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The Ladders Revolution: Material struggle, social media and news coverage

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This article, which focuses on a strike and ocupation that took place in Barcelona in May 2015, is part of a larger enquiry that attempts to locate public expressions of dissent in their sociopolitical, discursive and spatiotemporal context. The methods used to conduct this study include the standard collection of observational and media data, but also encompass an attempt to investigate the control of space by public and private authorities. Discursive manifestations of dissent and the arguments posed by social actors are therefore considered in conjunction with the physical impact and material setting within which goals are pursued. The case study used in this article is the workers' occupation, in 2015, of the Telefónica building, the famous landmark identified in George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* as the epicentre of the internecine struggle that took place within the Republican camp in 1937.

Introduction

On 7 April 2015, about 150,000 technicians working for Spanish mobile phone company Telefónica-Movistar, initiated an open-ended strike to protest against their working conditions and the precarious terms of their employment (Martínez, 2015). In order to reduce costs, Telefónica-Movistar had forced its workers to become 'self-employed', while at the same time safety at work had been downgraded. The nation-wide campaign initiated by the workers was known as *la Revolución de las Escaleras* or 'the Ladders Revolution' in reference to the ladders used when engineers have to set up mobile, landline and internet connections. On 23 May 2015, in addition to the national strike, a group of sub-contracted technicians occupied the central Telefónica building in Barcelona. Their goal was to draw attention to the unrealistic targets set by the company, the increasingly long shifts that were demanded, and the low wages and lack of basic work entitlements, such as paid annual leave. These are the realities that the strikers tried to encapsulate in their slogans *Telefónica esclaviza* ('Telefónica enslaves') and *Telefónica precariza* ('Telefónica creates insecurity').

This chapter draws upon primary material gathered at the site during the occupation, including interviews and visual material, while providing insights into the workers' use of social media and their relationship with the news media. We also provide an analysis of the news coverage of the occupation: while the story was, for the most part, ignored by news broadcasts, elements of the press presented some detailed coverage. In addition, we consider the role of group-specific protest actions in the current Spanish socio-economic and

political context, and discuss the intersections between public mobilisation, social media and the commercial underpinning of news production. The whole enquiry is set within the larger context of spatial control and the temporal '~~manouevers~~' that social actors carry out.

manoeuvres

State power and workplace occupation

This article represents one element of a larger project, based on a multifaceted analysis of certain types of public occasion (protests, occupations and demonstrations) drawn from observational data gathered on a number of events held on the Spanish mainland between February 2013 and May 2015. Although this experience provides the empirical basis for many of the observations that follow, we also make a more specific theoretical argument, based on our contention that protest is an activity that is circumscribed by the desire of executive powers to establish operational oversight and control of the temporal/spatial circumstances within which acts of dissent are played out. The officials responsible for regulating protest do not present this goal in quite these terms, but embed it within the larger and apparently more reasonable proposition that the maintenance of public order by police and related agencies is of benefit to the community as a whole.

In the first instance, therefore, it is the routine management of public space (the everyday maintenance of areas intended for both commercial and civic purposes), rather than the exceptional interventions made by public authority, that determines the physical, 'performative' expression of most protest events. This means that the use of edifices and spaces is governed by an administrative regime that has been established over time, and is therefore less likely to be regarded as unusual or offensive: in these circumstances, 'contentious' activities occur within a physical, cultural and ideological context that is at least understood – if not accepted – by all those involved in an event. Any occupation of the *workplace*, however, such as that which occurred at the Telefónica building, acts as an affront to the basic assumptions that circulate within formal (patriarchal-capitalist) democracies, including the notion of ownership, hierarchical power, and the commercial sanctity of privatised space (see below).

Our references to the role of public and private authority is, however, not simply a matter of identifying the use of 'exclusionary geography', or the spatial restrictions imposed on 'a purportedly democratic' social order (Starr, Fernández, & Scholl, 2011, p. 1), but also of noting the host of procedures that accompany and reinforce this activity. The 'special measures' devoted to the creation of 'sterile zones', for example, must be understood within the general ambience created by routine or everyday surveillance, including the use of CCTV, GPS tracking, and recorded announcements that ask travellers to report suspicious behaviour.

