

Crackdown In Spain

Wave of Arrests Sweeps Barcelona

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The message went out to a thousand phones on Monday morning, the 3rd of October: the first of the arrests from the Parliament blockade had taken place. Four undercover cops snatched him up as he left his house. A protest was called for the same day, at 7 o'clock in the evening, Plaça Catalunya. Two more arrests soon followed. The news quickly spread via telephone, internet, and word of mouth. Several meetings are called to share information and organize the response. By the time people started gathering in the hundreds for the protest, a fourth arrest had occurred.

Back in June, the popular rage that has been growing in Barcelona, in tandem with other parts of the world, coalesced once again as 200,000 people blockaded the Catalan Parliament in an attempt to prevent the passage of the latest austerity laws. These laws cannot accurately be called cutbacks, for in addition to slashing healthcare and education, they augment the ranks and arsenal of the police and continue the urbanization projects that tailor the city to the needs of tourism and social control.

This was not the first round of reforms to hit Catalunya, and in fact the Socialist Party was already voted out of power for inaugurating the crisis measures, so now it's the conservatives' turn to continue the same policies. Half of the people never voted for any of them, and an increasing number of these have been taking to the streets to win back control over their lives in an escalating series of strikes, protests, occupations, and popular assemblies that have spread across the Spanish state. The media and the academics have referred to this phenomenon as the movement of "indignados," the "Real Democracy Now" movement, or the 15M movement, but in reality the feeling on the street is increasingly closer to rage than to simple indignation; its politics are much more heterogeneous and in large part more anticapitalist than a narrow, naïve call for a "real" democracy, whatever that means; and the activity ascribed to it predates the 15M—or 15th of May—plaza occupations. Threads of the ongoing defiance run continuously back through the joyful Mayday riots in the wealthy neighborhood of Sarrià, the January 27 general strike that was called only by anarcho-syndicalist and far-left minority unions, in an unprecedented move demonstrating a new boldness, the September 29 general strike that reached massive proportions on a countrywide level and in Barcelona erupted in a daylong insurrection, which itself evoked references to and drew on experiences from an entire history of struggle against dictatorship and against the democracy that replaced it, a struggle that not everyone has forgotten.

On June 15, for the first time in much too long, politicians remembered the taste of fear as people blocked their path and harangued them, assailed them with insults, spat on them, threw trash, and in at least one case, attacked them with spraypaint. Many lawmakers had to be flown in by helicopter, and only in the face of undeniable public opposition and with the help of an army of riot police were they able to pass the reforms. For at least one day, the lies of democracy were put in their place, and the curtain masking the reality of social war was parted.

People who participated in the blockade, who got to reap just a brief moment of revenge against the wealthy, hypocritical politicians who are intent on taking everything, went home that day with a general feeling of jubilation. All that changed as soon as they tuned back in to the official reality, and checked out the news the next day.

In the stateless, communal majority of human history, shame played an important function in upholding community norms, based generally on ideas of mutual aid. The person who did not share, the bully and would-be authoritarian were shamed and prevented from spreading social relations based in competition or domination. In a postmodern, media-driven world, shame is instrumentalized by the mass media and used to uphold the relations and values that benefit the owners of society.

Pacifism, as it has arisen in the Real Democracy Now movement, is little more than an uncritical reliance on the media of the ruling class and a reproduction of the shame and values they inculcate. People who had been participating in social struggles here for years were surprised, in May and June, to suddenly find that other protestors would throw themselves in front of banks to protect them from vandalism, or in front of riot cops to protect them from insults and the throwing of trash. Evidently, breaking the windows of a bank or fighting with the police is more shameful than the homelessness, the hunger, the debt slavery, the murders, and the torture the banks and police are responsible for.

By July, after newcomers had had to face off with police to defend occupations or block the eviction of neighbors who couldn't pay their mortgages, more and more people were dismissing nonviolence as a hopelessly inept tool for accomplishing goals that were not compatible with those of the ruling class, and what's more, they began to see it like the rest of us, as an indignity and an insult to the history of revolutionaries here who have fought bravely and on their feet against fascism, against capitalism, against power in all its forms.

But in June, many people were still hypersensitive to what the media were saying about us. The same people who went home with a smile on their faces awoke with a frown to encounter the media's predictable hysterics. The forceful protest of the day before was presented as a travesty, a source of profound shame for some fictive national community that included, altogether in one happy, democratic family, those who consumed the news and were losing access to healthcare, and those who broadcast the news and had private healthcare. People began to backpedal, to deny what was being signalled as shameful, in a word, to betray themselves.

The police took advantage of the boom in video footage at protests and the dissolution of the line between journalists and protestors, with the proliferation of alternative media. They gathered and seized all the footage they needed, and began identifying suspects. The media cried out about impending arrests. But curiously, the arrests never came.

On inspection, the police strategy is tried and true: make the people police themselves. As long as the two primary ingredients—pacifism and sensitivity to the media—exist in abundance, the mobilization of shame and fear by the press will divide a movement and redirect it towards dialogue, leading it straight back into the hands of the politicians whom it rejected at the very

moment of its birth. Where heavy-handed arrests might have strengthened the movement's resolve and united them behind the bravest sector—those who had gone face to face with riot cops and politicians—the soft hand of the media sowed doubts and handed legitimacy to the most cowardly and opportunistic.

