Activist and Citizen Political Repertoire in Spain: A Reflection Based on Civil Society Theory and Different Logics of Political Participation

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ABSTRACT Citizen participation in Spain has significantly increased, and its repertoire has broadened as a result of the 15M Movement. From assemblies and acampadas (occupations) to the current proliferation of new political parties, there has been constant movement through a wide range of techno-political actions and experimentation with means and political tools used by civil society and activists. This article aims to reflect on this complex and novel political repertoire from a theoretical framework of civil society. This framework is complemented with the differentiation of (horizontal versus vertical) political logics used in social movement studies.

KEY WORDS: Civil society, Spain, political repertoire, political logics

Introduction: The importance of political repertoire

Since 15 May 2011, with the emergence of massive citizen protests, the crisis of traditional politics and its representative structures in Spain has been accompanied by the exercise of ‘civil society politics’, ‘online’ politics, and the proliferation of new forms of political participation by citizens (Castañeda, 2012; Castells, 2012; Della Porta, 2013; Fuster, 2012; Romanos, 2013, 2014). The birth of what is now known as 15M (the 15th of May Movement), following the call-out on 15 May 2011, has changed the existing Spanish political scenario, expressed through the proliferation of multiple citizen initiatives, demonstrations, actions to halt home evictions, escraches, self-management initiatives, hacktivism, boycotts, peaceful sieges on Parliament, citizen legislative initiatives, and the formation of new political parties, among many other types of action. The emergence of 15M was a turning point in how citizens and activists conceive politics. Since May
political experimentation has become a common trend for civil society especially in the context of the political and economic crisis (Charnock, Purcell, & Ribera-Fumaz, 2011; Kaldor & Selchow, 2013; Pianta, 2013).

The proliferation of a plural and complex political repertoire is a challenge for theoretical approaches that attempt to make sense of citizen movements such as 15M. This article aims to reflect on this diverse political repertoire. Questions addressed here include the following: What type of political actions have spread among civil society actors in countries such as Spain? Does civil society theory, especially neo-Tocquevillian views, help explain the 15M complex and changing political repertoire? Is there a predominance of political logics, either ‘vertical’ or ‘horizontal’, in 15M political actions?

**Methodological framework**

This article proposes a theoretical dialogue and complementarity between a civil society framework and the social movement studies debate on politics and collective action logics. 15M—and its complex political repertoire—represents the object of analysis of this theoretical reflection, where civil society literature is used as the primary theoretical framework to understand the context of active citizen participation. This theoretical base is complemented with a specific topic within the social movement literature: The theoretical axis that differentiates vertical and horizontal forms of participation and collective action. This theoretical complementarity situates this article alongside analytical categories used by social movement scholars such as Tormey, Flesher Fominaya, Robinson, and Juris. These works are used due to their capacity to complement civil society perspectives, such as those of Habermas, Keane, Cohen, Arato, and Kaldor, with the goal of comprehending the political repertoire of protests and citizen movements such as 15M. Though the social movement framework is fundamental to this theoretical analysis, this article will focus specifically on political logics and not on other key aspects of social movement theories. The abundance and quality of social movement approaches to 15M—as opposed to the shortage of these analyses from the civil society perspectives—explains this motivation. It is worth mentioning here some significant studies of 15M already developed from social movements studies, such as Della Porta (2012, 2013), Flesher Fominaya (2014a, 2014b), Romanos (2011, 2013), Benski, Langman, Perugorría, and Tejerina (2013), Tejerina and Perugorría (2012), and Hughes (2011).

Thus, we aim to explore, using a qualitative approach, the 15M political repertoire from 2011 to the present. Since 15 May 2011 Spanish activism has attracted a wide and rich range of academic research. In these studies, special attention has been given to the origins (and effects) of the movement, the links with other protest movements (Occupy, Yosoy132, and so forth), the role of new media tools, the impact on traditional media and the public sphere, the problems of the Spanish representative democratic system, and the disaffection towards representative structures (Castañeda, 2012; Castells, 2012; Charnock et al., 2011; Della Porta, 2013; Fuster, 2012; Haro Barba & Sampedro, 2011; Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Postill, 2013; Subirats, 2011; Taibo, 2013; Toret, 2013; Tormey, 2015). In addition, several empirical analyses and opinion polls have further explored the problems of Spanish representation linked to the increasing distance between representatives and citizens (Alonso, 2014; Font, Navarro, Wojcieszak, & Alarcón, 2012). However, the theoretical approaches to 15M have paid little attention to the evolution of the political repertoire, using a civil society perspective as the
theoretical framework. In this article, an analysis of the diverse and broad 15M political repertoire is undertaken contemplating the heterogeneous groups closely linked to 15M in its origin and further evolution.⁴

Prior to the discussion, it should be noted that the categorizations presented in this article are not independent of the issues raised by the establishment of typologies of political actions, which are necessarily arbitrary to a certain extent due to the selection of elements and political processes, which are dynamic by definition (Weber, 1978). The typologies of political repertoire established in this analysis highlight the characteristics that are most relevant. As such, these categories cannot fully grasp the quantity and heterogeneity of the elements. However, this should not undermine the importance of establishing an analysis of political repertoire that is based in a context such as Spain, where civil society actors are using heterogeneous means to express their claims (and to make themselves heard).

