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# **The Indignados as a socio-environmental movement.**

## **Framing the crisis and democracy**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study analyzes the framing processes of the Indignados movement in Barcelona, as an exemplar of the latest wave of protests, and argues that it expresses a new ecological-economic way out of the crisis. It finds that the movement was not just a reaction to the economic crisis and austerity policies, but that it put forward a metapolitical critique of the social imaginary and (neo)liberal representative democracy. The diagnostic frames of the movement denunciate the subjugation of politics and justice to economics, and reject the logic of economism. The prognostic frames of the movement advance a vision of socio-ecological sustainability and of “real democracy”, each articulated differently by a “pragmatist” and an “autonomist” faction within the movement. It argues that frames are overarching outer boundaries that accommodate different ideologies. Ideologies can nevertheless also be put into question by antagonizing frames. Furthermore, through the lens of the Indignados critique, the distinction between materialist and post-materialist values that characterizes the New Social Movement literature is criticised, as “real democracy” is connected to social and environmental justice as well as to a critique of economism and the “imperial mode of living”.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Crises shake our mental conception of the world and political subjectivities (Harvey, 2014), but they are not simply “exogenous events”: they are a matter of interpretation of reality, and social movements are the carriers of those interpretations (Rochon, 1998; Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). Characterizations of the crisis that started since 2008 as a “multi-dimensional crisis” or “multiple crises” are widespread. This article aims to analyse a wide social movement that emerged under the thrust of the crisis. The *Indignados* movement has featured the largest occupations of Spanish squares since the transition to democracy in the 70s, while enjoying support from over 70% of the wider population (Metroscopia, 2011). The Tunisian, Egyptian and Icelandic revolutions represented major sources of inspiration for the movement (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013; Castells, 2012), which in turn acted as a springboard for “indignant” or Occupy mobilisations from Portugal and Greece to the United Kingdom, United States and Israel. Some authors (ibid; Tejerina et al., 2013) have identified a global cycle of contention, sharing the symbolic dimension of “square politics” (Castells, 2012: 135; Bensi et al, 2013; Maria Antentas and Vivas, 2012), demands and values such as democracy, social justice and dignity (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013), directed against social and economic inequalities (Tejerina et al., 2012).

This article aims to contribute to the burgeoning literature on the recent wave of protests by shedding light on the cognitive dimension of the Indignados movement, through the study of framing processes and collective identity. Specifically, it intends to analyse the interpretation of the crisis, the visions put forward and the conceptualizations of “real democracy” advanced by participants of the movement. It finds that the movement was not just a reaction to austerity policies, but put forward an integrated critique to contemporary societies, a meta-political critique.

This article also delves into a completely neglected issue in the literature on the latest cycle of protest: the role of the environmental critique within the movement. Situating itself within the debate on New Social Movement (NSM) theory, it identifies its limitations and challenges, shedding light particularly on two issues. On the one hand, the role of ideology within the movement and their relationship with frames. On the other, whether the movement is bearer of materialistic or post-materialistic values, and whether such a distinction makes any sense. In this direction, another question it aims to answer is why, in the midst of what is considered to be the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, the movement did not plea for resumed growth.

Having briefly introduced the composite theoretical framework and the methodology, the fourth section contains a historical excursus over the development of the movement in Barcelona, especially focusing on the square occupation period. In the fifth section I proceed with the framing analysis. Implications of the two theoretical debates on ideologies and values are discussed, before conclusions are drawn.

## **2. THE CULTURAL TURN AND THE COGNITIVE PRAXIS**

Having been marginalised for twenty years by the resource mobilisation paradigm, grievances and ideologies received renewed attention with the cultural turn in social movement studies. NSM theory perceived “new movements” – a cluster of movements that began to emerge out of the students movement of the 60s, and which included the environmental, peace and second-wave feminism movements - as products of postindustrial society, which transcend class as the main social cleavage. NSMs focus on cultural and symbolic concerns linked to issues of identity and everyday life, post-materialist values like autonomy and self-expression, and use decentralized organization and radical mobilization tactics, intimately linked to the credibility crisis of conventional participation channels of Western democracies (Johnston et al, 1994). These features were thought antithetical to the “old” labour movement, focused on political conflict and “materialistic values” such as social rights, redistribution, and the stimulation of economic growth (Offe, 1985; Johnston et al., 1994; Inglehart,

1990; Habermas, 1981). Critiques of historical misrepresentation aside (Calhoun, 1993), NSM theory is deemed to represent a paradigm shift from class and economic reductionism to culture, focusing on the neglected question of “why” movements emerge (as opposed to the “how” of Resource Mobilization and Political Process theories) (Melucci, 1985; Buechler, 1995). The concept of collective identity (Melucci, 1989; 1995) enabled to bridge micro (individual motivations) and macro dimensions (macrostructural models) (Calhoun, 1993). Collective identity is developed interactively through connections within a group concerning three interwoven levels: a cognitive and moral framework, relational and emotional investments (ibid; Polletta and Jasper, 2001). It requires the construction of a “multipolar action system” (Melucci, 1989) in which the collective “we” is negotiated through evolving tensions within movements.

This paper focuses on the social/cultural construction of meaning by looking at framing through the prism of collective identity and the evolution of “action in action” (Melucci, 1995:60, 1989) so as to avoid the reductionist bias towards the psychological (individual) level of which framing has been charged (Buechler, 2002; Benford, 1997; Benford and Snow, 2000).

