and solidarity on the long term.

The last empowerment is the embodied empowerment. It

is the embodied learning long-term activists experience. The activists go through different phases of their activism. They can distinguish between the condition, the analysis of the same, and their own personal experience of and with it. An example of this is one of Carlos statements. "It could be called a contradiction how I feel. On the one side, hm, what outages is the happiness. It is, I feel fulfilled to some extent. (...) And next to that, I guess that is just how I am, what my personality is, I also like to not fit in with what surrounds me, if I see one can do something, and if there is the need to create something, I did something, well I like to propose, and put new things, and to emit a little. Therefore, on the one side, I am super happy to see that the things I come up with in my mind, that I have the determination to carry them out until they are done, and on the other side, lately I have been feeling a little tired. (...) to dedicate myself to something that seriously, that, let's say, in the last years has turned out to be for a big part a theme of organization and administration, more than anything political, in which I did not end up seeing the practical impact it has on the lives of people. Oh well, talking about results, like shit, two years ago there was no collective here, and today there's a collective of thirty people, people in their first year of university, and they are doing a lot of things (...). And on the other hand, exactly that. A little as well tired, because, let's see, you feel like you dedicate a lot of time to it, which is not reimbursed, but in a way also not only economically speaking. The thing is, that they don't pay me. Next to studying, next to living, next to working, because of my principles I do something, let's say, and I also do get some things back. I also would not want them to reimburse me in economical means, only the necessary to survive. I have seen me many times dedicating a lot of hours to activism, that I say: fuck, this is a work which is a lot more useful than a lot of other jobs. Like, let's say a broker of Wall street, or other jobs. (...) I don't know, but on this hand also some frustration at least. And I would also like to have some more time for music, or simply for doing nothing. This is something I like." The genuine understanding helps to overcome the current situation they find themselves in, which might not be solely good, but it is rooted in this embodied empowerment. It is truly implemented in their experiences. It is the learning after unthinking, and the action itself, the un-thinking, becomes rewarding.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the research we have seen four things. (1) Emotions are rational and part of any social movements activists repertoire. (2) The indignados movement has chosen an emotion as their 'label'. As it is not limited to one personal situation, the movement is able to mobilize different struggles under one. (3) The conditions of the movements are shaped by globalization and the Spanish locality, marked by crisis. (4) The three empowerment mechanisms as observed in five Indignados activists are: unthinking in order to be able to think, empowerment through collective action, and embodied empowerment. The first one refers to de Sousa Santos concept that social justice can only be achieved after cognitive justice has been established. The second mechanisms is the empowerment through solidarity. The last mechanism is the ability of the activists to see the action in itself, the cognitive justice and their implementation in life as rewarding and dignifying in themselves. This assertion of activism in Spain is one of countless. It is a struggle against the long-term effects of coloniality and colonialism, and the Western epistemology of binary truths and wrongs. The new colonialism is the

reinforcement of power relations, established years ago. They are strengthened through the capitalist logic. Now, however, there are new ways of empowering. This is a testimony of it.

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ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Hannah Nonnenberg was an undergraduate student under the supervision of Rolando Vazquez when the research was performed. The idea arose during her ERASMUS exchange in fall 2016 in Madrid. The interviews were conducted in that time in Spain, the research was put together after returning to her home university in the Netherlands. The idea arose in conversation to local activists, and previous classes on social movements have helped to formulate the questions.

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