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Spanish Anarchist Engagements in Electoralism: From Street to Party Politics

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Abstract: The eruption of the Spanish 15M movement in 2011 was marked by a high degree of political participation and creative experimentation. The political repertoire has constantly been re-evaluated, with methods revised and evolving, from the occupation of public spaces to the recent creation of new constitutional parties. One of the key aspects of these tactical revisions has been the involvement of anarchist actors in an experimental process of engagement in electoral processes, a method of political engagement anarchists standardly oppose. Our study identifies the motivations and theoretical justifications that have recently led libertarian activists to take the electoral path. This paper stands in the small but growing tradition of works that examine the recent phenomenon of new parties built by ‘street’ activists, but uniquely concentrates on a detailed case study of the anarchist actors linked to the platform *Castelló en Moviment* (CsM). It thus describes the anarchist influence in recent electoral developments, identifies proponents’ justifications for engaging in these previously rejected methods and highlights some of the doubts raised about the electoral experiment.

Key words: anarchism, institutions, activism, political participation, social movement, political parties

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Introduction

The Spanish political context is undergoing a period of volatility as far as political participation is concerned (Tormey, 2015a; Postill, 2013; Monterde *et al.*, 2015). Since the 15M movement appeared in 2011 there has been significant experimentation within civil society, expressed through protest-camp occupations, demonstrations, stopping evictions, citizen platforms to defend public services and popular legislative initiatives (Marzolf & Ganuza, 2016). The experiment with electoralism by grassroots activists in 2014 is an indicator of this wider institutional-electoral shift (Feenstra 2015; Subirats, 2015). In this context, there has been a transformation from a phase of explicit anti-electoral protest, oppositional response and direct action of *street politics*, to a DIY politics that seeks to operate concurrently with the electoral processes.

One of the most striking aspects of the changes in the complex broad political repertoires linked to 15M is this evolution in approaches to electoralism, which began in 2011. This evolution is indicated by the shift from the initial motto ‘they do not represent us’ to the more recent slogan ‘we represent ourselves’. This ‘electoral shift’ throws up many theoretical puzzles, especially as it was initiated by street activists, including a large group of anarchists.

‘Electoralism’, here, means the process of operating through competitive elections as part of the democratic process (joining or creating parties, drafting manifestos, putting forward candidates for election, electioneering and voting). Closely aligned to this notion is that of ‘constitutionalism’, seeking to make socio-political change by participating with or in the formal offices and processes of government. These two are not quite synonymous, as some groups might take part in competitive elections in order to promote extra-parliamentary activity, but have no intention of engaging in the formal structures of the state; one example of this strategy is Sinn Féin’s abstentionist policy with regard to the British parliament in Westminster. Similarly, groups and individuals might reject electoral participation, but use legitimate influence on the offices of state, or accept positions in government. An example of the latter is the participation of four ministers from the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour - CNT) in Francisco Largo Caballero’s 1936 government. Usually, however, electoralism and aligned concepts such as ‘electoral shift’ imply constitutionalism, that is to say working through the national (state) or local (municipal) institutions.

The Spanish political context has witnessed sporadic processes of hybridisation between anarchism and democratic institutions, one example being the *Partido Sindicalista* (Syndicalist Party), a small party formed in 1932 by former member of the CNT Ángel Pestaña, who sought to bring the CNT into the parliamentary sphere (de Lera, 1978; Bolloren, 2015). Other precursors include the municipalist struggle by an autonomous-type organisation, the *Sindicato de Obreros del Campo* (Agricultural Workers Trade Union - SOC), in 1979. However, today’s phase presents many striking and novel aspects. First of all, the number of actors involved in the process is

substantial and geographically extensive, going beyond Castellón and *Castelló en Moviment* (Castellon in Movement - CsM), with other so-called ‘municipalist projects’ arising throughout the regions. In addition, and covered more extensively in popular and academic literatures, are the new national parties that grew out of the social movements: *Podemos* (We Can) and *Partido X* (Party X) (see for instance Kioupkiolis, 2016; Orriols & Cordero 2016; Rodon & Hierro, 2016). Secondly, although the ‘*Podemos* phenomenon’ is well-known internationally, the success of the municipalist platforms has attracted relatively little attention, even though they have won elections and now govern in some towns and cities (*Barcelona en Comú*, *Ahora Madrid*, *Zaragoza en Común* and *Por Cádiz Sí se puede*) or play a determining role in constituting new local governments (CsM, among others). Such electoral impact is especially striking, as these platforms were created more recently, between 2014 and 2015. Thirdly – and one of the key elements in the present analysis – is the participation of anarchist actors who, to date, have been reluctant to take part in representative politics; other anarchists, however, remain steadfast in their refusal to participate in elections (see for instance CNT 2015). In this broad and complex panorama the municipalist turn is particularly significant, mainly due to the large number of anarchist activists (among other groups) directly involved in this initiative, which brings to light certain features of the fluidity of political identities. The electoral success of these new local parties is also significant, no less so in Castellón. Despite its recent creation – CsM had its first activist gathering in October 2014 – it won 10,443 votes (13.06% of the total) in the 2015 local elections held on 24 May.¹ This result gave CsM four councillors. The councillors supported an alternative local administration to the conservative *Partido Popular*, which had