The social constructionist concept of framing, borrowed from Goffman (1974), conceives movements as signifying agents actively involved in the “politics of signification” also involving media, local governments and the state (Snow and Benford, 1988). Framing processes are “schemata of interpretations” that act by focusing attention on what is relevant, articulating mechanisms and perceptions so that a narrative about facts is created or reconstituted, like when unfortunate but tolerable social conditions are transformed into mobilising grievances and injustices (Snow, 2013). Framing tasks involve: 1) a diagnosis of some aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration, thus creating a responsibility; 2) a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem, hypothesising new social patterns; and 3) a call to arms or rationale for engaging in corrective action (Snow and Benford, 1988:199).

Despite the popularity of the approach, several limitations and failures have been noted. From an interpretive/constructionist tradition, framing’s emphasis shifted to strategic textual artefacts (Westby, 2002), pushing beliefs and values to the periphery of the approach (Gillian, 2008). The concept of frame alignment for example was intended to link the strategic efforts of social movement actors with the interests of prospective adherents, dichotomising cultural and strategic orientation to action (Polletta, 1997). Snow and colleagues have been accused of using frames as a substitute for ideology (Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Buechler, 2002; Melucci, 1996:349) and of characterising ideology as an accomplishment of framing processes (for ex, in Hunt et al., 1994:191). While Snow and Benford (2000) construed ideologies as both constraint and resource in relation to framing

processes, there still remains a degree of confusion. Steinberg (1998) depicts frames as outer boundaries within which ideological processes of mobilisation vie for hegemonic control. Gillan (2008) points out that ideologies may contain many of the ingredients of specific frames, whereas Westby (2002) conceives ideologies as one component of frames, together with the “strategic imperative”.

In order to address critiques of framing as “decontextualised and disembodied” (Buechler, 2002) for their failure to grasp the ideology dimension, this paper examines and clarifies their relationships, by looking directly at the empirical case of the Indignados movement. This is even more compelling, given that new social movements have been depicted in some cases as “post-ideological” (Kuechler and Dalton, 1990; Offe, 1990).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In this article the Indignados movement is analysed dynamically in its process of framing construction and evolution, through the identification of transformative events. Transformative events are “turning points in structural change, concentrated moments of political and cultural activity” in which “very brief, spatially concentrated, and relatively chaotic sequences of action can have durable, spatially extended, and profoundly structural effects” (McAdam and Sewell, 2001:102). As pointed out by Snow (2013:474), “little research has examined systematically the discursive processes through which frames evolve, develop, and change”, hence the concept of transformative events, coupled with that of collective identity, is here instructive.

The analysis is based on two years of intensive field work on the Indignados movement in Barcelona. Participant observation was conducted from the start of the encampments in Plaza Catalunya through the subsequent decentralising evolution of the movement. This comprised attendance at neighbourhood assemblies, thematic commissions meetings, “inter-neighbourhood coordination spaces”, demonstrations and international gatherings such as Agora99.

Inextricably linked to discourse, frames are examined through thematic analysis of the transcripts of 40 in-depth interviews and 4 mini-focus groups (interviewees’ details can be found in the Annex), conducted between January 2012 and spring 2013, and covering participants’ accounts of participation as well as open reflection upon movement dynamics and debates (Johnston, 1995; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This work was also informed by additional fieldwork (about 40 interviews and participant observation) carried out until May 2014 as part of a wider research project on the

Indignados (Asara, 2015). Documents, websites, emails, flyers and literature produced by the movement were also analysed.

#### **4. HISTORICAL EXCURSUS: FRAMING through TRANSFORMATIVE EVENTS**

In Spain, the economic crisis translated into about 500,000 evicted families between 2007 and 2011 and an unemployment rate of 22%, and 47% among youngsters (February 2011). After the enactment of the first adjustment and austerity policies, in September 2010 a general strike against the new labour reform evolved unexpectedly into the occupation of the old seat of the Spanish Bank in Plaza Catalunya. Since the end of 2010, mobilizations against the Sinde Law on Internet regulation, a general strike called by university students, a demonstration organised in Madrid by the Platform “Youth without Future”, and the surge of new initiatives such as “Do not vote for them” and “State of Malaise” have marked the advent of a different political climate. In these months a new platform “Real Democracy Now” (RDN), constituted of disparate individuals and collectives from various cities, published a manifesto on Facebook and called for a demonstration on 15 May 2011, one week before the national elections, with the slogan “Real Democracy Now. We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers”. In the manifesto the activists declared outrage at the “dictates of big economic powers”, party dictatorship, the dominance of economism (i.e. “placing money above human beings”), social injustices and the corruption of politicians. Their call for an ethical revolution, successfully brought to the streets tens of thousands of people in more than 70 cities of Spain. Following encampments in Puerta del Sol in Madrid after the demonstration and their attempted eviction, occupations spread to more than 800 cities around the world. For some without a background in political activism, the videos and manifesto of RDN denouncing a *de facto* non democratic system caused a “frame transformation” involving a change in prior understandings and perspectives (Snow, 2013). The following excerpt is from an interview with a 30-year-old woman from the Outraged University Commission (I5:14):

*‘I had watched the videos of RDN when the demonstration was being prepared (...) For me the fact that in the videos there were girls saying “this is not a democracy, the real democracy...”, for me it was like... before I didn’t think about it, but I understood immediately the message and indeed I thought that they were very brave and that for me it was true’.*

The movement came to be known both as “Indignados”, from the famous pamphlet of Stephane Hessel (“Indignez-vous!”) and as “15M”, after the day of the first demonstrations. In Plaza Catalunya, where tens of thousands of people gathered, the atmosphere was charged with much energy,

solidarity, excitement, and illusion that real change was imminent. The RDN “frame makers” soon lost the control of developments, as is evident from a 35-year-old male RDN activist’s words:

*‘We felt that something was changing, that a new social movement had been generated, and that we were completely internal to it, without knowing what it was about. There was the sensation that we could not make this thing ours, because it was something completely explosive’ (I24:483).*

The demonstration and the following occupations were new in eschewing banners of organisations, labour unions, political parties, and they were using a language which appealed to citizens beyond any political spectrum. The 15M movement occurred in a climate of distrust not only of political parties but also of major labour unions. One of the main slogans was “no-one represents us”.