In the meantime, within those political formations known as democracies, the practical instruments of spatial governance (such as the permanent designation of some areas as security zones) are combined with the timely production of messages intended to present state responses to dissenting activity in a positive light. These are drawn from a repertoire of normative socio-economic values, and include references to public safety, the protection of commerce, and the need to balance the rights of groups that adhere to competing perspectives. Such apparently anodyne mechanisms are, however, directly

related to larger forms of social control, a connection that is made more noticeable during periods when new conditions are imposed on public assembly.

At these points, the standard assumptions that have been absorbed by citizens over time have to be adjusted, and fresh controversies can arise, altering both the behaviour of the participants and the types of official explanation used to justify state intervention. A case in point is the introduction by the Spanish government of the Ley Orgánica de Protección de la Seguridad Ciudadana (the Law for the Protection of Citizens' Security). Passed by Parliament on 26 March 2015, it came into force less than three months later, on 1 July. Combined with reforms to the Criminal Code, the Law placed new forms of duress on protest groups, including one Article that made it an offence to take photographs of police officers or to make unauthorised use of any data that related to their activities. This edict means that it could be a criminal offence to take photographs of police misconduct, a procedure that has often provided useful evidence to counter accusations that activists are involved in criminal behaviour.

Protest and 'democracy'

At this point, therefore, we will try to address the normative/democratic conception of protest by engaging with some recent contributions to this position. The perspective we refer to here is presented in a number of sources, but one of the most significant is contained in an intervention made by della Porta. This author, a leading theorist belonging to the 'contentious politics' tendency, draws attention to the growth of protests against 'what [the social movements] saw as a deterioration of democratic institutions' (della Porta, 2015, p. 3). Here, she ascribes a particular point of view (the belief that institutional democracy has been weakened) to a broad swathe of European organisations. The example used to reinforce this observation is a placard carried by a Spanish protestor, which read 'They call it democracy but it is not' (della Porta, 2015). Quite apart from the limitations inherent in using a single reference to substantiate a general point, the slogan itself does not complain about the 'decline' of democratic life, but is rather a more fundamental attack on 'the system'. In Spain, this can be traced to the suspicion that the 'transition' to democracy after the death of the dictator Franco in 1975, was not entirely genuine (Sanz Sabido, 2015).

Of course, the conclusions reached about the meaning of protest in this context depend, in part, on the extent to which more radical positions are expressed by the protesters themselves. On a demonstration in Barcelona in February 2013, the authors of this article noted a banner carried by an adherent of the anarchist trade union, the CNT, which read: 'The Crisis is an excuse, the problem is Capital'. The reproduction of tropes that make assumptions about the quality and purpose of 'democratic' cultures is, again, discovered in remarks made by Jaime-Jiménez and Reinares in their discussion of the professional cultures adopted by the police. In a piece that takes Spain as its primary focus, these authors argue that 'one would expect to find tangible differences' in the policing techniques employed by 'democratic and nondemocratic systems' (Jaime-Jiménez & Reinares, 1998, p. 166). The function of the police in authoritarian countries, they contend, is 'of an explicitly political character', since the main objective is 'the surveillance of social groups that could present a threat to the survival of the regime' (p. 166). By comparison, they believe, 'tolerant political systems' use forms of policing that do not attempt to 'protect the state's

interest', but intervene instead to 'defend the basic rules that ensure the existence of democratic society' (pp. 166–167).

Here, the division between democratic and nondemocratic polities rests on a conventional political assumption about their relative worth, since it is immediately obvious that any action that defends 'the basic rules' that guarantee the continuation of 'democratic society' is analogous to another action that ensures the 'survival of a regime'. The point of the activity in both cases is to prevent the dissolution of a particular system, so in this sense the exact nature of the intervention will be determined by the need to meet that particular goal, not by the supposed difference in the governing systems. One important but unacknowledged variable is the exact form taken by the opposition to whichever state system is under discussion, but the more urgent question is the unsubstantiated implication that rules in a democratic society are the product of a consensual process, whereas authoritarian regimes are supposed to issue edicts or instructions. The positive distinction made in favour of democracy made here, depends on ignoring the existence of rules and customs that are created without any electoral sanction, often achieved because voters are prevented from exercising effective control over the representatives they have helped to elect.

