Correspondence from the Horizontal Movements of Spain: Interview with Jeza Goudi

Interview with Social Activist Jeza Goudi
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The 15M movement has been a turning point for social movements in Spain. Which were the conditions of social counter-power in the country until then and what changed after 15M?

Sometimes we talk about a kind of "climate", a certain atmosphere. At the times when the 15M movement erupted, people were really disappointed with the traditional political parties and trade unions. In the post-Franco Spanish republic, much of the "transition to democracy" narrative was aimed to de-politicize people, summarized in a "vote every four years, that is democracy" logic about politics. Corruption, lack of opportunities for the youth, the feeling of powerlessness and, in fact, all the consequences of the limitations of the "transition to democracy" narrative, in addition to the looming economic crisis, made the 15M movement possible. At the same time, the international context of the *Arab Springs* played a role, maybe not so much in terms of political content, but in terms of movement structures and forms. On top of that, the violence used against people camping peacefully in Madrid during the first night of 15M was a wake-up call for the populace to occupy the rest of the country's squares. But the turning point, at least for me, was the narrative that people jointly constructed during the days of the movement. It was not an angry narrative or a complicated "class struggle" analysis. Instead, it was very direct: "They don't represent us and we are not objects in the hands of politicians and

bankers". Such a narrative introduced emotions in politics. It was a narrative constructed by common people, which other people could understand, share and complement. This attributed to the movement a feeling of a work in progress, in which everyone could participate. There were only questions, instead of final answers, as is characteristic of the traditional movements. And of course, social networks helped as a tool to spread, share and build this whole new narrative.

Identity politics and factionism have fragmented grassroots movements in Europe for decades. How do Spanish movements cope with these pathologies and how do different parts of the movements coordinate, network together and / or even confederate?

As per your question, it seems you have a conception of the "social movements" as a fragmented entity. It is easier to think about the movements as something more organic: groups of people who organize to do some things, usually practical stuff, i.e. a project, a campaign for or against something, and always with a communications' team in charge of explaining what they are doing to the rest of the "social movements" and society. In this grassroots way of organizing, if other people agree or believe they can be helpful, they just join. Then, when important political events arise, activists may join forces to create a space to coordinate for a demonstration or a specific campaign, for instance against the gag law. Usually, those spaces, as per our experience, never last as much as some would like, but they rise and fall in relation to the specific objective that generated them. When the objective is gone, they can still be there as long as they are useful. When they aren't anymore, they die. When there is need for the pursuit of other objectives, they are built again. In the last 5 years, I've seen lots of spaces like these being created and then disappear. All of them had different characteristics, which is very interesting, depending on the objective and the people who actually was giving live to them.

It is not that factionism does not happen, but when something is important, activists in the Spanish movements work somehow together. Some say we use hacker ethics, don't waste the others' time and understand what a fork is: the possibility of having two projects instead of one. Why getting angry to a team because you don't like their strategy or because you know they are going to fail? I would claim the right to be wrong and experiment by myself. And getting angry with someone because you don't share the same strategy means at the end a strong form of paternalism: you know what is right and wrong for everyone, you know what is better for the others. We agree for instance to fight against the gag law. Yet, the strategies of different teams of activists were different, because the concerns of each team were different. We agreed in some actions, but some might focus on legal issues, others would prepare the ground for coordination, others made communication campaigns, acts of disobedience and all different kinds of actions. The whole project even had different approaches in Barcelona and in Madrid, due to divergent political conditions in these two cities.

The first thing to observe in Spanish movements is their strong emphasis on the construction of "poder popular", i.e. autonomous power from below embodied in socialized institutions of self management and self governance. Can you describe the state of "poder popular", its gravity for social counter-power and its potential?

I will speak about Barcelona, because the movements are not homogeneous throughout Spain. In Barcelona, associationism has a centuries' old history and is part of the city's social tissue. By taking different shapes, from working class' direct forms of struggle, to neighborhoods organizing the neighborhoods' festivals and cultural activities, such as the "balls de bastons", associationism has been the natural way of urban socialization. Therefore, we could claim that we are used to construct autonomous citizens' projects and develop

activities around them. In the case of social centers, as Can Batlló or La Base, some of them are really open to the neighborhood, especially after 15M, and they have become meeting places for the neighbors. This has a lot of potential, especially in a city under the constant menace of gentrification, since such places have the capacity to organize the resistance. In addition, these modes of associationism change the mentality of people. What takes place in these movement structures is directly opposing to the dominant worldview imposed by capitalism, i.e. individualism. Feminization, in the sense of taking care of each other physically and mentally, plays a central role in such spaces.

But the housing movement is as well "popular power", a kind of institution built from the grassroots, winning its legitimacy by doing, becoming reliable on day to day struggle and through communication to the wider public. A lot of campaigns and working teams actually work as a popular institution, where people go to get help and solve their problems (and some join, of course).

