

# **Spanish State: “What has happened since 15 M has favoured the politicization of society and the opening of new spaces for self-organization and participation”**

Wednesday 31 August 2011, by [ANTENTAS Josep Maria](#) (Date first published: 4 August 2011).

**Starting from the demonstrations of 15M [May 15], do you think that there may be a change in the concept of representative democracy as we know it today?**

Josep Maria Antentas – 15 M challenged the current political model. Although vaguely, and not without contradictions and limits, the movement criticizes the professionalization of politics, reduced to simple electoral marketing between similar political options subordinated to economic powers, and the loss of control over political representatives. The movement expresses a firm will to regain control of public affairs, over the decision-making process, and of creating democratic spaces of popular participation, such as neighbourhood assemblies, for example. There exists within it, in any case, different appreciations and views on alternative models of democracy, and what relationship should be maintained with party politics. There will be no substantial changes, however, in the current model of democracy if there is not a sufficient social mobilization to impose them.

**Starting from these mass social demonstrations, is society heading to a new political moment?**

The movement born on 15 M marks a turning point in the social history of the Spanish state. Demonstrations over these two months have been genuine founding struggles that have brought the birth of a new stage. The phase dominated by fear and resignation has ended. In the management of the crisis the ruling classes have finally come up against the eruption of the masses, and in particularly daring, combative and striking forms. They will from now on have to deal with an unanticipated and annoying interlocutor. What has happened since 15 M has led to the politicization of society, the opening of new spaces for self-organization and participation, and has been a reaction against apathy and depoliticization.

**What would a change in politics and democracy consist of today?**

Current politics and democracy have become politics at the service of a privileged minority, under the domination of the financial elite, carried out by a professionalized caste, and with close ties to the business world. Any significant change involves breaking with neoliberalism and the subordination of politics to business interests and promoting the possibility of individuals controlling their own lives and their own destiny, by encouraging popular self-organisation and involvement in collective affairs. It is necessary to advance another logic based on the defence of the common good, solidarity and equality rather than the dominant logic based on privatization, competition and selfishness.

**What is the impact of the global financial crisis in European society?**

The crisis has deepened the social effects of the neo-liberal policies that we have suffered for decades. It increases the polarization of wealth, the deterioration of the labour market and rising unemployment. With the excuse of the crisis and the deficit a genuine “social European war” has begun that seeks to destroy the social regulations that still exist in Europe and restore the mechanisms of class domination.

The submission shown by the political parties to the financial world has been more evident than ever, increasing disaffection with regard to institutional politics and scepticism toward political representatives, whose discredit is growing. The crisis has shown in crude form the ideological fallacies of neo-liberalism and has exposed the true nature of the system, whose alibi has vanished. I think that people have the feeling of living in a democracy kidnapped by financial power, markets, the rating agencies...

### **Is it possible to take a balance sheet of the consequences of the neoliberal system in Europe during the last decade?**

Neoliberalism has caused an increase in social inequalities, the polarization of wealth, the casualization of the labour market, the erosion of labour rights and the mechanisms of social protection, environmental depredation, and the privatization of public space. It has also meant the generalization of an individualist and consumerist culture and the spread of the values of competitiveness, competition and selfishness, and has contributed to social fragmentation, breaking class solidarities, and the privatization of the social life of people.

### **Some sociologists say that Europe has rediscovered its poor. When was the social welfare state damaged? What is the current status of social welfare in Europe?**

The situation is very different depending on each country, since the models or welfare state regimes have been different in Mediterranean Europe, the Anglo-Saxon countries, central Europe or Scandinavia and, of course, Eastern Europe. But the general trend of recent decades has been the erosion of social gains and regulations.

The European ruling classes consider that the social rights existing in the old continent are an obstacle to the international competitiveness of European enterprises in their fight to avoid losing positions in the global economy. So dismantling as much as possible of the so-called “European social model” has been their strategic objective for decades, and this has intensified now even more.

### **What can you expect of the European left parties?**

Social democracy is fully integrated in the logic of the current system, does not have an agenda of its own solution to the crisis different from that of the right and is limited to managing the interests of financial power. Nothing can be expected of it. To its left, the European Greens have for a long time experienced a rapid process of integration into the institutions becoming part of many governments with social democracy, and applying a green cosmetic to social liberal policies. In many countries they have grown electorally from the votes of those disillusioned with social democracy, seeking to vote for something a little better and fresher, but they do not have any alternative project. At the same time, most Communist parties or coalitions dominated by them (with the exception of Portugal and Greece, where there are Communist parties of the Stalinist type) have tended to move towards the right, institutionalizing their political practice and always governing at the side of social democracy and subordinating themselves to it. In some places they have grown electorally at the expense of social democracy, but lack strong links with the social movements and activist generations. There are in some countries relevant anti-capitalist alternatives, like the Bloco in Portugal or NPA in France, which are attempts to articulate new anti-capitalist projects geared to

struggle, although they also experiencing difficulties, and in several European countries the anti-capitalist left, without being relevant in electoral terms, has a significant role in social struggles. The fundamental challenge remains building a political alternative which involves a project of rupture, oriented to the struggles and with a non-institutional conception of politics, and acquires social influence in a fragmented and increasingly destructured society.