The mobilisation in the square gradually forged a new collective identity through what I would call the “political identity divesting” process, the implicit requirement of each participant to enter the square as a “bare” person, leaving aside one’s own ideological stance to create something anew, as this excerpt from a 26-year-old woman from the Degrowth Sub-Commission exemplified:

*‘What is happening is that politicians and bankers are making fun of us and we have to learn to find a way to counteract this power. So it is not a question of “what my tag is”, the important thing is that they are screwing us’ (I13:407).*

Even people who belonged to political organisations or labour unions were expected to participate unaffiliated, leaving behind ulterior political motives. Some participants commented in the square: “I come here not as a labour unionist of X, but as a person, as a participant to this assembly”. The 15M also raised expectations of creating new political ideals, as the following excerpt unveils:

*‘It was the idea of starting it all again, no? (...) I thought that it was about leaving aside all the “isms”, all of them: communism, Marxism, socialism, Trotskyism, anarchism and start once again with some ideals like “anti-capitalist”, “they don’t represent us” and assemblies, start it all over again. And I liked it.’ (I23:183).*

This “anonymous encountering space” seemed to “strengthen brotherhood, and the confluences of many” (I19:440). The “political identity divesting” process is very specific to the 15M movement and stemmed at least in part from the crisis of representation (I33:950):

*‘for me what makes sense is all the concepts that deal with “uniting”, rather than ideology (...). You have to participate yourself, there is no-one behind you telling you “you should arrive here”’ (I5:429).*

In a few days Plaza Catalunya turned into a “free space”, with myriads of different activities going on, and the formation of the first commissions, linked to the more strictly logistic and material



functions of the square. The centre of the square was composed of three artificial areas, Tahrir, Iceland and Palestine and around it were the different commissions and a brand-new urban garden. The *acampada* (square encampments) experienced a rapid and exponential increase in “complexification”, with a proliferation of commissions, subcommissions, neighbourhood assemblies, and very long General Assemblies (GA’s) late in the evening. These followed the global justice movement format (Maeckelbergh, 2012) as the transparent and accessible, decision-making body, moderated by the rotating “facilitation flotilla”, a diverse team from social centres and squatting backgrounds with assembly-facilitation experience.

#### **4.1. The Declaration of Minimal Demands and the eviction attempt**

The “Content Commission” was created to discuss and formulate a statement of “minimal demands”, to communicate to the wider public. The discussions nevertheless represented the first important conflict. Some participants, including anarchists and autonomous leftists were against the very idea of demanding something from the (neoliberal) state. Indeed, collective memories of the anarchist experience during the Spanish Civil War infused the discussions with libertarian ideals. Others felt that the enriching heterogeneity of the square precluded a quick prioritization of a finite list of demands, while still others feared that the radical connotations of claims would have been lost before the approval of the Content Commission and the GA was sought. Finally some perceived the process of the square as not just a means to something, but an end in itself.

Soon it was clear that the Content Commission was unable to formulate a declaration early on, hence while it generated a whole new set of thematic sub-commissions<sup>i</sup>, where participants could be involved in more sectorial and profound deliberations linked to long term objectives, “minimal demands” were confined to a newborn specific sub-commission. The final declaration included the following themes<sup>ii</sup>: no more privileges for politicians, bankers and those earning large incomes, decent salaries and quality of life for all, participatory democracy and freedom of information, the right to a house, to quality public services, and to environmental sustainability.

On 27 May 2011 an attempt to evict Plaza Catalunya with the excuse of cleaning the square produced a massive flow of support into the square. While non-violently resisting, some demonstrators were beaten by the police. This event, and the following reoccupation of the square, produced anger and then enthusiasm, and new adherents joined the movement to save the square. Frame alignment (“democracy is not real”) was strengthened for participants new to political activism, through the

shocking experience of repression. This event also reinforced the internal solidarity and the collective identity of participants by provoking further civil disobedience and more “confrontational” actions.

#### **4.2. The GA, content commissions and the INCS**

A second important internal conflict involved the removal of the encampments, which had a bearing also on subsequent developments. The majority view, reflected in the GA’s decisions, of a post-*acampada* evolution, involved a decentralisation of the movement to neighbourhoods, to ensure more active individual involvement in assemblies and local urban realities. A consensus regarding the exact timing for removing the encampments was not reached. While the majority of commissions/people left the square in the first week of June, a relatively small group of resistant people were “emotionally attached” to Plaza Catalunya square as a powerful symbolic “free space” and stayed until the third week. The square was a “*small paradise in which strong comradeship, formation, information were being lived, and you were generating your own resources, it was like a panacea*” (I22:279).

The lack of a full consensus on whether and when to remove the *acampada* was one of the factors that delegitimised the GA, which eventually ceased to be convened. Hence the Inter-Neighbourhood Coordination Space (INCS) became the only general coordination entity. Nevertheless, in some adversarial meetings of the INCS in September, it was decided that the INCS would not have decision making power, which belonged instead to neighbourhood assemblies, given that a central decision-coordinating organ was perceived as hierarchy reproduction. Moreover, according to the “neighbourhood perspective”, thematic commissions should have been dismantled, as they belonged to the previous phase, the *acampada*, and each thematic issue should have been dealt with at the neighbourhood level. In a difficult, “war of power” transition (I23:10), the INCS rejected any ‘inclusion’ of or interference from the thematic commissions, which, similarly to the GA had lost all representativeness in the eyes of neighbourhood partisans. Many committees were dismantled with the majority of participants pouring into the neighbourhoods - but others survived, like electoral law, communication, popular consultation, education, health, culture, outraged feminists, outraged university, degrowth, and international committees.