¹ Results available at: <http://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/2015/municipales/17/12/40.html>

governed the city with an absolute majority since 1991.² Castellón City Council is made up of 27 councillors. For the investiture, 14 votes in favour were required. *Castelló en Moviment* (CsM) opted to support the investiture of the social-democrat party PSOE (7 councillors) and a regional left-wing party, *Compromís* (4 councillors). This involved agreeing to a programme for the investiture, although CsM does not form part of the local government's executive.

The objectives of this paper are to: 1) Identify and analyse the main characteristics of the anarchist actors in CsM; 2) Detect the key challenges that the activists highlighted as significant for those engaging in electoralism; and 3) Elucidate and contextualise the problems and advantages that have arisen in engaging with electoralism.

CsM provides a pertinent case study to examine the complex innovative political ecosystem in Spain as a result of 15M, and to complement the numerous works on this movement and its electoral turn that have focused exclusively on either national movements or large cities – especially Barcelona and Madrid. This study will be useful for theorists of social movements, exploring its many formulations and manifestations, and to anti- and non-state actors who are sensitive to the impacts of prolonged activism on participants: how it impacts on and transforms their theoretical and practical positions. The standard assumption is that anti-state activism is generative, promoting further prefigurative practices outside and against the state. However, by focusing on initially anti-state actors and their justification for turning to electoral methods, the study challenges this traditional anarchist account of the anti-hierarchical political

² The governing program can be consulted at:
<https://castelloenmoviment.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/PROGRAMA-DE-GOVERN-MUNICIPAL.pdf>

trajectory, and suggests that prefigurative methods can generate a (re-)turn to electoral politics. Factors that attract these activists to the electoral path include: 1) the new openings it offers for political struggle (goal-orientation), and 2) the desire for political experimentation (methods).

Methodology

The methodology is based on a case study of the political motivations, effects and trajectory of CsM in relation to the wider 15M movement. This study, like those of other analyses of 15M (such as Morrell 2012; Corsín & Estalella, 2013), applied several qualitative methods, including a detailed analysis of nine interviews with participants who identified as anarchists, former anarchists, or participated in organisations that operated along broadly anarchist principles; and analysis of audiovisual materials, CsM websites and documents. It also features an autoethnography, as two of the researchers were heavily involved in the local 15M movement and went on to engage with CsM, one in a highly public role as an electoral candidate (Anderson 2006). Through this involvement, they gained an understanding of the critical incidents that informed the movement's developments. However, rather than using autobiographical details as in standard autoethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011), here research reflection provides part of the structure and impetus for the study.

Previous studies of 15M have used interviews as a key resource (see for instance, Castañeda 2012; Flesher Fominaya 2014; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014; Romanos 2016). However, our interviews are not based on national movements like Podemos or the two major cities of Madrid and Barcelona. In this case the interviews (and the study itself) took place in Castellón (Spain), a city on the east coast of Spain

with a population of over 170,000. Like other parts of Spain, Castellón witnessed extensive 15M activity. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with key actors linked to anarchist movements: five women and four men who were active in the formation of CsM. Of the various groups in this platform, we are interested in two in particular: members of self-managed groups, specifically the *Casal Popular de Castelló* (an alternative, activist community and cultural centre), who overtly identify as anarchist actors, and those who form part of the *Plataforma Afectados por la Hipoteca* -PAH- (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), who are overtly guided by the principles of anti-hierarchy and direct action closely associated with anarchism, but do not necessarily use the label ‘anarchist’ to describe their group. As will be explained below, the first group is linked with what is known as ‘capital-A’ anarchism, whilst the second group’s political activism is close to what is called ‘small-a’ anarchism. Interviewed activists No.1 to No. 5 belong to the first category, and No. 6 to No. 9, to the second category. Of the nine interviewees, two people currently hold representative posts as councillors (one from the *Casal Popular* and the other from the PAH), and another anarchist activist connected to CsM works for the City Council as an advisor. All the other people interviewed are politically active in the platform’s assembly and in local social movements. The research therefore concentrates on those who engaged in the electoral experiment, rather than on the anarchist or autonomous colleagues who remained antipathetic to electoral activism (see Bray, 2017).