For this reason, rather than distinguish between authoritative institutions on the basis of their relative proximity to an abstract ideal of democratic conduct, or speculate on whether police interventions are becoming more or less paramilitary in character, we are more interested in the structural, ideological and physical mechanisms that help to ensure the continuous reproduction of functional governance. We advocate, in effect, a model of power that takes account of contingency and confusion, structural complicity (Price, 2010, 2011), and the local flexibility that some managerial systems display, without sacrificing our conviction that the basic impulse of contemporary executive authority is to maintain the integrity of structures that support established socio-economic relations.

The principal argument set out above is fairly straightforward: that the everyday and largely uncontested function of the legally constituted state is not separate from, and can actually reinforce, its repressive capacity. In practice, therefore, the activity of state operatives and functionaries (i.e. through liaison with the leadership of protest groups, in the designation of the spatial requirements of the protest itself, and in the nomination of legitimate activities), may in one sense enable the production of dissent, but at the same time constitutes a mode of control that is intimately linked to the desire to neutralise any threat it may pose to the *authorities* rather than to the *public* as such. At the same time, it is clear that other forms of compulsion, besides those mobilised by the state, underpin the everyday experience of workers in the current, 'neo-liberal' social order. These are enshrined in the demands made by employers throughout the 'post-industrial' Western world, and observed in the reports of Telefónica workers concerning the practices they are forced to observe.

One of the engineers who occupied the Telefónica building explained that the national strike began when the company renewed the existing sub-contracting terms and conditions for a further three years, effectively aggravating an already unbearable situation. Meanwhile, Telefónica-Movistar has reported that the company yielded profits of more than 4500 million euro in 2013 and 3000 million euro in 2014 (Martínez López, ~~2015~~). **AQ1** **2015a** By September 2015, Telefónica had made a profit of 4577 million euro, which equals an

increase of 69.6% (Muñoz, 2015). The corporation, which is an important player in the international telecommunications market, has also been criticised for spending millions on advertising not only in Spanish media, but also around the world. Between 2010 and 2011, Telefónica was reported to have invested 311 million euro in Spanish media alone (Martínez López, 2015a). Looking at the data, the technicians were outraged at the company's indifference towards the wellbeing of its workforce. Antonio, one (anonymised) technician, pointed out that, while Telefónica is raking in enormous benefits, workers are caught up in increasingly precarious conditions:

> sub-contracting companies enter into a war amongst themselves to pick up more work, to the extent that they will agree cheaper prices. They pay us to do the work, but they do not calculate salaries based on the time it takes to complete each job: they do it based on the number of installations that we complete. So, if we don't manage to do the minimum that they expect, we are told off and threatened. They don't care how many hours each job takes, the worker's rights do not matter. (Antonio, 2015)

Critical approaches to protest events

In the course of positing a 'mixed method' that examines both spatial circumstance and critical approaches to discourse, we are nonetheless aware of the forms of censure that are levelled at analysts who declare their allegiance to 'radical' positions, perspectives which are regularly applied to the ideological composition of public life in general, and 'elite' political discourse in particular. Some authors argue that methods like critical discourse analysis (CDA) are unable to produce a reliable interpretation of the subject matter under scrutiny. We note, for example, the critique of CDA made by Jones and Collins (2010) on the grounds that its 'linguistic methods […] actually get in the way of understanding the political and ideological significance of discursive practices' (p. 18). Although we feel that this particular accusation needs further discussion, we are more receptive to their claim that 'a particular communicative action can only be grasped through an exploration of the communicative conduct in its actual place' (p. 18), precisely because it reinforces our belief that generalised descriptions of social movement activity are not theoretically productive (such as the remarks made by della Porta, noted above).