#### **4.3. The post-*acampada* phase**

The post-*acampada* period is characterised by rich activity at the neighbourhood level, with both assemblies and working groups in each neighbourhood gathering every 1-2 weeks, and coordinating

themselves through the INCS, as well as the continued activity of some commissions. The collective identity of the movement gradually shifted towards more radical positions, hence somehow conflating the rich heterogeneity of (ideological) positions.

On 14-15 June 2011 thousands of people camped around the Catalan Parliament, symbolically blocking the entrance to parliamentarians, to protest against proposed social cuts. Since mid-June the 15M started to coordinate actions with the “Platform of Mortgage Victims” (PAH), an assembly-based platform born to protect the rights of homeowners against repossessions and lobby for a change towards non-recourse debt through direct action against mortgage execution, and legislative initiatives. On 15 October 2011 an international demonstration with the slogan “United against the global crisis” witnessed the participation of 951 cities from 82 countries in the world, and in Barcelona the demonstration was followed by actions and occupations.

After the student mobilisations in November, 2012 witnessed two general strikes against labour reform and austerity policies, the “Valencian spring” against cuts in education, the controversial initiative of “surrounding” the Parliament in Madrid (“Rodea el Congreso”) on 26-29 September, and celebrations of the anniversary of the movement from the 12-15 May in many Spanish cities. In Barcelona the latter involved a demands manifesto, 4 intensive days of assemblies, speeches and the organisation of several actions. The event also triggered initiatives against banks, such as the lawsuit against the bailed out Bankia through crowd funding (“15MpaRato”).

## **5. FRAMING ANALYSIS**

### **5.1. Motivational framing: indignation**

The 15M was the result of an “indignation surge”, connected with the emotional dimension of an indignation frame and the related identification of an injustice. For mobilisation to occur, “inchoate anxieties” need to go through a process of transformation into moral indignation and outrage towards concrete policies and decision-makers (Goodwin et al, 2001). The RDN manifesto explicitly targeted the culprits: politicians, bankers and businessmen. The 15M, especially during the *acampada* phase, was extremely heterogeneous in its composition but managed to build a collective identity because of its strong inclusiveness, tolerance and solidarity, which allowed the participants to find a common ground beyond their ideological differences. This collective identity was boosted through the construction of daily sharing practices of *caceroladas*, food sharing, night camping, assemblies, direct

action etc. After the movement's decentralisations, networks of mutual support were established in each neighbourhood to help victims of foreclosures and/or people experiencing economic difficulties.

The characterising emotion of indignation nevertheless does not make the 15M a solely "emotional movement", as pointed out by Bauman<sup>iii</sup>. This is clear in the wider cognitive critique explained below.

## **5.2. Diagnostic framing: economism, the counter-revolution, and the crisis of values**

The 15M movement put the denunciation of the undemocratic character of current (liberal) parliamentary systems centre stage. Participants contend that voting every 4 years does not make a democracy. The frequency of unfulfilled electoral promises, and a corrupt two-party system that does not allow real political choice, creates an unrepresentative system, that is a "non-real democracy".

They also point to a need to advance citizens' rights to participation in decision-making, as a 35-year-old RDN activist put it: "*politics belongs to us day by day, and hence we want to decide on what it is, on what our lives are*" (I24:903). The slogan "no-one represents us" is both a denunciation of the un-representativeness of political institutions as well as the actualised affirmation of the prefigurative politics of direct democracy. The RDN slogan "we are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers" rejects the subjugation of politics and justice to economics and the very interpretation of the crisis in terms of economic logics, as epitomized by the following excerpt:

*'What normal people intend with crisis is simply the economic problem, no? They don't even touch upon the cultural crisis (...) But it [i.e. the economic crisis] is an invention because there would be an economic crisis if it wasn't possible to produce...and this is not true, on the contrary, we can produce more than it is needed'* (I21:429).

The cultural substratum of the crisis and the actual degradation stem from the submission of all values to the economic one. The critique of economism was already in the RDN manifesto as "placing money above human beings". Economism is criticised both from a cultural and political perspective: "*for me the problem is that money has become an end in itself. When capital accumulation becomes the only objective of the economy, this is a problem, the problem is that it does not respect anything else*" (I31:772). Politics is subjugated by economic powers, and states have ceded their political sovereignty to the Troika and other major financial powers.

The debtocracy and the neoliberal-austerity policies are a "counterrevolution" (the slogan "this is not a crisis, it is a swindle" is revelatory), as an economic crisis has been fabricated to further dispossess the lower classes and undermine the (never-integrally achieved) welfare state.

Two other famous slogans were "System error: restart", and "we are not anti-system, the system is anti-us". The system of financialised capitalism undergoes a crisis whose root lies in the prioritization

of certain types of values, such as the economic profit of investors, firms and individuals. Indeed the crisis is intrinsic to the productive model that leads to an unsustainable situation: “*we are realising that chasing only our profit does not bring benefits to the whole, on the contrary in the end it ends up being a catastrophe*” (I10:575). There is widespread consciousness about the Western world’s high consumption levels and the ecological limits to growth. A “model change”, with “model” meaning the way development is conceived, has become imperative and “the new model” must subsume the insight that the “capitalist model of economic growth” is exhausted.