Literature review: anarchist groups facing the institutional path

In many contemporary western democracies, political parties and party-centric politics are perceived by citizens and theorists as a cause of political disenchantment and

democratic disengagement (Crouch, 2004; Hay, 2007; Alonso, 2014; Tormey 2015a). Right-wing populist politicians and parties across Britain and Europe have gained support partly by portraying themselves as rejecting standard political parties, established within traditional networks of power and corresponding corruption scandals (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Abedi & Lundberg, 2009). It is also a feature of Donald Trump's appeal to voters in his successful bid for the USA presidency. Traditionally, anti-politics for anarchists is a deeper rejection of existing political party loyalties, as it opposes the hierarchical state and party apparatus (Bakunin, 1953; Kropotkin, 1987; Guérin, 1970; Ward, 1996; Cappelletti, 2006).

Anarchism can be defined in terms of a rejection or contestation of hierarchies, such as capitalism, racism and sexism, a social view of freedom in which access to material resources and the liberty of others are prerequisites to personal freedom, and a prefigurative commitment to embodying goals in one's methods (Colson, 2001; Franks, 2006; Colombo, 2014). The anarchism introduced here is largely, what Graeber (2001) and others (e.g. Kuhn, 2009) refer to as 'small-a' anarchism, focused on the prefigurative micropolitics of daily practice such as following anarchist anti-hierarchical decision-making practice in their daily activities and seeking immediate (albeit partial) solutions, rather than in prioritising sweeping social change. 'Capital-A' anarchists, by contrast, are more consciously part of the anarchist tradition and more overtly geared towards developing large scale anarchist organisations operating along anti-hierarchical, democratic principles to facilitate and foreshadow significant structural change. The differences between these two tendencies are over-played. 'Small-a' anarchists are inspired by revolutionary change and 'capital-A' anarchists engage in immediate direct action; the differences are largely ones of emphasis, overt appeal to the tradition and the

use of ‘anarchist’ as a label or self-description. Events like 15M provided great opportunities for putting anarchist forms of organising into effect with participants unfamiliar with anarchist history, little previous knowledge of this way of working and no overt desire to adopt an ‘anarchist’ label as part of their self-identity, as has been highlighted by some anarchist authors (Aisa 2011; García Rúa 2012). It confirmed ‘small-a’ anarchists’ contention that anarchism can operate without overt anarchists.

Closely associated with ‘small-a’ anarchism are activists that Flesher Fominaya (2015, 145) identifies as ‘autonomous’. The autonomous also operate through horizontal networks, support principles of participatory, direct democracy, self-organisation and direct action. Like the anarchists, they too are independent of formal political parties and established politics (Katsiaficas 2006; Robinson and Tormey 2007), but are more reluctant to adopt overt political identities, including ‘anarchism’, and call for a greater degree of pragmatism (Ordóñez, Feenstra and Tormey 2015).

Against this background, the decision by anarchist CsM members to opt for institutional engagement is particularly worthy of attention given their marginal and often antagonistic position. Before providing details of the study, it is necessary to identify and explain a core political feature of the CsM platform: its commitment to tactical and organisational experimentation. Prioritising methods that challenge orthodoxy and that promote self-management and direct action grew out of the assemblies. *PAH* and *Casal Popular* concentrate on participants by solving social problems concerning economic inequality, access to housing and so forth. Both these groups seek to subvert current conceptions of politics and defend direct democracy. One crucial aspect that we find in both these groups is their willingness to experiment on a temporary basis with a wide political repertoire –which includes the electoral pathway–

to make immediate social and political changes. As we will see later on, both groups leave their long-term objectives to one side, along with their theoretical and methodological differences, to achieve immediate changes, even at the risk of falling into contradictions (Holloway, 2014). They therefore operate as creative laboratories that conscientiously reflect on their possibilities and limitations in order to bring about the social transformations they pursue (Melucci, 1989; Flesher Fominaya, 2015).

The tendency of CsM anarchist activists to experiment politically seems particularly incongruous given that the CsM's electoral turn comes about in a political context of greater anti-politics activism. One of the slogans that marked the initial period of Spanish activism in 2011 was the avowedly anti-electoral: 'don't vote for any of them' (Galais, 2014, p. 346). So what are the causes, objectives and difficulties hidden behind anarchist CsM actors' participation in electoral platforms in 2014-15?

Castelló en Moviment: origins and main features

In 2011 the decision to launch an electoral project based on building a new representative political model split the wider 15M activist community. A large number of members distanced themselves from, and actively opposed, the electoral path. Nonetheless, by 2014 a larger number of activists supported the electoral turn and, riding on the impetus of *Guanyem Barcelona*, CsM began to develop.