With regard to political allegiance, we would note that there is no absolute requirement that the study of political events should contribute to a general *social critique*, in the sense that the absence of a comprehensively critical stance does not mean that scholars are unable or unwilling to take note of injustice or inequality, just as the existence of a radical posture need not necessarily suggest that the analyst is sensitive to all forms of oppression. Despite these caveats, our contention (stated above) is that there is a theoretical deficiency in any 'normative' model that assumes that the executive interventions made in a democracy – in particular, police activities – are always qualitatively different from those associated with authoritarian polities.

The practical question, from our point of view, is the extent to which the theoretical positions associated with, or drawn from CDA, need to be supplemented with a spatiotemporal analysis of 'live' events, particularly with regard to the ways in which the authorities deal with the public manifestation of dissent.

Contested space

As already suggested above, the timely use by executive powers of measures that secure spatial control – manifested in this case through the initiative of private security guards – is part of the whole configuration of powers available to the authorities, powers that are at the same time generally denied to protesters and dissidents. The regular appearance in Spain of demonstrations that must follow agreed routes is no different to the standard practices found in other European states, explained by the fact that these manifestations are not meant to attain permanent forms of visibility. Besides the attempts to deny space to their critics, powerful institutions are also adept at 'staging' their own procedures in the spaces they seize, controlling the symbolic character of 'elite' events and using these occasions to promote a specific view of their activities. Teune (2013), for instance, describes the creation of photo opportunities within the 'maximum security zone of Heiligendamm' during a meeting of world leaders in 2007. In managing the activities of journalists, Germany's Federal Government Press and Information Office managed to secure 'specific angles of vision' (Teune, 2013, p. 207) through which the event could be viewed and therefore characterised. The public appearances managed by public and private authorities are thus highly controlled spatiotemporal events, performances produced by institutions that conduct their real business in private. The occupation of public space, therefore, represents a challenge both to this form of control, and to the narratives that powerful institutions wish to promote. In other words, the seizure of space by protesters calls into question the meaning of the staged events that are a regular feature of the public relations efforts of governments and the corporate sector. The occupation of the workplace, on the other hand, though often less visible, represents a challenge to the whole logic of ownership that underpins the patriarchal/capitalist system (see Ness & Azzenllini, 2011).

As an inherently *radical* act, therefore, the capture of a factory, or call centre, or educational institution by its workforce, relies on a different set of tactics than those employed in more open, public events. This was particularly noticeable in the case of the Telefónica occupation, because the 'outsourced' technical staff were not actually located in the building they seized, and were supposedly only independent workers on short-term or 'flexible' contracts.

The occupation of 23 May 2015 was not the first attempt the workers made to occupy the Telefónica premises in Plaça Catalunya. According to one of the engineers that we spoke to, a group of workers had initiated a similar action fifteen days earlier, although they 'left later the same day' because 'Telefónica got in touch with the engineers' and claimed they would resolve the issues that had been raised (Miguel, 2015a). Not only did this first occupation fail it, also alerted the company to the engineers' intentions. Consequently, security officers were on guard the following days:

> After this experience, they were prepared. I mean, they closed the main door, so people would have to use the smaller door on the side. They could then control the flow of people coming in. If the guards saw a couple of technicians passing by, they closed the door immediately. (Miguel, 2015a)

It was against this backdrop that the engineers managed to occupy the building on 23 May. One of those involved described the action as follows: 'on Saturday morning,

the sub-contracted technicians arrived in a van. They were wearing plain clothes, so as not to raise suspicions. The sales people [those working inside the building] didn't know what was going on'. Here, a degree of subterfuge was employed, as a counter measure to the activities of the security guards, who had previously denied access to the technicians: previously, the distinctive uniforms worn by the workers had made them easily identifiable. The technicians, now clad in ordinary clothes, carried out the first incursion using 'two waves of technicians' composed of 'twenty or thirty people' who entered the building 'at about 11am, to *control* the situation' (our emphasis). This incident demonstrates one of the hard facts of this type of action: the workers must use their collective strength in a decisive and timely manner, against their essentially ruthless corporate or state opponents. Our respondent noted, for example, the insincerity of the company when, during the first occupation attempt, 'they promised they would deal with all the issues, but it was just a trick so [the technicians] would leave the building' (Miguel, 2015a).

