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The Free Culture and 15M Movements in Spain: Composition, Social Networks and Synergies

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ABSTRACT *This profile discusses the organization, goals and practices of the Spanish 15M movement. I argue that it developed as a complex, multi-layered ecosystem, mobilizing a new generation of citizens through the convergence of struggles over housing and the Free Culture and Digital Commons Movement (FCM), creating a common framework for action through social networks. Primarily in and through the actions in public squares, the 15M movement also constructed further layers of mobilization, incorporating the networks and skills of previous social movements (such as those mobilizing over inter alia education, health, alternative consumption) and connecting with previous generations who had mobilized over civil liberties in transition to democracy. Furthermore, I argue that links with the Free Culture Movement had a profound effect on the genealogy of 15M—in terms of its composition, agenda, framing and organizational logic. The methodology is based on case studies of both the FCM and 15M between December 2010 and December 2011 in Spain.*

KEY WORDS: Organizational logic, Free Culture Movement, 15M mobilization, new technologies of information and communication, social movements, Spain

Spain has recently witnessed the emergence of a wave of social mobilization, starting on 15M (15 May 2011), featuring some of the largest occupations of public squares since the country transitioned to democracy in the 1970s. The 15M—alternatively known as *indignados* mobilization—caused surprise not only because of the size of the protest but also by its character. With new technologies in information and communication (ICTs) playing an important role in the mobilization process, the 15M movement has become the latest and greatest exponent of a *self-mobilization* or *social network* format organized through the Internet.

It is also characterized, in the current context of multi-crisis, by the contention surrounding information, culture and knowledge regulation (Lessig, 2004). The emergence of the *Free Culture and Digital Commons Movement* (FCM) is a sign of this conflict (Fuster Morell, 2010) as it supports a vision of accessibility and flow of information and knowledge, and open and collaborative formats of knowledge creation (such as software or other types of immaterial content), instead of proprietary and restrictive visions. The FCM not only places the regulation of the Internet and ICTs at the heart of its political agenda but

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also makes extensive use of ICTs in achieving its goals of mobilization and organization (Fuster Morell & Subirats, 2012).

This profile first presents the components of the 15M wave of mobilization, then presents an analysis of the ways that the FCM might have interacted with the 15M and ultimately influenced the growth of the 15M. The methodology is based on case studies of both movements in Spain between December 2010 and December 2011. Several qualitative methods were employed. Virtual ethnography of websites and participative observation of events were conducted to become familiar with the actors, the organizational logic, and to obtain an overall view. A detailed analysis of 25 interviews, and audiovisual materials and documents, was used to identify actors, organizational forms, and to interpret the links between the FCM and the 15M.

The Wave of Mobilization Through *Social Networks* Arrives in Spain: A Surprising Start

In a context of social discontent, and of growing mobilization in other countries, *Anonymous* and individual citizens started to mobilize themselves through *social networks* to conceive and prepare a general call to citizens for mobilization. In March 2011, a group of collectives decided to create a common platform, *Real Democracy Now* (RDN). Since 15 May 2011, this initial call has generated an unexpected and spectacular wave of mobilizations in Spain. In the words of the organizers:

> Call [. . .] to organize a large protest throughout Spain before the coming municipal elections [. . .] to denounce the deplorable situation in which citizens suffer from severe abuse caused by political and economic powers. (Call Mobilization Demonstration, 15 May).

Common to all the collectives involved were factors such as *new* initiatives (created in the previous months and without strong ties to previous social movements) and, more importantly, the sharing of common views and principles on an organizational model based on the reliability of ICTs in general and of social networks more specifically, being used both as a tool and simultaneously as an inspiring organizational format (Interview, member RDN, 17 September 2011).

The organizational and communicative model of a social network was primarily inspired by Internet use in Arab countries, with a few precedents in Spain itself. Important among those precedents were the revolt of 14 March 2003 to protest the Government reaction to the Madrid train attacks, the housing movement of 2006, and various campaigns of the FCM.