The various municipalist strategies launched in Spain between 2014 and 2015 came out of the original project *Guanyem Barcelona* (Let's Win Barcelona, now called *Barcelona en Comú*). *Guanyem* (Let's win) was the original name given to this initiative and shared by all the other municipalist platforms in Spain, but was dropped when it ran into legal problems with registering the name. Some platforms adopted 'en

comú' ('in common'), while others like *Ahora Madrid* (Now Madrid), *CsM* or *Marea* (En Masse) opted for other designations.³ The initial drivers of *Guanyem* were people from 15M, social movements, academia and neighbourhood associations. The public face of *Guanyem Barcelona* was the charismatic Ada Colau, the former spokesperson of the PAH (González-García, 2015). The *Guanyem* Platform explicitly encouraged 'taking back the institutions and putting them at the service of the majority and for the common good', and linked this strategy with grassroots movements. It claimed the 'need to strengthen, more than ever, the social fabric and spaces for citizens to self-organise'.⁴ *Guanyem*'s call inspired many of the cities that sought to consolidate a new party model with a marked innovative spirit (similarly to 15M), arranged according to principles of participation, horizontality and ethical commitment, and with a political programme based on anti-austerity and support for the most underprivileged.

The sudden appearance of *Guanyem Barcelona* also inspired activists from the city of Castellón to launch their own municipalist platform. The development of the CsM programme was slow and far from smooth because it lacked some of advantages of other municipalist platforms. CsM did not have a charismatic leader known to the public like Ada Colau in Barcelona, and the Castellón-based social movements and activists were not closely linked as in other cities. Indeed it was not until 24 October, 2014 that CsM's first public assembly took place. It was here that the platform, and its organisational principles and basic policies, were publicly debated, having been initially proposed in activist circles six months earlier.⁵ Its characteristics were: i) plurality of

³ http://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/politica/Guanyem-Barcelona-presentara-concurrira-elecciones_0_354865337.html

⁴ See: <https://guanyembarcelona.cat/lets-win-barcelona/>

⁵ On 21 April 2014 a brief informative press release was published in the local newspaper *Levante EMV*. As of 24 April, information about the launch of a new municipalist platform was gradually released. See: <http://www.levante-emv.com/castello/2014/10/21/dignitat-22-m-debate-creacion/1177161.html>

actors, ii) pragmatic solidarity based on a small number of shared values (a minimum), and iii) promoting and using a new way of doing politics.

Plurality of the actors involved

Around two hundred people contributed to and were present in building the platform. However, the active group of actors (evidenced by the constant number of people at the assemblies) is made up of core of about 80 people.⁶ They come from various different backgrounds, mainly members of the *PAH* ('small-a' anarchists), of self-governed social centres like *Casal Popular de Castellón* ('capital-A' anarchists), and *Platforma Petroli No - Columbretes Netes* (Group against oil platform), new political parties similar to 15M like *Podemos* (biggest group) or *Partido X* (small group). The platform also includes *Izquierda Unida* party members (United Left, former Communist Party), independent members and Green Party supporters.

Pragmatic solidarities

Although all the groups making up CsM are broadly at the left-wing end of the ideological spectrum, there are significant ideological and historical differences between them. To provide a basis for electoral and effective operations, historical differences and ideological disputes were deliberately left to one side, and instead efforts concentrated on finding shared activities and policies which were agreeable to all the main groupings, even if they supported them for different reasons. By sharing in participatory and prefigurative practices, shared values develop.

⁶ This number was obtained from the public minutes of the CsM platform from February-May 2015 (a key time in the platform's consolidation). Information available at: <https://castelloenmoviment.org/assemblea/>

The 15M identity had already helped to unite different groups (Monterde *et. al*, 2015) due to common concerns about the socio-economic and political impacts of Spanish and European government policies. 15M focused on practical, direct and radical responses to these policies and the problems that arose, targeting the political institutions and people who were imposing them. Following 15M, CsM's main priorities were preventing evictions and opposing cuts in social provision. In the political sphere, it continued the fight against corruption and supported implementing transparency mechanisms, calling for the public disclosure of and a limit on council expenses. In addition, CsM promoted a more participative democracy by bringing in revocation mechanisms (recall and deselection). CsM members placed their trust in not only the problem-solving capacity of assemblies, but also in the available digital tools that can empower citizens. Information and communications technologies (ICT) enabled wider access to, and scrutiny of, policy decisions and discussions.