These details should not suggest, however, that the workers had only to contend with the employers, the police, security guards, and a dysfunctional mainstream media (see below). The strikers had also to face the fact that the established trade unions were complicit in the reproduction of the system their actions had called into question. One spokesperson noted that:

> Initially, the unions, CC.OO. and U.G.T., suggested that we strike two days per week, for two weeks. In practice, this meant that we still had to complete all the work in the remaining days before the week was over. Then, they agreed a six-day strike, which was cancelled the day before it was due to start. The problem is not that they cancelled the strike, but the fact that they agreed worse conditions than the ones we had before the strike! We went on a demonstration to *protest against the unions* and the way they had dealt with the issues. Nobody came out to acknowledge us, to speak to us, nothing. CC.OO. called the works committee to see if we could meet 'again' … 'again' you know, as if the demonstration had counted as a meeting. There are rumours that UGT wants to get involved again to 'improve' the agreement – *not to rectify what they had messed up.* (Carlos, 2015, our emphasis)

Although much of the activity observed in and around the building constituted an active form of democratic exchange, there were limits to this aspect of the organisation, as one of our respondents, Miguel, went on to explain:

> Whatever we are planning to do, only the strike committee knows, based on how their conversations with Telefónica are progressing. The committee decides what to do and then they inform the rest of us … if they were all involved in the decision-making process, someone may pass the information to Telefónica or to the subcontracting companies … once the information is out amongst us, it is difficult to ensure that it will not reach the wrong ears. We don't want the companies to anticipate our tactics. (Miguel, 2015b)

The grassroots 'mediation' of protest

> As you can see here [inside the occupation], there are also lots of people who come in to see what's going on, to have a nose around, to sign the petition … Everyone is welcome. They are surprised because they haven't heard anything about this. It's not in the media, so they walk by and wonder what's happening. It takes them by surprise. (Antonio, 2015)

This description of the 'public's' encounter with the occupation, exactly matches the experience of the authors of this article. Although our work over the last three years

has been based on the study of contemporary protest in Spain, we had actually spent most of May 2015 making a documentary on Memory and the Spanish Civil War. After collecting material, including over 40 interviews, from a dozen cities, towns and villages, we arrived in Barcelona intending to take a day off. Turning the corner into Plaça Catalunya, we were greeted by an astonishing sight: the occupation of the Telefónica building was in full swing, complete with a stall carrying literature, windows covered in posters and graffiti, strikers distributing leaflets, ranks of private security guards, and a man shouting through a megaphone. We had seen nothing about this event in the mainstream media, and the contrast with the commercial ambience of the square was profound. Access to the building was entirely open, except when strike meetings were held, at which point only journalists were allowed to enter: brandishing some of the equipment used for our documentary (hastily collected from our hotel) we were given admittance. As we gathered data and interviews, however, the enduring question remained – why had this event not been prominent in the news?

The belief that media institutions represent a cohesive, organised centre of power, or at least a functional expression of collective influence, runs parallel to, and in some cases underpins, the argument that mainstream channels of communication comprise a dominant system, one that (irrespective of the editorial stance assumed by individual establishments) acts against or restricts the free reproduction of meaning. A number of writers have set out to interrogate this claim, stopping short perhaps of full agreement with its conclusions, but making nonetheless trenchant critiques of the chronic imbalance in access to the mechanisms of public communication, the hierarchical structures that underpin journalistic activity, and the limitations of the various conceptual frames employed to generate news.

In effect, a broadly critical approach to institutions and outputs is the default position assumed by most academic studies of public communication. In addressing both structural and discursive factors in the production of meaning, these fields of enquiry acknowledge the negative influence of 'powerful political élites' (Manning, 2001, p. 18), 'media moguls' and 'financial corporations' (Castells, 2012, pp. 8–9). The concerns of the Telefónica strikers on the issue of public representation were, of course, more immediate. Although they possessed a critique of media treatment, their main task was in supplying a counter-argument to the misinformation generated by the company, yet even the existence of the strike and occupation was not widely known. This, as one respondent explained, involved the release of material online:

> Some people are in charge of audio-visuals, that is, they put stuff up on social media. Videos, photos … anything that helps to raise awareness, so that people know what's happening. The media are not talking about it, and when they do mention it, they don't tell the whole story, you know? (Carlos, 2015)

The real point, however, is that the strikers were able to use their embodied presence in a building that had been transformed into a haven for grassroots democratic expression (the confidential strategies of the strike committee apart), so that the actual experience offered to visitors was that of a raw, untidy, noisy, tiring but peaceful 'revolution'. In effect, therefore, the concentration of representative forms in mainstream media may well have certain advantages, but a direct encounter with a workers' occupation has a quite different and more profound impact:

At night, after dinner, we have a concert or some sort of event, and people come in. It helps to raise awareness. The other night there was a magic trick performance, and we bring in music … University students and people who are at work during the day come to see us in the evening, and events like this draw more people in. A group of people play cards, for example, so we join in and spend time like that. The point is to keep people in, so there are more of us. (Carlos, 2015)

In some cases, partly as a result of the attempts made to find every possible avenue for publicity, established media currents followed the lead of the strikers. For example, the blog TeleAfonica, and its related social media sites, became a source of information for the news media that covered the events. From the beginning of the conflict, the online newspaper *Diagonal* had covered the strike and the development of the talks (Martínez López, 2015a). On 6 May, *Diagonal* published an article titled 'Telefónica technicians' strike continues despite the UGT and CCOO agreement' (Martínez López, 2015b, our translation). Here, the newspaper used information from the TeleAfonica ~~Twitter account~~ blog that drew attention to the arrest of seven technicians in Madrid.

However, this positive coverage was an exception to the rule. National newspapers only referred to the strike to emphasise the fact that thousands of users had been affected by the technicians' actions. For example, *El Mundo*, in the article 'More than 200,000 users affected by Telefónica's strike' (Bravo Cuiñas, 2015), refers to the strike that was initiated in Madrid on 28 March, but frames its story from the perspective of the disruptions that the clients had to endure, either because they were waiting for new services to be connected, or because they required technical support to repair faults. In this case, Telefónica was allowed to assert that there were only about '700 acts of sabotage', and that there were some customers who were 'paying more' because they were in the process of moving to other companies, yet their services were still routed through Telefónica (Bravo Cuiñas, 2015). It is only in the second part of the article that the newspaper explained the reasons for the strikes.

Resisting negative representation

In addition to raising awareness and engaging with people – essentially, anyone who *saw* the occupation in progress and decided to take a closer look – the engineers also seemed particularly concerned about the possibility that the occupation might be ~~charcaterised~~ characterised as 'violent'. Their worries were underpinned, in the first instance, by the legal framework within which they were operating:

The same day of the occupation, on Saturday, Telefónica made a formal complaint and the public prosecutor's office accepted it. The *mossos* came here, and were just awaiting the official notice to force us to vacate the building. But the judge didn't want to get involved, because it was the day before the elections. He said he would look into it on Monday. Then, on Monday, he decided that there was no evidence of criminal behaviour, but this was a work-related conflict that must be solved by the parts involved. (Miguel, ~~2015~~ 2015b)

The technicians were, therefore, very careful not to engage in any 'criminal' behaviour that would give Telefónica the legal grounds to force them out of the building:

Nobody breaks anything because that would be entering into criminal territory. We have only put up posters and stickers. The phones and all that stuff ~~was~~ were put away by the sales people. They are all at home. We are only technicians here. (Carlos, 2015)

Carlos also mentioned the CCTV cameras in the building, which were 'recording 24/7'. In fact, the cameras had been covered at some point during the occupation, but it was later decided that the recordings might provide useful evidence if the authorities came into the building and the police started mistreating the workers. In the meantime, the technicians organised shifts so that there were 'always some people at the door, at least six, to check who is coming in, in case someone is just looking for trouble. We have two-hour shifts so that people at the door are always fresh' (Carlos, 2015).