The mobilization achieved in the 15M demonstration exceeded all expectations. On the night of 15M, a group of Madrid residents (with a significant presence of hackers) decided spontaneously to encamp at 'Plaza del Sol' (Intervention, member RDN, 3 June 2011). Similar encampments subsequently proliferated in the main squares of several Spanish cities and later extended, in acts of solidarity, worldwide.

Composition of the 15M: Precedents and Synergies Around the 15M Mobilization

It is not easy to describe the overall composition of the 15M. The Global Justice Movement (GJM) of the early 2000s has been described as a 'movement of movements' (della Porta & Mosca, 2005). However, this characterization does not suit the 15M, as it has many more

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interactions and synergies of a plurality of components which together create a complex *system* composed of interacting or interdependent components or layers that form an integrated whole.

The configuration of a new generation of mobilized citizens who had not previously mobilized, or at least not in the last cycle of the GJM, is particularly relevant in the Spanish case. For many participants, the organization of the 15M demonstration was their first political experience (Intervention, member RDN, 18 June 2011). These new participants were mobilized and organized through social networks and by starting new collectives. Even so, the early 15M composition went beyond these new participants, evolving further with the confluence of previous mobilization trajectories and the accumulation of knowledge that had an affinity with the organizational spirit of the 15M. In this regard, the 15M was also formed by the confluence of previous movements. The most important of these are the housing movement, the opposition to and denunciation of the banking system, and the FCM (Intervention, member RDN, 22 May 2011).

In 2006 and 2007, mass mobilizations occurred demanding the right to respectable (fair, decent) housing in Spain. Some parts of this movement have remained active since then, becoming more forceful with the bursting of the real-estate bubble to form the platform of those affected by mortgages (PAH), which had a notable presence before 15M, and helped to increase the numbers for that mobilization. The housing movement's demands became more visible alongside the demands of the 15M movement, with the development of direct solidarity actions among neighbors to stop housing evictions resulting from mortgage non-payment (Intervention, member PAH, 27 October 2011). The housing movement also influenced the 15M in adopting a speech and an esthetic that broke with the correctness of previous political languages, to connect with the emerging youth cultures (Haro, 2010).

Another movement that contributed to the early 15M was the opposition to the banking system. In 2008, activist Enric Duran (given the name *Robin Bank* by the press) hacked more than 30 banks and extracted almost half a million Euros in credits that he later used to finance newspapers that explained his actions and provide information on functioning projects outside the capitalist economy (Interview, Enric Duran, 15 May 2011).

The anti-austerity mobilizations against cuts in public services such as healthcare and education were already highly mobilized before 15M; however, they converged after the 15M mobilization within the 15M system in the public squares. The same applied to the occupied social centers and other subsets from the previous wave of the GJM, which played a key role in the growth of the public squares movement, and the later migration to the neighborhoods (Interview, member of occupied social center, 23 May 2011). The squares also attracted a plurality of alternative visions of society, from diverse traditional political orthodoxies through to mystical groups, and regular occupants of public spaces, such as the homeless.

In this sense, the alternatives resulting from the waves of the GJM also joined the occupation of the squares. After the major demonstrations against the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the European Union before 2004, the GJM in Spain transformed its energy into putting alternatives into action, which by 2011 had reached maturity. This was the case with the networks of solidarity interchange, such as the time bank, the networks of interchange of knowledge, the networks of interchange of goods (trueque) and the cooperatives of agro-ecological consumption (Ubasart *et al.*, 2009). The squares were like living cities, and managing the squares involved many skills.

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Differences in technological practice might explain why the start of the 15M was not significantly connected to previous social movements, but they subsequently converged. The GJM was also innovative in using ICTs for social mobilization, using websites, Short Message Service (SMS) messaging, email distribution lists and Indymedia. Even so, the groups and activists that came from a GJM background were of the technological generation of the early 2000s and were unfamiliar with social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, which became popular in Spain only much later and were opposed by many activists because of their corporate character (Interview, Enric Duran, 15 May 2011).