A new way of 'doing politics'

In line with this idea of participative democracy and wider engagement through ICT, various CsM members are strongly committed to anti-elitism, embodied in their rejection of conventional parties. This rejection of conventional party structures is reflected in a series of internal mechanisms that define CsM's structures:

- The assembly as the supreme body of the platform.⁷
- A strict ethical code that limits salaries, terms of office and responsibilities.⁸

⁷ The Assembly Regulations are described at: <https://castelloenmoviment.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Reglament.pdf>

⁸ The Ethical Code is available at: <https://castelloenmoviment.org/codi-etic/>

- Revocation mechanisms that help maintain strict control of councillors voted by the assembly.
- Participative and open mechanisms for selecting candidates.⁹
- Rotating positions of responsibility in the platform.
- Devising collaborative programmes by means of digital tools and assembly attendance.
- Rejecting financing from banks in order to preserve its independence.
- Electoral campaign based on direct contact with citizens and through social media.

These features distinguish CsM from conventional parties and their characteristic vertical structures. To an extent, CsM can be defined as a ‘connective party’ marked by a decentralised structure where participating actors are not subjected to imposed orders or decisions. Actors cooperate together, not because they defend a fixed pre-given and universal ideological framework, but because they share a project and a style of ‘doing politics’.

Characterising the anarchist actors of CsM

Most of the activists interviewed identified themselves as having a flexible approach to tactics and organisation. The best way to capture the ideological character of the actors interviewed is by distinguishing between those from ‘capital-A’ movements, which identify with the anarchist tradition more centrally, and ‘small-a’ anarchists linked to PAH, whose identities are more fluid, though they embrace the key principles and

⁹ The most important documents on this matter can be consulted at:
<https://castelloenmoviment.org/documents/>

practices of anarchism, with an increasing preference for promoting an autonomous political logic. The activists interviewed defined themselves as open to re-defining or discussing their political position and to accepting their potential (or theoretical) contradictions. As one activist observed: ‘I consider myself to be one of those anarchists who have been rejected by orthodoxy’ (Activist no. 2). The activists interviewed from ‘capital-A’ anarchist cultural centres and libertarian groups acknowledge that anarchist ethics, its claims and forms of resistance, are part of a political culture that cannot be sidelined. Indeed one of the interviewed activists pointed out:

I don’t see my participation in CsM as that of an anarchist activist, but as a series of political practices that include libertarian values: rejecting hierarchy, [promoting] horizontality, anti-authoritarianism and scepticism about delegation and representation. From my position inside the CsM platform, this is the libertarian legacy that I defend (Activist No. 1).

Using a similar line of argument, another activist stressed the importance of the ‘small-a’ ethos as being the most decisive factor in her activism, rather than the ideological label, namely, the values of self-organisation and anti-hierarchy embodied in the movement’s tradition.

I don’t know the name of this movement. All I know is that values and actions are important. If we have to disobey, then so be it. If we have to take a risk and they handcuff us, then we take it. If the formal legal system goes one way and social justice goes another way, then I don’t care about the legal system.

What's important is solidarity, empathy, mutual aid, determination or cooperation (Activist No. 8).

Nonetheless, using libertarian and autonomous-type political tools in institutions can be a problem for several reasons: is it possible to combine self-management, direct democracy and anti-representational politics, with institutional praxis: verticality, leadership and representation? If activists propose operating within existing, usually despised, institutions, how can this be explained and legitimised to people who are opposed to any form of institutional collaboration? We cite the two main reasons why these activists consider the institutional path to be politically valid: 1) it provides new openings for political struggle; and 2) desire for political experimentation.

New openings for political struggle

During our interviews, anarchist activists indicated that one of the main reasons that led them to consider experimenting with other political logics had to do with promoting political struggle, especially around issues of social justice. One activist explained:

When the economic crisis began in about 2008, we at the CNT wondered: 'how can we fight against social injustice from an anarchist position?' Then PAH appeared. PAH was made up of many impoverished people who got involved because it was the only group that tried to solve their problems. If there had been other alternatives, they would have had to choose. But there was nothing else at that time (Activist No. 1).

A few interviewees from CsM highlighted the campaigns around housing and social struggles carried out by PAH in particular, and the 15M movement as a whole, as marking a turning point in their political paths and prompting them to reconsider political strategy. As one explained:

We wanted to influence the city's political life, but then 15M came along. 15M allowed us to learn to work with other people we did not know, and it made us enter dialogue and negotiate because there were so many political sensitivities to consider (Activist No. 5).