The cultural crisis, or crisis of values, is hence also epitomised in consumerism – that “*has eaten the other values*” – and which, together with individualism, economism and competition, explains the cultural degradation of present society and the erosion of solidarity. It is a crisis of direction, or a crisis of the meaning of life: “*we are in a mechanism, like hamsters on a wheel, once in a while you fall down and say: “we should really go down the wheel and do other things” and instead the majority of people is still there running*” (I20:297)

### **5.3. Prognostic framing**

#### **5.3.1. Real democracy**

Two famous slogans of the movement were “they call it democracy and it isn’t” and “no-one represents us”. The latter could be intended in two fashions, depending on the political-ideological positions. On the one hand, there is the libertarian quest that self-organization and a direct democracy system could be generalised and substitute parliamentary systems. This vision is typically associated with what I call below the “autonomy faction”. This position is characterized by a communitarian perspective centred on the neighbourhood and founded upon solidarity relationships, or with confederate systems and networks of direct democracy. Hence it follows a rejection of the professionalisation of politics. Profound and broad education processes are perceived as an important prerequisite for the possibility of a direct democracy generalisation.

On the other hand, the slogan “no-one represents us” is intended by others as a provocation and as a claim to strengthen participation within institutional politics, and improve representation mechanisms (through for example, but not limited to, a change of electoral law). While this “participatory democracy” perspective maintains that some dose of representation is necessary or cannot be avoided, it also foresees injections of direct democracy (for example at the local level or with referenda) in a sort of mixed system, or it is compounded by visions of electronic democracy or technopolitics (as in

the “X Party”, the new 15-M project for a political party). This perspective is typically associated with what below I call “pragmatist faction”.

Participants from both perspectives alluded to the citizen’s responsibility to participate by exerting control methods such as protests. Assemblies are valued for empowering and fostering participation, conveying deliberation and ‘collective intelligence’. Although the assembly method is slow and tiring, “*what is important is the process, because if the process is not carried out well, what comes out, what is decided in an assembly is not important because people didn’t assume it*” (I22:243). The ability to reach a consensus within an assembly depends on the willingness of all participants to reach it (and not to block it), hence the importance of maintaining an open attitude of tolerance. Assemblies are also critically assessed. Some of the critiques included the dominance exerted by those having oratory skills, populism, and the risk of political manipulation in consensus building.

“Real democracy” is not limited only to the political domain, but it is connected to wider demands for social and environmental justice (Glasius and Pleyers, 2012; Maria Antentas and Vivas, 2012).<sup>iv</sup> Further, for the autonomous faction, economic democracy is an important ingredient for a “real democracy”, and it is linked to radical changes through democratic (self)-management of work and production. A real democracy is “to imagine a democracy in all the realms of life” (I26:1131).

### **5.3.2. The imperial mode of living and degrowth**

A diffused awareness that the economic crisis is not temporary nor cyclical and that previous (unsustainable) levels of consumption and welfare cannot be resumed is widespread (see also Calle Collado, 2012; Alvarez, 2011; Arellano Yanguas et al., 2012:55; Jurado Gilabert, 2014:60). The environmental unsustainability of economic growth was also one of the points of the Manifesto of Minimal Demands, which stated: “the economic system cannot be based on indefinite growth. This is not sustainable”. The degrowth discourse, supported, among others, by “movement intellectuals” (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991) such as Arcadi Oliveres, is closely tied to redistributive and social justice issues:

*“Welfare (state) means that all that we generate is reinvested into the population in the most uniform possible way (...) Welfare is social justice for everyone the same, so well, this implies that we should lower our acquisitive level, there is no problem with that, but for all the same”* (I22:517).

A degrowth commission was already established since the *acampada* (along with the Environment Commission), and after the encampments it continued to organize activities such as “the day without purchases”, the indignant university, awareness raising public talks etc. For many participants,

ecological limits to growth have already been reached, so the solution is a socio-economic model of society not based on growth of consumption and of appropriation of resources – what Brand and Wissen (2012) call the “imperial mode of living” - which would entail thorough cultural changes. The degrowth vision of the indignados links directly with a critique of capitalism:

*“Fairly distributed, everything is possible but the capitalist system works in a way that it only functions when it has the maximum profit. In this way it is a perverted system because it is based on maximum growth”* (I12: 378).

Claims for social rights in education, health and housing - through for ex. demonstrations for public education (like in the “Marea groga”), encampments in public hospitals against privatizations and actions against repossessions and occupations of evicted apartments held by banks (a vast campaign called “Obra social de la PAH”) - went hand in hand with the claims for a different economic model not based on economic growth and ever increasing consumption. As explained by a participant (I20:27):

*“Until a few years ago there were more [social] rights and those need to be recuperated, but on the other hand there is awareness of the fact that there is an unsustainable economic model that cannot continue. Other roads have to be found in the sense that it must be understood that unsustainable consumption has to be reduced. To lose a part of consumerism does not mean to lose quality but to gain it, and to exit this aberrant and intolerable logics of production and consumption”*.

An “environmental justice” component of the movement materialized in an activism directed at safeguarding and protecting neighbourhoods and territories against urban speculation, from the platform “Salvem el Casc Antic” to mobilizations against the project “opening 16 doors to Collserola Park”<sup>v</sup>, from the commission “Rethinking Poble Sec” and the platform “Aturem el Pla Paralel”<sup>vi</sup> to the platform “Aturem Eurovegas” against the construction of the huge gambling complex of Eurovegas.