A further important synergy lies in the diffusion of the movement message online (info-actions) from home. The 'info-action' was particularly important for feeding the informational ecosystem of the 15M and maintaining connections with a network of solidarity locations in other countries to amplify and internationalize the protest (Interview, member of occupied social center, 23 May 2011; Interview, member RDN, 17 September 2011). This informational ecosystem of conversational flows was created by the connection of mutually interacting applications and spaces.

As the mobilization processes converged within the 15M, the movement also activated previous generations who had struggled for political and social freedoms, such as grandparents who had fought during the dictatorship and who felt sympathy for the spirit of the squares, and showed solidarity with their oppression. Indeed, the 15M movement enjoyed wide support among the citizenry; according to a Metroscopia survey of June 2011, the majority of Spanish people (84%) believed that the movement tackled problems that directly affected the citizens and had good reasons to mobilize. Spain has a youth unemployment rate of approximately 45% and problematic access to housing. Those precarious living conditions could help explain the understanding and level of support the protest received.

In short, the 15M engaged a multi-dimensional synergy: a new generation of citizens converged with the housing movement and the FCM to create a common framework for articulating actions through social networks and changed the scene by generating the fire to demonstrate. However, to this first composition was added, primarily in the squares, the networks and skills from previous social movements (such as education, health and alternative consumption, among others) as well as a connection to previous generations—together generating a virtuous cycle that obtained large social support and engagement (online and off-line) for the mobilizations.

The FCM in the Genealogy of the 15M

The FCM interacted and contributed to the genealogy of the 15M in various ways—with composition, agenda, frame and organizational logic the most significant.

Composition

The FCM was one of the movements that mobilized for the 15M demonstration. Individuals and two of the initial groups (*Anonymous* and *Do Not Vote for Them*) that formed the platform to organize the initial demonstration were directly connected to free culture struggles. The FCM also contributed in providing the main physical spaces—in centers connected to free culture practices before the occupation of the squares—to celebrate the organizational meetings.

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Agenda

The FCM contributed to the agenda of the 15M through developing an information and knowledge policy that favors public domain and access. Even so, the documentation on the 15M shows a reduced presence of subjects tied to new technologies and intellectual property. The FCM also contributed to the 15M agenda through the development of the concept of the digital commons (Fuster Morell & Subirats, 2012), and thus the wider connection with the commons as political tradition, strategy and organizational format.

Frame Creation

The 15M changed the terms of opposition to the political and economic system, moving from contemporary thematic movements (such as ecological or feminist) to a more general, meta-political frame confrontation.

The creation of a general 'meta-politics' frame dates from 2007. Law professor Lawrence Lessig, a key advocate of Creative Commons licenses (an alternative to Copyright that favors use and accessibility), announced that he would stop working on free culture and cyberlaw. The reason that he gave up was that he had reached the conclusion that promoting free culture and its democratic values through promoting free culture practices as such had arrived at a specific endpoint. In his view, therefore, to advance it, it was necessary to face institutional corruption and to directly engage in political system reform; the political system, according to Lessig, is structurally corrupt, and therefore prevents any possibility of change in the institutional and administrative framework (Lessig, personal blog, June 2007).