The activists admitted that 15M made exercising politics possible in the immediacy of everyday life. Anti-hierarchical activism operated through the micropolitics of ordinary activities, in the new forms of autonomously organised protest and participatory decision making that intersected with each other. Many actions and attitudes stemming from 15M in 2011 were, for many people, the unmistakable proof of the movement's libertarian origins (Taibo, 2012). On this particular point, one of the interviewees stated, 'I have spoken with anarchists who found in 15M what they had been waiting many years for: assemblies held in town squares, people occupying public spaces, civil disobedience, blocking Parliament, and so on' (Activist No. 7).

One section of the wider 15M opted to redirect protests towards creating constitutional parties, especially after 2014; this shift provided the impetus for these activists' politics to also turn decisively towards the electoral path. This was how one activist expressed it: 'after 15M, I thought constitutionalism was a hypothesis that we had to experiment with' (Activist No.1). It was after the 15M demonstrations that these

radical activists saw representative institutions as a way not only to continue fighting against social injustices, but above all, to coordinate collective actions that would have short-term positive impacts for the disadvantaged and oppressed sectors of the population, without negatively impacting on existing political organisations or tactics.

The desire for political experimentation

In recent decades, one of the most important characteristics of western social movements has been their emphasis on political experimentation (Juris, 2008; Estalella & Corsín, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). There is an important inter-relation between participatory democracy and experimentation, not only in epistemic terms, but also, and above all, in methodological terms (Dewey, 1954; Ansell, 2012). Anarchism largely rejects positivism and universal forms of knowledge (see for instance Bakunin, 1972; Malatesta, 1984). It sees those most directly involved in a situation, whether as practitioners and participants (in the case of workplaces) or local inhabitants (in the case of communities) as best placed to understand local challenges and dynamics, finding links to others in similar situations; hence, their preference for community organisation and worker-led syndicates, co-ordinated through networks of solidarity and affinity. Individuals and collectives have a significant role in generating contextual and practice-based forms of knowledge. As such, there is a general rejection of dogmas and a willingness to innovate, test and re-evaluate social activities and political methods. Some theorists in the field of anarchist studies have explored the connection between experimentation, direct democracy and commitment to anti-hierarchical autonomous co-operation (Collier & Lowery, 2005; Graeber, 2009; Razsa & Kurnik, 2012).

Many of both ‘capital-A’ and ‘small-a’ activists within the CsM extended this experimentation further by examining political logics that had previously been marginal or excluded from their political tactics. Activists No. 1, 3 and 7 stressed the importance of reducing core principles to more pragmatic and minimal concerns in order to extend links of solidarity. Another activist stated,

We have been carrying the anarchist flag for decades, but it does not work for me. So some of us have decided to explore other forms of political experimentation, like institutional politics. This alternative might be understood as ‘possibilistic’, but what is clear is that carrying on as usual will not lead to any political change (Activist No. 2).

The interviewees (emphasised by activists No. 1, 2, 4, 5 and 8) considered that their theoretical and practical commitment to prefigurative and anti-hierarchical methods were best achieved by going beyond the standard repertoire of anarchist tactics. The desire to promote a change in the game rules of local politics, and the possibility of influencing the lives of fellow citizens, also led them to reassess their political culture and to pose questions about the limitations of their theoretical underpinnings. As one activist explained:

When I self-criticised from an anarchist perspective, I asked: ‘What have we done to win in political terms? What can we do from now on?’ When I talk with anarchist friends, they tell me that they prefer to stay in the ghetto rather

than to start with contradictions. I think that this is a mistake: let's start with contradictions! (Activist No. 1).

These statements reveal that the most decisive point for these activists is that experimenting with electoralism is regarded as a pragmatic as well as a creative position. Furthermore, the wish to experiment is consistent with anarchist epistemologies and is a product of the activists' engagement in radical practices, even if this particular form, initially, appears to be an outlier. Anarchist activism gives a central position to, and tries to provide a harmonious environment for, self-critique. It seeks to promote regular reflection upon, and analysis of, the assumptions that underlie individual and group activity (Jeppesen, 2010; Ibáñez, 2014). Similarly, such reflection should also be applied to this electoral turn, to see if the electoral experiment supports the criticality and wider ethos of the solidarity that prompted it.