## **6. COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND FRAME DISPUTES**

After the removal of the *acampada*, the collective identity of the movement evolved towards focusing on the construction of alternatives at the local level. This second stage stemmed in part from the awareness that a political change could not be brought about swiftly. Nevertheless, the friction between thematic commissions/RDN on one side, and the neighbourhoods, on the other, meant that two different factions proceeded concurrently. According to the diagnostic framing of virtually all

the interviewees active at the neighbourhood level but also some participants of commissions such as Degrowth or Education (termed here as “autonomy faction”), social rights degradation demands the establishment of a “parallel system” of alternatives and self-management. Efforts flowed into the construction of micro-experiences in many different spheres with the vision of extending self-management to many life realms, with the belief that social change needs to start from the individual level. The prognostic vision is hence actualised, instantiated and implemented in a practical life experiment. As one participant with an intensive activism past in the alterglobalization movement asserted: “*The Social Forum was to speculate on how a better world could be, and 15-M is to demand that we wanted a better world, not ask for it but build it*” (I19:391). A variety of initiatives have been realised or strongly supported: the Catalunya Fair (and Network) of Solidarity Economy, free social canteens for the disadvantaged, second hand barter markets organised by many neighbourhood assemblies<sup>vii</sup>, (legal and not) self-management of vacant urban lots, disused factories, social centres<sup>viii</sup>, self-organised alternative neighbourhoods celebrations, communal urban gardens<sup>ix</sup>, and consumption cooperatives<sup>x</sup>.

According to the alternative faction grossly associated with commissions, especially the Communication and International commissions, RDN, the X Party and the Platform for the Citizens Audit of Debt (PACD), radical changes could only result from a proactive and programmatic activism based on skilful organisation (also through ICT), and aimed at concrete objectives, such as joint campaigns coordinated with other groups in Spain and beyond, that facilitate “exit hibernation” (I30:666). Self-management has empowering potentialities, but is not effective for creating consensus or obtaining concrete results for the wider population, as it is merely a strategy for resistance in the face of impotence. These participants are advocates of technopolitics, which could be described as a new politics and activism interfacing internet and physical space (Alcazan et al., 2012; Jurado Gilabert, 2014; Toret et al., 2013), allowing the creation of widely participated events and actions (from the RDN initial call to the “Toque a Bankia” and “Rodea el Congreso”, to the 15mPaRato and “La Caixa es Mordor”), and (with the hope of) possibly creating some sort of electronic democracy. Collective identity stems from a “common way of working”, “a new way of doing things”. These participants stress that “methodology” involves flexibility and not an essentialist position closed in fixed (endogamic) identitarian formats such as non-party politics, the square, or even neighbourhood assemblies. Methodology is “a normal and natural answer to the “fossilization of ideologies”, and implies a rethinking of politics through a revisited institutional confrontation and direct intervention into the socio-political sphere.



As illustrated in the historical excursus, the collective identity emerged throughout the “action in action” (Melucci, 1989) and the two factions emerged during conflictual transformative events. The two factions also differed as to the role of ideologies, a topic that is explored in the following section.

## 7. THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGIES

As mentioned above, one of the characteristics sometimes ascribed to NSMs is their “post-ideological” nature (see for ex. Offe, 1990). Yet, this is not straightforward in the Indignados movement. It is true that RDN was able to gather such strong popular support for the first May 15<sup>th</sup> demonstration thanks to a new type of language, deprived of traditional ideological bent (Gago and Fernández-Savater, 2011; Subirats, 2011:50-51), and the “political identity divesting” process helped to create a collective identity the first days of encampments. Nevertheless, starting from the square occupation, dynamics within the movement were in part gradually infused with the discourses of existing social movements, which “take advantage of this movement as a sounding board to get their ideas disseminated” (I17:271). The critique gradually moved from anger addressed to a “caste” of politicians and bankers and emotional (at times populist) slogans to a more articulated critique. As one participant commented:

*“The 15M is against “these sons of bitch of bankers and presidents” (...) but the discourse has been improving and maturing, and people little by little and thanks to the square, have sophisticated the discourse from an anger towards something they didn’t know to a critique of financial, international and corporate capitalism” (I19:499).*

Free spaces can hence represent an important locus for the interaction of people with very different backgrounds, leading to cross-fertilisation and politicisation (Taibo, 2012).

Furthermore, the role of ideologies differed in the two factions. According to the autonomous faction, direct democracy facilitated the development of an “experimenting dialogue” between different (traditional) ideologies, which nourished the movement itself. The “original cleavage” of the Civil War (Aguilar, 2012), and the collective memory of the 20th century Catalan anarchist cooperative movement constituted an important driver for a libertarian and autonomous ideological bent, at times intermingled with Catalan nationalism. In some neighbourhoods such as Poble Sec, collective memory even acted through what Melucci (1996) calls “rebirth” or “regressive utopia”, a vision of comprehensive transformation and regeneration of the present through mythic reaffirmation and return to a past situation.

In contrast, in the pragmatist faction, (traditional leftist) ideologies were negated, denounced as old, divisive, constraining and anachronistic dogma, or were strategically hidden in order to gain wider support. As an X Party and ex-RDN member observed: *“Instead of saying to people ‘join our [political] tag’, we say ‘let’s work together and let’s do things’, that is, ‘let’s throw out the tag in the flushed water, because the tag is what divides us’* (I32:500). Methodology was perceived as the common ground able to overtake the crisis of representation involving also ideologies. While this faction shared an ideological bond around a critique of neoliberalism, it rejected the dichotomy of reformist versus revolutionary strategy. Some claims for reforms can indeed be revolutionary or radical when they imply an incompatibility with the system logics (like the claim of debt cancellation from PACD), or when they are radically “asked” or performed (an exemplar case being the demand of non-recourse debt, claimed by PAH both through collection of signatures for a popular referendum and “performed” through evictions blockages and occupations).