In addition to preventing any situations that would give the judge a reason to order their eviction, the technicians' efforts to maintain the peaceful nature of the occupation was also explained by a second motive: to avoid the negative images that the media would use to cover the event. Of course, the occupation had received very little coverage in national media, but the workers felt that this could change immediately if an opportunity arose to delegitimise their struggle. Their refusal of violence, as a way to protect their cause, was therefore central to their strategies, including their planned response if and when the police came to evict them:

> When the judge decides that we have to leave, we will sit down on the floor and let the guards take us out. Peaceful resistance, that's what we will do. By sitting down, we avoid any actions that could be misconstrued as violent, and lead to a brawl that would end up making us look bad. We need to avoid that. We are not here to create trouble. We are demanding our rights, as workers, as human beings. (Miguel, 2015b)

For the moment, however, the problem was not that they were being misrepresented, but the fact that their struggle was hardly being represented at all. As one blog post noted:

> The occupation of the flagship of Spain's second main company is not newsworthy enough unless it is visited by representatives of institutional politics. Base politics … is best not shown, in case … it occurs to the commons that they might self-organise. (TeleAfonica, 2015d)

By the time the engineers occupied the building in the centre of Barcelona, on 23 May, the strike had already been in progress for almost seven weeks. However, the news media had barely acknowledged the actions. The conviction that it would prove impossible to get the mainstream media to cover the strike, can be found in Antonio's reference to Jordi Évole, a journalist known for his incisive interviews in *Salvados* (La Sexta), and for his critical stance towards all manifestations of injustice and. Antonio told us that:

> Jordi Évole came to see us. He was here, talking to us. We asked him to make a programme on what was going on. He said, 'sure, I can come and film, and interview you, but then, when I go back, the channel won't let me do anything with it. I won't be able to air it'. (Antonio, 2015)

Antonio's line was that *even* Évole would not be given the space to address their grievances. The irony was, as Antonio pointed out, that they would 'probably be in the news if we were beating each other up, or setting fire to things'. Indeed, according to the protest paradigm, the media would normally only cover protest actions when there is evidence of disruption or criminal behaviour, which would help to obscure a deeper and more meaningful coverage of the underlying struggle (Lee, 2014, p. 2727). Indeed, the newsworthiness of the event would increase dramatically if these images of protest could be turned into a story of violence and destruction.

This is not to argue, however, that the paucity of news coverage was explained by lack of newsworthiness, as the event did seem to animate a number of typically recognised

news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). The determining factor in the relative absence of coverage was, instead, the strong financial connections that the mainstream media (national television and newspapers) had established with Telefónica (see above), including lucrative advertising contracts. The workers, well aware of the powerful commercial forces that limited the visibility of their message, devised a number of strategies to counteract the influence of Telefónica and the broader capitalist marketplace. One of the tactics, mentioned above, consisted of the organisation of activities and events within and around the building in order to draw people in and provide information about the strike. During these exchanges, visitors asked questions, showing an interest in the technicians' plight, and sharing their own very similar experiences in their respective workplaces. This face-to-face work was important, in the sense that it helped to create a sense of solidarity and support that extended to wider sections of the working class and their communities.

Besides the direct engagement with citizens, Telefónica's workers also sought to extend the visibility of the physical occupation into the social media realm. Not only did online tools facilitate communication amongst groups of technicians in different locations throughout the country, but they also provided a platform for the release of articles (in the form of social media posts, blog entries, and so on) for public consumption. Whenever any news media outlet covered the strike or the occupation, the article would be posted on the blog, alongside a commentary that addressed its reliability and attempted to clarify any misunderstandings or misinformation contained in the original source (see, for example, TeleAfonica, 2015b).

In addition, the blog played a central part in the dissemination of the latest developments in the negotiations, for example, when they confirmed, following the end of the occupation, that a meeting had been arranged with the sub-contracting companies and Telefónica (TeleAfonica, 2015b). Once this and subsequent meetings were held, the outcomes and re-assessments of the situation were also offered online (TeleAfonica, 2015c).