Difficulties with the electoral path

From the interviews conducted with CsM activists, the most significant initial problem they faced in opting for the electoral path was that they were committing to forms of politics and social relations they were still suspicious of and had previously been hostile to. Activists 1-5 and 7 faced the dilemma of how to generate alternative anti-hierarchical forms of struggle and find sufficient support to help initiate and then sustain them. This standard dilemma for political action faces a particular obstacle as it involves the apparently conflicting demands of advocating direct (anti-representational) forms of politics whilst engaging in representational politics in order to promote them. The activists were concerned that following the electoral path would undermine rather

than support anti-hierarchical methods. One activist expressed it as follows: ‘Our challenge is to see, through our work, how we can overthrow the idea of representation or if, in the long term, we end up reinforcing the idea of delegation’ (Activist 7). Another activist expressed these same doubts when she wondered whether, ‘in the end, will we achieve citizen empowerment or will we once again become some sort of recycled version of the old type that never gets any further?’ (Activist No. 5). Consistent with the idea of the electoral turn being an ‘experiment’, activists were acknowledging the real possibility of it being a failure. Conversely, activists 6, 8 and 9 showed no concern about their involvement in the electoral process. Activist 9 pointed out that: ‘participating in CsM is a good idea because what we have accomplished for a few people we wish to accomplish for many more’. Once again, for some activists the potential for increasing social impact has resulted in their adopting electoralism as a means of political struggle.

For some activists the problem of electoralism is that it develops a political hierarchy between representatives and the represented. It creates uneven power structures and social practices to maintain this hierarchy, leading to the development of a separate political class with interests distinct from those communities the representatives initially came from. One activist explains this problem through a musical analogy:

The challenge is to build something organic, which is very complicated. For instance, in terms of rhythm, inside-outside are two worlds. The people working inside institutions have different rhythms, which are neither better nor worse than those who work from the outside. In any case, what I mean is that

participation in institutions has opened up possibilities to do the things that we wanted to do before and didn't know how to. Now we have an infrastructure that lets them listen to us (Activist No. 4).

Activists 4's comments are particularly revealing. They highlight the activist's recognition of the different ways of operating in institutional and non-institutional structures, but initially consider that neither is preferable. They end, however, by identifying an 'us' and 'them' and the need to develop an 'infrastructure' to ensure that the representatives from the movement ('them') still 'listen' to 'us' (CsM's activist base). The two structures do not generate a natural harmony, but require conscious manipulation to prevent one rhythm overriding the other. The use of 'us' and 'them' is indicative of the impact of the hierarchy of representation on the previously anti-hierarchical social movement, one which has reduced the role of 'us' to speaking, whilst it is the representatives who will act on their behalf.

Some activists also discussed an additional problem concerning the erosion of the anarchist ethos. Would engaging with electoralism undermine the values that sustain radical, co-operative activities? One interviewee maintains that her current electoral commitments preserve these principles: 'my values have not changed a bit: I am still a feminist, a left-winger and a libertarian' (Activist No. 5). Nonetheless, other activists stress the difficulties that they must face when working from two apparently antithetical perspectives: 'the hard thing is to maintain authenticity and commitment when it is so easy to fall to falseness and cynicism' (Activist No. 3). Despite the difficulties and challenges, CsM actors wish to fulfil two basic objectives: 1) to consolidate

participative municipalism, and 2) to create a critical mass to support anti-hierarchical activities.

Advantages of the institutional path

Municipalism is the term CsM activists use to describe the transformation of local governments into direct democracies. They argue that true democracy only occurs in a self-managed, participative assembly, with direct democracy, rather than the managerial, representative model of standard local government. One activist states ‘I believe that the political tool that justifies choosing between the institutional or constitutional path, call it what you will, is municipalism’ (Activist No. 6). Bookchin (1995; 2015; Bookchin & Biehl, 2009) and his followers have been the keenest defenders of the municipalist tradition within anarchism. There are important precursors in Proudhon’s federalism (2011), Balius’s free municipality (Amorós, 2003) and the Dutch Kabouters (Marshall, 2010). The Kabouters, for instance, were split between those who engaged in municipal electoralism primarily to destabilise representative institutional power, and those who regarded fuller constitutional engagement as a way of not only promoting direct, counter-cultural practices, but of providing a structure for supporting and extending radical activities (Bogad, 2005; Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014). CsM activists support this latter version of municipalism: ‘we want an assembly-based and horizontal City Council that provides the means for citizens to manage their own affairs’ (Activist No. 3).

Activists no. 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 pointed out that they had successfully introduced major changes into the way the Castellón City Council operates. One of the

activists told us, for example, that they have enabled platforms like PAH to be on the municipal housing committees without having to revoke their activist repertoire:

In December 2015 we occupied a building that housed six families. In less than a month, the City Council contacted Bankia [a financial institution bailed out by the Spanish government in May 2012]. The occupation has forced the authorities to take measures. During the meetings we have had with the City Council's social services department, we are forcing policies to be made to allow access [to housing] for people who genuinely need social services (Activist No. 8).

In relation to this transformative conception of municipalism, another activist highlighted one of the proposals that CsM is developing to amend the Castellón City Council regulations: 'we are working on a document that will shortly be approved and will allow neighbourhood associations and groups to be able to present their demands directly without having to use political parties as go-betweens' (Activist No. 9). Another activist stated:

For two months we have been trying to hold an open assembly with citizens so they can ask questions or make proposals. OK, perhaps it is being interpreted as a symbolic gesture; but what is symbolic is what generates a political reality (Activist No. 6).