In both factions, but most notably in the autonomous splinter group, a gradual “radicalisation process” was partly driven by the retreat, after the removal of the encampments, of many of the so-called “common people” and by a politicisation of the lay people that stayed in the movement.

In sum, although the Indignados movement partially downplayed the ideological element in order to build its collective identity (Benski et al., 2013), traditional ideologies still constituted an important cultural tool for the movement, both when partially drawing from them and when consciously opposing them for building diagnostic frames. Collective memory can play an important role in shaping a movement’s ideologies and frames. I agree with Steinberg (1998) that, especially in heterogeneous and broad based movements such as the Indignados, frames constitute the outer boundaries which can accommodate different ideologies. Frames are indeed a more general, overarching, porous and immediate interpretation of reality. But ideologies can also be put into question, especially in “unsettled times” (Swidler, 1986), and jettisoned through the construction of antagonising frames.

Another feature of NSMs is based the distinction between materialistic and post-materialistic values, to which I turn in the next section.

## **8. POST-MATERIALISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, one of the key defining traits of new social movements is the abandonment of a collective action based on economic grievances that characterized the

working class movement (Johnston et al, 1994; Buechler, 1995). The Pacification of the class cleavage afforded by Fordism liberated space for the emergence of new types of values (Della Porta, 2015; Habermas, 1981) - based not on socio-economic grievances but on post-materialist values - which engendered a new type of collective action. Inglehart's "silent revolution", drawing upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs and suggesting that humans develop higher, post-materialistic needs (like self-expression and environmental concerns) only after having satisfied survival needs, had great influence upon the most important NSM theorists (see for ex Habermas, 1981:33; Melucci, 1989:177-178; Dalton, 1990). NSMs hence focus on the symbolic and cultural struggles (Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1978; Offe, 1985) rather than on material resources.

If on the one hand, the value change thesis maintains that economic development is conducive to the spread of postmaterialist values, on the other it predicts that economic decline would have the opposite effects (Inglehart 1981), hence causing materialist values to displace post-materialist ones. A reversal towards materialist values has indeed been found by some quantitative studies for the latest cycle of protest (Cameron, 2013; Grasso and Giugni, 2013). Several authors maintain that, contrarily to NSMs' "pacified" class cleavage, the "Occupy social movements" put centre stage class and materialist grievances (Della Porta, 2015; Grasso and Giugni, 2013; Tejerina et al, 2013, Hammond, 2013). Certainly, the indignant mobilization find their antecedent in the increasing levels of social inequalities, precarious employment and proletarianisation of the middle classes rooted in neoliberalism (Della Porta, 2015; Tejerina et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the cognitive critique explained above shows that the indignados movement was far from being reduced to redistributive claims directed against austerity policies and the cutting back of the welfare state: although the latter were obviously present, "real democracy", cultural and environmental claims were at the heart of the critique.

While some authors (Della Porta and Reiter, 2012:5-6; Eggert and Giugni, 2012; Morena, 2013) have stressed that there is some "homogenization trend" between workers' type movements and "new" movements with respect to values, other authors have stressed that the Indignados/Occupy display a contemporaneous coexistence of materialistic and post-materialistic claims (Langman, 2013), somehow similarly to the alterglobalization movement (Della Porta et al, 2006:241,244; Crossley, 2003; Morena, 2013). Given that materialist and post-materialist values were conceived to be antagonistic and inversely related (Barker and Dale, 1998), it is not clear though how they could actually co-exist, a subject which deserves further scrutiny.

The cognitive critique explained above challenges that very distinction and conceptualization. The idea of higher level, post-materialistic claims (which for Inglehart would include issues from self-expression and participatory democracy to environmental concerns), has conceptually been criticised for the assumption of a universal, cross-cultural hierarchy of needs (West, 2013). From the environmental point of view, this theory was confuted by studies arguing that affluence does not make people more concerned about the environment (Fairbrother, 2013; Dunlap and York, 2008; Givens and Jorgenson, 2011), and pointing out that it fails to consider the “environmentalism of the poor” (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997; Brechin and Willett, 1994; Martinez-Alier, 1997). The “objective problems-subjective values” (OPSV) hypothesis (Brechin, 1999; Inglehart, 1995) attempted to correct that bias, accounting for environmental concerns in less developed countries when environmental degradation directly touches upon people. Nevertheless, it created two types of environmentalisms, in the South derived from citizens experiencing directly pollution and environmental problems, and in the North from post-materialistic values (Dunlap and York, 2008; Givens and Jorgenson, 2011).

More generally, the hierarchy of needs epistemology failed to acknowledge the “material roots of prosperity” (Martinez-Alier, 1995) and the treadmill of production theories (Givens and Jorgenson, 2011) which make it possible to maintain environmental concerns even in a developed country experiencing the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Further, the cognitive critique explained above forces us to go even beyond treadmill of production theories (hence “treadmill of accumulation” might be a better expression, see Bellamy Foster et al., 2010). Materialistic claims (which for Inglehart are linked to economic security, economic growth and redistribution) are indeed intended not in economicistic terms but in social justice terms, which encompass redistributive claims but exclude (and even conflict with) claims of economic growth. For the Indignados degrowth is deeply connected with the cultural critique of economism and consumerism, and stems from a double concern about both the *material* environmental consequences of affluence and social justice. This double concern, not considered by Inglehart, has indeed been especially visible in a country that entered the economic crisis by way of an enormous housing bubble, with the paradoxical situation of 3.4 million homes lying empty in 2011, while more than 350,000 families were being evicted between 2008 and 2012.