### **How have politicians and financial institutions reacted in relation to the 15 M demonstrations?**

First they reacted with disbelief and with the hope that the movement was something temporary. When that proved untrue reactions were divided between apparent hostility, including attempts to criminalize it, and demagogic expressions of false sympathy. The movement raises a number of changes that question at the root current economic policy and the logic of professional politics. Despite the fact that some of the demands of the movement can be met and that some moderate sectors within it could be co-opted or instrumentalized, the political class and financial power find it is very difficult to deactivate a movement like this and they cannot absorb its demands without touching the hard core of their current policies.

### **What has been the impact of the movement in politics and in the Spanish economy? Has 15 M already achieved any concrete action?**

The movement broke out in an unexpected and abrupt way in the political and social life of the Spanish state. After two and a half years where the resistance to the crisis had been limited (but real) the outbreak of 15 M completely changed the political, social and cultural landscape of the country. Challenging the current economic model, policy courses and the political regime born from post-Francoist Spain. It has emerged as a new social and political actor whose existence is extremely annoying for the political powers and all those that have the monopoly of public life and decision-making, who are now sharply addressed by a movement they did not expect and whose vitality has puzzled them.

The biggest victory of the movement is that it has allowed many people to regain confidence in collective action, in the collective capacity to change things. It has been demonstrated that “Yes, we can”, that is possible to overcome after many years of setbacks and defeats. From 15 M to date several victories have been achieved that have generated a feeling of strength and optimism: first, the challenge to the Central Electoral Board and its prohibition of the camp and occupations of the squares on the eve of the elections of March 22; second, the victory over the attempted eviction at Plaza Catalunya on March 27 by the police; third, the victory against the attempt at media criminalization of the movement after the day of blockade of the Catalan Parliament on July 20, during the Catalan Government’s budget debate.

Some concrete, although very defensive victories have also been won. In many districts of cities throughout the Spanish state social mobilization has managed to block evictions of families who could not afford to pay for their homes. In Catalonia, where the Catalan Government has announced big cuts in health care, ambulance occupations have succeeded in some cases in avoiding closures and cuts to emergency and other services. Also in many cities during these two months the implementation of repressive “civility orders” (governing the use of public space) has been de facto impeded, but if the movement falters their implementation will be ruthless.

However, it is necessary to recognize that the movement still has not obtained enough strength to reverse the general sense of anti-social policies underway or the big neo-liberal reforms, or the adoption of the social cuts in the case of Catalonia.

## **What are the social and political effects of the movement of 15 M in Europe?**

The start of the movement in the Spanish state generated many examples of solidarity and sympathy. Under the impetus of students coming from the Spanish state in many European countries there were camps and symbolic occupations of squares in solidarity with the movement of 15 M, and attempts to start a similar movement. In Greece, the European country with the most explosive social situation since the outbreak of the crisis, the popular movement added the “occupation of square + camp” method to their protests, turning the Syntagma square in Athens into the centre of the social mobilization against the new adjustment plans. The emergence of 15 M in the Spanish State, the protests in Greece, are symptoms of a new trend across the European Union which is starting a cycle of mobilisations against the effects of the crisis. The Arab revolt and the protests in the South of Europe have placed the Mediterranean at the epicentre of this new wave of struggles.

## **What are your expectations about 15 M, two months after the emergence of the movement?**

We are at the beginning of a new wave of struggles, of which 15 M and the square occupations have been the first shock. The emergence of district assemblies is the strongest organizational achievement movement and its dynamic for now is positive. The latest demonstrations, like the march in Madrid on July 23 and 24, the demonstration against the budget of the Catalan Government in Barcelona on July 20 and, above all, countless demonstrations in small towns against health cuts and evictions, show the vitality of the movement. In September and October there will be new struggles and the day of demonstrations on October 15 seems strong. One of the challenges and unresolved matters is penetrating workplaces, bringing the indignation to the enterprises and shaking up the trade union scene, questioning the conciliatory policies of the majority unions.

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### **P.S.**

\* Interview with Josep Maria Antentas, teacher of Sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), published in the Brazilian electronic journal IHU on-line on August 4, 2011.

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