### The importance of citizens’ repertoire actions for political theory

Political repertoire is a key matter for the fields of political science and political theory because both deal with the study of citizens’ mobilization through an empirical or analytical approach. In empirical work, studies seek to measure civil societies’ level of political participation by analysing the basic repertoire of citizens’ political involvement. To measure and understand participation in civil society, empirical studies introduce relevant differentiations among conventional and unconventional forms of participation or focus on diverse types of acts of protest, such as joining in boycotts, attending lawful demonstrations, joining in unofficial strikes, and occupying buildings or factories (Dalton, Van Sickle, & Weldon, 2010). The political repertoire issue is also relevant to the fields of political theory and philosophy, especially in projects where a subject reflects in detail upon the different strategies believed adequate to achieve political transformation. In various studies and approaches relating to civil society, this issue arises in models labelled—following Ehrenberg classification—neo-Tocquevillian, a theory that gained traction at the end of the twentieth century that lists ways in which movements, associations, groups, and non-governmental actors can be politically active within democratic systems (Ehrenberg, 1999). In addition, reflection upon different forms of political participation has also been—and still is—a key issue in the classical theoretical debate that draws a line between the horizontal and vertical logics followed by social movements, in the sense that each of these lines (logics) entails a series of political actions.

This article aims to analyse the ability of such theoretical frameworks to understand the complex political repertoire associated with 15M. To this end, we will start by providing a theoretical introduction that goes deeper into the role of the political repertoire.

### ‘Vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ logics of citizen participation

The distinction between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ political logics is a familiar axis for activists and social movement scholars to reflect on heterogeneous political movements or perspectives that might share a common goal (e.g. ‘real democracy’) but disagree on the views of how this can be achieved (Flesher Fomiyana, 2014a, 2013, 2007; Juris, 2005; Robinson & Tormey, 2005; Tormey, 2015). Hence, any theoretical approach on
the political repertoire of a citizen’s movement such as 15M cannot ignore the basic distinction between horizontal and vertical political logics.

On one hand, vertical approaches are infused with the idea of the importance of building parties and gaining power. This political premise is built on the need to develop a programme, to build a party to win supporters for the programme and to capture power to put the programme into practice. The objective in the case of 15M, for instance, is to capture power to implement the vision or to reshape the environment in accordance with Spanish activists’ understanding of real or true democracy. The vertical approach is based on ‘an image of power as a macrosocial resource which one can possess’ (Robinson & Tormey, 2007, p. 128). There is, thus, a ‘centre’ of power that can be occupied and that, once occupied, provides the power holder with the basis for moulding society in a particular image. In this sense, the quest for effectiveness is made desirable and, under certain conditions, necessitates the production of vertical political structures. Among the group of theorists who advocate these forms of participation, we can include Zizek (2010).

On the other hand, the horizontal logic indicates the desirability for a generation of spaces in which people can interact to obtain mutual benefit. Those who defend the horizontal logic seek to undermine the hegemony of existing political forces while prefiguring new types of social, economic, and political relationships. This entails seeking to promote ‘an activist rhizomatics—a way in which networks can coalesce, develop, multiply and re-multiply’ (Robinson & Tormey, 2005, p. 213). Horizontalists claim that there is no need for a programme or a political party. What are needed are zones of encounter, shared learning, solidarity, affiliation, coalescence provided by networks of support, and the ability to mobilize together and place pressure on the logic of the system until it falls. In the case of 15M, for instance, it is the generalization of alternative practices and ‘revolution in everyday life’ that will lead to real democracy in Spain (Flesher Fomiyana, 2014a; Tormey, 2015). Within this theoretical framework, we find such authors as Holloway (2002) and Graeber (2013).

The theoretical distinction between the ideal types of political logic allows for the identification of the types of political actions corresponding to both of these logics. On the one hand, the organization of manifestos, strikes, and legal proposals and the promotion of political parties form part of the vertical logic. On the other hand, within the horizontal logic, we find actions such as demonstrations, civil disobedience actions, and the promotion of alternative collective projects.