Needless to say, it came as a shock when the police began their wave of arrests in early October, nearly four months later. But the underlying motives soon came to light. The order to make the arrests did not come from the Catalan police, but from higher up—all the way from Madrid, in fact. In response to the supposed inaction of the Catalan authorities, Manos Limpias—a fascist organization—brought a suit to the Audiencia Nacional, a supreme court in Madrid that often metes out political repression. The Audiencia Nacional then ordered the Catalan police to arrest all twenty-two people they had identified in footage, charging them with various offenses under the statute covering “assaults on democracy.” Possible sentences range from six months to eight years in prison. Curiously, this seems to be the first use of the law protecting democracy, which was passed after an attempted military coup in 1981. Yet another example of progressive laws used for political repression, like hate crime laws used in the US against those protesting the police or homophobic churches.

By the second day, ten people had been arrested. In each case, they were taken to a facility on the outskirts of town, near the immigrant prison, booked, and given a citation to appear at court in Madrid. Lawyers in Madrid soon got the list of all twenty-two suspects, and those whom police had not yet been able to locate went to the Barcelona courts to see if they could get their citation without being arrested. They were stonewalled, and after hours of waiting, went downstairs to a café. Suddenly, riot police surrounded the café and arrested the other people on the list. Like all the others, they were subjected to biometric photos, to be added to police databases for automatic and remote facial recognition.

As the arrests became known, a pattern quickly emerged. Whereas the media had previously trumpeted the certainty that protest “leaders” and those involved in convening the Parliament blockade would be charged in addition to the worst of the troublemakers, all of those arrested were people from the grassroots, acting outside of any organizational framework, and nearly all of them were anarchists. But because the arrests had been imposed by higher authorities and had not been immediately accompanied by any PR action on the ground, the media did not have any strong directions from police regarding how to report on the occurrences, and they fumbled and did their best to explain the arrests, in their typically cloudy, sophomoric, and professional way. As such, the detainees were labelled as members of the movement of indignados, rather than being singled out as “bad protestors” and “antisistema.” (Given that anarchism has not been erased from Spanish history, the media cannot use “anarchist” as a depoliticized, pejorative, and scary term; thus they invented the label “antisistema” or “anti-system” to refer to people who reject dialogue with the political system, though the connotation is overwhelmingly one of rebels without a cause).

Not only were the police and media caught flat-footed in carrying out and justifying the arrests, what's more, the situation was stacked against them. Radicals are harder to isolate in today's political climate, at least in Barcelona. Within the neighborhood assemblies, workplace struggles, and occupations of the hospitals facing cutbacks or closure, the old political divisions have lost much of their meaning. Anarchists and other radicals who were once easy to isolate now form an integral part of new networks of neighbors and coworkers acting together in solidarity.

The October repression has deepened the practice of solidarity among a wider group of people. The thousands who have taken to the streets to protest austerity measures are returning to the streets out of a shared loyalty and a growing awareness of the mechanisms of social control. At Monday's spontaneous protest, called the same day as the arrests began, nearly one thousand people gathered in Plaça Catalunya and then marched down Las Ramblas, Barcelona's principal commercial street and tourist attraction. That night, the spectacle of consumption was interrupted by the forceful chants of the protestors, and every single bank and chain store along the route was decorated with graffiti against capitalism and against the police. Those who automatically whipped out their cameras to film the crowd, unwittingly drawing a line between participant and spectator, were yelled at: "haven't you learned anything? Twenty-two people are facing prison because of your photographs!"

Three days later, another protest was held. This time, perhaps 3000 people showed up, some of them having marched all the way from their neighborhoods, blocking all the streets along the way. Again, energy was high, and the chants that rang through the air showed a greater political maturity than was common back in May. "It's not a crisis, it's capitalism!" "Slashing healthcare is murder!" "No one represents us!" "Politicians go to hell!" "Not one step back! Against repression, direct action!" "The cops kill and torture!" "The media aim, the police shoot!" "We were all at Parliament!" And my personal favorite, "Let's burn down Parliament!" Mustapha, a Saharan immigrant who was killed by cops in a nearby town just a short time earlier, was also remembered in many of the chants. People were drawing connections between the political system, the economic system, and the repression, and calling for unmediated action.

Only twice did I hear someone sing out the old, leftist favorite that used to predominate at protests: "They call this democracy but it's not," but every time the radical refrain of "Yes it is!" arose in response, louder than the original chorus. Finally, the march arrived at the Interior Ministry, where cops were booed and insulted, and kept on their toes with a loud firecracker. At one point, an alternative journalist filming inside the crowd was physically ejected. He claimed that by filming what the police might do he was protecting us, but this old line fell on deaf ears. There's already one person in Barcelona in prison for defending himself against a cop, arrested and convicted with the help of a journalist's footage, and now there are twenty-two more people facing prison. Meanwhile, for all the busted heads, all the cases of torture, all the killings, and all the independent journalists on the scene with cameras rolling, there isn't a single cop doing time.

People are starting to wake up. What has always been obvious is starting to become visible. Twenty-two people have to travel to Madrid to go to court this Tuesday for doing what most of us dream about. The politicians who got spit on, and the bankers standing behind them, are hoping to make an example out of those twenty-two. But for us, the assault on power they stand accused of is an example of bravery, an example of truth, an example of hope.

Those in power who want to lock them in a cage for years just for challenging their authority are losing their hold on us. Those who favor dialogue with the powerful have lost their credibility. Those who fear to attack them have lost their relevance.

When thousands of people here and in other cities around the world took up the call once more for "revolution" and for "freedom," governments, spectators, and opportunists expected this would exhaust itself in the same old reforms. But there's a growing number of us who mean what we say.

When all the old rules are rejected, everything becomes possible.

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