Acts of solidarity vs. the atomisation of class

The workers' blog posts combined information about the actions with encouraging messages about continuing to work for the common good. On 28 May, for example, a post stated that an assembly had been celebrated earlier that day and had been attended by colleagues who were on strike, and *also* by some who had returned to work. Rather than creating a rift between these groups, the blog acknowledges that the struggle is difficult and colleagues who had abandoned the strike continued to support the cause in different ways. The discourse is not divisive, but inclusive:

> Something that is very clear, to all of us, is that even the colleagues who are now back to work want us to win. We need to think, collectively, how to do it. [Other colleagues] have sent messages of solidarity. (TeleAfonica, 2015d)

Descriptions of the interventions that had taken place during the assembly were also highly informative. According to these sources, some of the workers had:

> proposed that there should be further actions in the following days, and emphasis has also been placed on the fact that we are constantly being watched in the shop. Big Brother is watching. Some interventions have also reminded us that we need to plan some immediate

actions, but it is necessary to think, together, about the medium and long term. We should think about some actions, ready to respond to any movements that Telefónica may make. Our aim is to win this fight, knowing that we are confronting a multinational company and that we all need one another, within and without the collective of technicians, and we will have to enter many battles. (TeleAfonica, 2015d)

This dedicated approach is particularly significant in a context where, following the escalation of social protests in 2011, activists have recognised, and tried to unite, the various interest groups, campaigns and causes that make up popular opposition to the government's 'neo-liberal' agenda. This was evident in the invention of different coloured 'tides' (or *mareas*) to represent different groups of citizens, divided into socio-economic and professional sectors (green for education; white for health; maroon for the 'economic exiled', and so on). In the case of education, for example, this approach would attempt to erase the hierarchical difference between students, teachers, professional services staff, and so on, based on their common experience within a specific sector with particular concerns: yet, on the other hand, the existence of other tides that had also to confront corporate power and the state, invited acts of solidarity while, in theory, citizens could belong to more than one group, depending on where they were placed and how their problems were articulated. Gutiérrez described this form of organisation as 'a networked post-trade unionism, or as a collective self-organization oriented towards the commons' (2015, p. 12). The authors of this article witnessed the physical manifestation of this principle on a demonstration in Barcelona on 13 February 2013, when the different coloured waves followed various routes across the city until they converged in the centre. The larger context here is, of course, the historical existence in Spain of horizontal trade unions like the anarchist C.N.T. (Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores), in which the workers belonged, irrespective of trade, to one union composed of various branches (though these individual elements were often based on industrial socialisms).

The employers, however, pursued an entirely different social philosophy, designed to atomise the working class by offering it a model of behaviour that was both economically advantageous to the company concerned, and intended to create ideologically compliant individuals forced to survive in a highly competitive environment.

Conclusion

The case study presented in this article is not, in strictly economic terms, a unique event, since industrial relations in Spain are largely determined by the introduction of precarious modes of employment that are meant to maximise profits while simultaneously transferring systemic risk to individuals. Kassam (2015), writing in the *Guardian*, noted the existence of 'a growing section of Spanish society made up from the workforce during the economic crisis and now struggling to land anything other than precarious short-term contracts' (p. 23). These temporary jobs are not unusual, but have become the standard way of managing employment, in sectors ranging from education to health. Prime Minister Rajoy's contention that a million new jobs have been made available must be seen in this context. As Kassam argues, 'short-term work is the definitive feature of the new jobs being created, making up about 90% of the contracts signed in Spain so far this year' (p. 23).

What marks out the Telefónica occupation, is the ability of the workers to enact a form of solidarity that militates against the separation of individuals into discrete economic

units. Movistar, the Telefónica subsidiary, operates a monopoly in Spain, a monolith that, in theory, brings all its operatives under one form of discipline. Yet, the particular hazards and pressures faced by the technicians and engineers, who work in a more practical or 'manual' sector than the sales teams, produced a form of distinct identity. It was clear throughout that the workers were engaged in a conflict in which they were able to project their moral conviction far beyond the confines of the Telefónica building itself. The fact that they did not attain the blanket coverage that a more sensational event might have achieved, is probably less important than their ability to make an impression on the more active sections of the trade union and protest movements: it is these centres of influence that, though less visible in national 'broadcast' media, provide the structures that can sustain an industrial campaign. Where the mainstream media neglect sections of its public, these elements in turn begin to ignore the media and, in some cases at least, create their own communicative structures.

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