These activists want to change traditional mechanisms of political intermediation to create channels of citizen participation and thus transform local government into a radical, direct municipalist structure.

Moreover, the activists pointed out the importance of consolidating a form of counter-power exercised by a mass network of interlinked groups (as Activists No. 1, 2 and 5 highlighted). The activists, thus, consider this municipalist model to be different from the liberal representative model, as for them representative democracy transforms citizens into a passive mass that transfers and cedes its power to a governing class. It also damages the development of the citizenry's critical skills. 'We do not want passive voters or citizens. We want people who get involved in the city's problems', said one of the activists (Activist No. 7). As a result, all the activists were in agreement about the importance of establishing sites and practices in which citizens develop analytic and evaluative skills. Participatory democratic fora, they argue, encourage reflection and dialogue, and radical decision-making practices foster rational participation and free expression. It is the development of these skills to enhance anti-hierarchical social practice that is important. The institutional experiment was undertaken to achieve these goals and would provide the basis on which success would be judged.

Conclusions

CsM is a small, but innovative, part of the broad activist ecosystem which developed in Spain in the aftermath of 15M. In this context, anti-austerity initiatives have made it possible to consolidate a type of democratic laboratory where political considerations, as well as tactics and repertoires, are constantly being redefined by those who lead

them. Creativity, political pragmatism, experimentation and openness have become principles that define the action activists take.

15M was a process of convergence of groups and identities. This movement has persisted, albeit forming into heterogeneous political initiatives that range from civil disobedience to the creation of new political parties. As a result of its electoral turn, some of the anarchist actors involved in the movement have altered the way they view political strategy and representative institutions. The former anti-constitutional positions, once core tenets for former generations of radical activists, were entirely absent in our conversations with the 9 CsM activists interviewed. In part this change in the anti-electoral positions reflects a greater fluidity in other aspects of the activist identity. There was a similar absence of precision regarding universal remedies or formulae to improve the political situation. Their position comes closer to what Lyotard called 'pagans' (1984): their political affiliation is not sustained by strict adherence to a particular organisation, tactics or identities, but by a primary opposition to a political system that generates injustice and inequality (Tormey, 2015a; 2015b).

It is this fluid politics of opposition that led them to extend their political repertoire, and to even incline towards a dynamic – the electoral engagement – that lies outside of, and in opposition to, their previous strategies. Their desire to struggle against what they consider to be social injustices, along with a wider change within 15M to embrace electoralism, provided the impetus for engaging in representative politics. Just as politics in Spain was extending beyond its traditional arenas of attention – the state and representative institutions – towards autonomous action, anti-state actors returned to this terrain. Nevertheless, they adopted this stratagem because they saw the corruption that had motivated the rise of 15M as providing an opening for social activists to engage

with and alter municipal institutions. It was not seen as renouncing the horizontal spirit, values or the dynamics of anarchism and autonomous movements, but an experiment in taking them into new directions. The objective of the activists we interviewed is to transfer their anti-politics experiences and tactics to the spaces associated with transforming the performance of representation and altering the hierarchical power relations found in town and city councils; a move that is not altogether inconsistent with some minority traditions within anarchism, such as the libertarian municipalism of Bookchin or the *Kabouter* phenomenon. They argued that a policy built on direct democratic institutions could create more organic and radical forms of citizen participation (van Duijn, 1972; Bookchin, 2015).

The electoral turn gives rise to a number of tensions and challenges for the future. Even when radical activists from local movements like the CsM are elected, they are only a small minority on the council and face considerable institutional opposition to their goal of transforming municipal councils into networks of direct democracy. Methods may need to be devised to maintain enthusiasm for the long-term, transformative project against such embedded opposition. Even when successfully introducing democratic reforms, the hierarchy of the representative-represented might still remain. In addition, engagements with town and city councils have made some positive material impacts and extended the autonomy of many citizens, but with funding reliant on taxation from commercial revenue, the goal might be to stabilise capitalist economies, rather than challenge and transform them. As the research shows, the identities of activists themselves have altered as a result of such engagement, becoming less defined as anarchists. Similarly, a subtle shift in values might occur away from commitments to social solidarity, self-management and criticality to paternalistic

managerialism, liberalism and electoral legitimacy. The jury is out on whether and to what extent these tensions could be satisfactorily reconciled. Will activists still consider the electoral turn to be a fruitful experiment, or will it become a strategic dogma, with its criteria of success framed by the principles of liberal democracy?

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