In the Spanish case, we can also trace a mutation in the FCM actors already mobilized by the free culture agenda, but who jump in at a specific point, aiming to change the political system. One of these mutations could be seen in the mobilizations against the Sinde Law of December 2010 on Internet regulation. A strong movement of opposition was generated, and actions against the law were developed over the Internet. The publication on Facebook of the 'Manifesto of defense of fundamental rights' against the Sinde Law generated more than 240,000 responses in under 24 h. Expressions of rejection achieved a large presence on Twitter, too. The *hashtags* (keywords to identify conversations in Twitter) #leysinde or #sindegate became a trending topic. Distributed Denial of Service attacks (or cyberattacks), generated large information flows from multiple connection points to block the webpages of the conservative Popular Party (PP), the Socialist Party (PSOE), the Catalan Nationalist Party (CIU) and of the lower house of Parliament (Congress of Deputies), who had voted for the Sinde Law, which was finally approved in mid-February 2011. FCM activists countered with the *Do Not Vote for Them* campaign (in Spanish, 'Nolesvotes'), denouncing the corruption of the political system, and targeted to influence the municipal elections of 22 May 2011. The campaign consisted of a shared manifesto that asked electors not to vote for political parties that had approved the Sinde Law. In sum, the approval of the Sinde Law prompted part of the FCM to reconsider their campaign focus and to redirect their activities (previously centered on free culture issues) to address the political system as a whole for *RDN* (Interviews with FCM members, 10 June and 13 July 2011). After 15M, other concerned networks also converged with this meta-politics frame.

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Organizational Logic

Last but not least, another source of FCM influence on the 15M is the modality of its extensive use of ICTs and its organizational logic in general.

The formats of the Sinde Law campaign and the *Nolesvotes* campaign were a reference point for designing the 15M as a campaign with a *swarming* modality (Interviews, member FCM, 10 August 2011, and member RDN, 17 September 2011). These campaigns were not based on creating a platform of representative organizations but on creating a common pool, which any person or organization who felt attached to the campaign could easily join. Similarly to Wikipedia, which prohibits group participation, individual participation is also the characteristic of FCM campaigns. Furthermore, participation is organized so that it accommodates the various types and degrees of resource availability and interest in contributing (Fuster Morell, 2010). It is also highly dependent on the digital arena. Here, the informational ecosystem is central to the movement's communicative strategy for occupying the public space, not only through the mass media but also by attempting to become a trending topic on Twitter, reducing dependence on intermediaries or traditional media actors. Although the 15M has significantly more face-to-face activity than typically occurs in the FCM, the decentralized meta-coordination of the mobilization through the Internet informational ecosystem plays a key role in both movements.

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Conclusions

In some respects, the FCM is a predecessor of the 15M mobilization; our analysis reveals a series of channels by which the FCM contributed to the genealogy of 15M. These contributions include composition (providing a mobilization trajectory and resources that fed the 15M), agenda (incorporating questions in the 15M agenda relating to an information and knowledge policy favoring public domain and access, and, more importantly, the *commons* political tradition and strategy), frame (reinforcing the necessity of framing the passage from thematic-specific to meta-politics) and organizational logic. In this last respect, as with its predecessor the FCM, the 15M generated an online informational ecosystem, which played an important role in meta-coordinating the mobilization, and in communicating and intervening in the public debate. In this regard, the 15M movement has not only become the latest exponent of a mobilization format arranged principally through the Internet but also managed to overcome the FCM's limitations to online settings, and generated large face-to-face mobilizations. Our analysis of the 15M composition further reveals that its *ecosystem* character is not limited to meta-coordination and communication of information in online settings only, as it *mirrors* an informational ecosystem characterized by a complex system of diverse components, interactions and synergies.

The 15M system of layers includes a new generation of mobilized citizens, who, with the juxtaposition of the housing movement and FCM, created the first surprising start. Following the occupation of public squares, the movement negotiated a convergence of anti-austerity mobilizations, the student movement, the occupation of social centers and alternative practices resulting from the previous wave of the GJM. Finally, *info-actions* by networked individuals from home helped sustain an international solidarity network, and secure the support and solidarity of previous generations who had fought for political freedom in the transition to democracy, as well as the strong support of much of the

population over precarious living conditions. The set of interactions and synergies of these components combined to generate a virtuous cycle that obtained large social support and engagement (online and off-line) for the mobilizations.

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