With this new re-conceptualisation, the dichotomous distinction becomes misleading: the movement fundamentally questions the opposition between materialistic and post-materialistic claims (Glasius and Pleyers, 2012). As succinctly stated by Colin and Dale (1998:76), “it is bad sociology that sharply separates the material and symbolic”, as “material needs are loaded with cultural and symbolic significance and symbolic needs require access to material resources to be fulfilled”. Further, scarcity

for the majority is systematically reproduced by capitalist exploitation (Colin and Dale, 1998:75), even during periods of affluence.

In the Indignados, both values are indeed entangled and imbued with ideals of social justice and are, in a sense, “materialistic”, but in a different way than intended by Inglehart. Environmental concerns did not spring out of affluence, but in the midst of their “impoverished” economic conditions and they were linked to the aggravation of the process of disembedding (Fraser, 2012). The reconceptualized “materialism” here emphasizes both questions of economic goods and distribution and material livelihoods, concerns with the everyday life (Meyer, 2008) taking into consideration “geographies of responsibility” (Massey, 2004) or the “principle of responsibility” (Federici, 2011), i.e. paying attention to “what is produced, how, where, and in which life condition”. Some authors (Dryzek, 2013:211; Schlosberg, 2013) have used the concept of “sustainable materialism”, where justice entails creating human practices and material flows that do not undermine environmental processes and systems. This concept is similar to eco-feminist concepts of embodied materialism (Salleh) and eco-feminist materialism (Mellor). An embodied materialism joins the human condition to its natural condition, making politics deeply and consistently material (Salleh, 2004, 2009). In materialist eco-feminism, relations of power are reflected in the ability to free oneself from embodiedness and embeddedness “as if it had no limits, because those limits are born by others, including the earth itself” (Mellor, 1997). In this view, the indignados question those power relationships, and what they imply in terms of sustainability.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This paper represents the first systematic frame analysis study on the Indignados movement, drawing from empirical research conducted in Barcelona. Frames have been analysed dynamically in the process of construction and evolution. The (conflictual) transformative events of the *acampada* phase had a bearing also on later “framing disputes” and tensions within the movement. Similarly to Benford (1993) frame disputes are connected with prognostic visions. Some insights regarding the relationships between frames and ideology have been provided. This case study also elucidates how strategic connotations are not one of the defining traits of framing processes: dichotomising cultural and strategic orientation to action (Polletta, 1997) is even less appropriate in a horizontal, assembly-based movement.

The indignados movement put to the fore the subjugation of politics and justice to economics, the diktats of markets and (financial) corporations over political decisions, sharpened through the neoliberal and austerity responses to the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the movement was not just a

reaction to austerity policies and the economic crisis, but framed the crisis also as political, cultural and environmental crisis. Liberal democracy is criticized not for its “failure to induce economic growth” (Della Porta, 2013:81): the naturalization of the need for economic growth is put in discussion in the Indignados. The movement is concerned with a wider meta-political question, linking ‘real democracy’ with a critique of the social imaginary of contemporaneous society (including individualism, consumerism and competition), social justice and the claim for a different economic model not based on growth. This critique hence does not involve single-issue claims, as argued sometimes in NSM theory (see for ex Offe, 1990), but a comprehensive vision, connecting social justice with environmental issues, and “real democracy” with a critique of economism. Limitations of NSM theory have been hence identified, particularly with respect to one of its core assumptions that links “new movements” to so-called post-materialistic values. Not only, as argued by some authors (Della Porta, 2015; Tejerina et al, 2013), the importance of redistributive issues in the latest cycle of protest foregrounds the need to “bring political economy back in” social movement studies. This article is also emblematic of how social movements can nurture epistemological innovation: through the lens of the indignados’ cognitive critique, the postmaterialistic/materialistic differentiation has been criticized for the very dichotomisation of values, which does not reflect their meta-political critique. Therefore not only can sociology, through tools such as frame analysis, contribute to a better understanding of the ways societies react and organize politically against the global economic crisis, but an ethnographic study of the movements can also help us develop a sociological imagination and theory beyond the schemes of the past.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Examples of thematic sub-commissions are: environmental, education, democracy, research, housing, culture, electoral law, economics, feminist, and immigration.

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://acampadabcn.wordpress.com/demandes/>.

<sup>iii</sup> See [http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/10/17/actualidad/1318808156\\_278372.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/10/17/actualidad/1318808156_278372.html)

<sup>iv</sup> This is epitomized in the Outraged Feminists manifesto: <http://feministesindignades.blogspot.it/p/manifest.html>

<sup>v</sup> See for ex. [http://assembleasriasantgervasi.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/120124\\_manifestoriginal\\_9barris.pdf](http://assembleasriasantgervasi.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/120124_manifestoriginal_9barris.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://assemblea.barripoblesec.org/presentacio-de-la-plataforma-veinal-aturem-el-pla-paral%C2%B7lel/>

<sup>vii</sup> Barter markets in Catalunya have increased in the last decade from 2 to 132 (CRIC, 2013). See the website [www.intercanvis.net](http://www.intercanvis.net)

<sup>viii</sup> Some examples are the project “Recreant Cruilles” (<http://recreantercruilles.wordpress.com/>), Can Batlló (<http://canbatllo.wordpress.com/>), Flor de Maig (<http://ateneuflordemaig.wordpress.com/>), Gracia expropriated bank (<http://bancexpropiatgracia.wordpress.com/>), Calafou (<https://calafou.org/>), Ateneu La Base (<http://www.labase.info/>).

<sup>ix</sup> See for example <http://huertosurbanosbarcelona.wordpress.com/ubicacion-de-los-huertos-mapa/>

<sup>x</sup> Consumption cooperatives in Catalunya have increased from less than 10 to 120 in the last decade (CRIC, 2013).