Spanish social movements usually hit the news in an indirect way, when electoral forces, such as Podemos, Barcelona en Comu and the CUP, which are supposed to represent them, succeed in the ballots. Which is the most appropriate correlation between non-representative movements and representative leftist forces according to your understanding and experience?

It is true that in certain political parties or organizations there are people who come from the social struggles. And, of course, some others don't. Hence, some took popular anger and the claims of the people as basis to build a political force and enter in the various levels of government. But they are not representing social movements, because we come from the main point of "no-one represents us" and because you cannot expect that the plurality of the movements can be represented through a political electoral force. This became obvious in the squares, where we could not even attain consensus on "de

minimis” political declarations of the movement. Even though the media, especially international media, try to simplify the relation between the 15M and Podemos by claiming that “Podemos is 15M”, yet they are totally wrong, since a great deal of the strength of the movements has not been converged at Podemos and there is no consensus among activists that “we are all going to penetrate the institutions”. Such an approach is only shared in a part of the movements, which considers that grassroots movements have a “ceiling” in their capacity to achieve change. If we are talking about forks, this is a big one and we don’t know if there will be a reunion of the branches again.

Yet, now it looks like the ones who achieved a certain power in government start to realize that there is also a “crystal ceiling” of the change that can be achieved through state institutions. In fact, they experience that state bureaucracy is not the machine for the success of the left, that when you somehow attain the power of a state institution, still the public servants, such as the police or the administration staff, remain the same people. And, moreover, left electoral forces don’t control the mass media, which the right uses to damage the credibility and the change proposals of the former. Finally, even though *Barcelona en Comu* claimed during their electoral campaign that they were in need of the people to keep to the streets and mark their autonomous political expression, it now seems that they aren’t all that happy, when we demonstrate or organize to defend, for instance, the street sellers. The answer is usually “you don’t understand the whole complexity”. Paternalism. How did it happened? Well from my point of view, as power relations are the main problem, gaining political power cannot be the solution: power will change you faster than you change it. What can social movements can do about electoral forces of the left? Utilizing them as tools has the potential menace of co-option, as happens with Podemos much more than others like Barcelona en Comú.

What are your views about the results in the recent national elections in Spain? What is the strategy that autonomous movements should adopt?

Looks it was not a good idea for Podemos to go together with Izquierda Unida. Why? Probably a lot of IU voters were there because the IU speech is more radical (No nato, and economy policies for instance). Some of them might not vote for the "new social democracy" of Podemos. In addition, Podemos made an effort to get the voters of the PSOE instead of the abstentionist. This didn't work. And the abstention grew, which is always good news for the right. In general, becoming the "new social democracy" is not a good idea. The failure of the negotiations and Pablo Iglesias insisting on lending a hand to PSOE was probably not a good thing for getting people to vote and to mobilize participation in the elections. As for the result, the right-wing Popular Party increased its power, Ciutadanos decreased. I think the voters of Ciutadanos went back to the PP, in order to guarantee "stability". Brexit for sure played a role in the dissemination of fear among voters. Furthermore, many activists abstained, as they felt disappointed from the last time they voted in the municipal elections for the "municipalities of the change". Recently, in a conference Pablo Iglesias said that it is stupid to think that things change on the streets and he claimed that things change only through institutions. And that the "blitz war" of Podemos against the institutions is over and they are going to the trenches.

"Social movements" do not sit together in one room and decide an strategy. I think that there are different teams, assemblies, working groups and campaigns and each one of them have, of course, autonomy to decide what strategy they will follow. Some will, as they do now, collaborate with the institutions in order to implement some measures when the objectives of both coincide, as they are doing at the municipal level. Some will, as they do now, contest the

measures of the new government if they feel them unfair or insufficient or to be attacking them. Some others, autonomous projects and initiatives, will be doing exactly the same whoever governs, building "*poder popular*".

Social antagonism takes place at the transnational level. Yet, social movements have until now failed to develop effective modes of struggle across and beyond borders and challenge the dominance of capital. Which are in your view the ways to change that and consolidate our collective counter-power at the pan-European level?

I don't know if something like this is even possible. Our concerns in the south, let's say Greece and Spain, are different from the concerns of movements in Germany. And as much as we think that the roots of all these are the same, i.e. the construction of the EU as a neoliberal-implementing machine (and in the end of capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism, knowing that one cannot exist without the other), our strategies and inmediate struggles are by now far too different. From my personal point of view, all the international meetings I have attended helped to understand the movements of other countries but failed to implement the decisions taken. Yet, it is worth to try. Maybe, the understanding of our unity in diversity can create something different, which probably we haven't yet imagined. In conclusion, we need a trial and error strategy for our transnational coordination to get closer to a success. Probably it is not going to be something like "united" and doing the same (every time someone says "we must unite", a kitten dies) but attacking the monster from different angles, depending on our position and our skills. I don't have a specific idea on how it would look like, but for sure it won't be a pan-european movement triggered from the top, just like Varoufakis's Diem25.