Another key differentiating element between the two logics is their predisposition to negotiate, or not, with representative institutions (and actors). While the vertical model calls for mobilization, which ultimately aims to negotiate with and place pressure on representative institutions, the commitment of the horizontal model is linked to the denial of representatives’ structures as a tool that can foster social transformation (Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2013).

In short, the ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ political logics can be differentiated by the political repertoire they foster and by their contrary predisposition towards representative structures. Whether this theoretical distinction is fruitful or not for understanding the Spanish political context will be discussed later in the article. At this point, it is necessary to introduce some civil society theory and the role of political repertoire into this thinking.
Civil society’s neo-Tocquevillian interpretations and political repertoire

Some authors in Western Europe stand out in the multifaceted, abundant reflection on polysemic civil society, after having reclaimed this term from progressive perspectives used in the last decades of the twentieth century (Hall, 1995; Kaldor, 2003). They aimed to describe forms of political transformation in which citizens are politically active and capable, and the state is a type of guarantor of rights. Among these thinkers, Habermas, Kaldor, Keane, Barber, Cohen, and Arato are highlighted. These and other thinkers, despite defending different normative models of civil society, shared basic beliefs as far as the possibilities and roles they assigned it (Edwards, 2004; Ehrenberg, 1999; Encarnación, 2003; Feenstra, 2008; Seligman, 1992).

Such proposals understand civil society as a network in which citizens express themselves in a politically active manner to claim settlements, reforms, or amendments within the legal framework. Civil society is understood as citizen-based pressure groups that demand realignment or common debate on set rules. Habermas expresses the corrective task of civil society quite graphically when he notes that civil society is characterized by exercising a ‘siege-type’ influence on a systemic world for the purpose of avoiding its colonialist abuse (Habermas, 1996, p. 487). Keane is of a similar mind when he claims the need to develop a civil society that monitors political representatives, and for that civil society to be consolidated as if it were ‘a thorn permanently in the political power’s side’ to advance the principles of equality and political freedom (Keane, 1988, p. 15).

This interpretation of civil society stresses its democratizing role in the political system and its structure (Barber, 2003; García-Marzá, 2013). The purpose of civil society then is to reform these structures by applying external pressure. In parallel, the self-limiting nature of its work is defended because, according to Habermas, ‘directly, it can only transform itself, and indirectly, it can work on self-transforming the political system that is structured in “rule of law” terms’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 490).

This self-limiting condition associated with civil society is, in turn, accompanied by demands as far as the political system is concerned and remains receptive to feedback and civil society’s influence. In other words, it remains permeable to outside claims so that they can be seriously assessed in decision-making processes. In this sense, the correcting or reforming role is possible only if this interrelation between civil society and the political system actually exists. In addition, the political system is considered to be capable of remaining close to civil society only if it manages to understand, channel, and assess civil society proposals (Cohen & Arato, 2000).

Therefore, the visions of civil society put forward by such authors as Habermas, Cohen, Arato, Keane, and Barber confer paramount importance to the interrelation between civil society and the political system. At this point, the characteristics and list of actions of civil society’s political repertoire become relevant. Civil society is associated with the civic network that employs a large number of non-violent actions to impact the political scenario. Different neo-Tocquevillian versions define civil society as being non-violent and as consisting of a wide range of actors, e.g. non-governmental organizations, social movements, resident associations, and consumer associations (Ehrenberg, 1999; Feenstra, 2008). These versions are also aware that the actions performed by civil society can be heterogeneous and plural insofar as no single pattern exists.

In relation to specific political forms, Habermas, Cohen, and Arato in particular have dealt with what the limit actually is by considering civil disobedience to be the last
resort of civil society’s contribution in its effort towards political change in certain circumstances (Cohen & Arato, 2000). Along these lines, Habermas, for example, notes that ‘the last means for obtaining more of a hearing and greater media influence for oppositional arguments are acts of civil disobedience’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 383). Such political action is defined as ‘acts of non-violent, symbolic rule violation’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 383), which can be used only exceptionally when actors ‘protest against binding decisions, their legality notwithstanding, the actors consider illegitimate in the light of valid constitutional principles’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 384). Cohen, Arato, and Habermas all indicate that such actions are a last resort, which is to be applied when all other means have been exhausted, in situations of crisis, and when there is no choice but to opt for conflict (Cohen & Arato, 2000; Habermas, 1996). These theses are shared by other neo-Tocquevillian authors, who acknowledge that civil society’s political repertoire must be adapted to a series of rules and limits (Kaldor, Anheier, & Glasius, 2003; Keane, 2003).

Thus, these neo-Tocquevillian views of civil society consider in particular the framework that must define the relation between the political system and civil society in advanced democratic systems. These views do so by understanding the political system and constitutions as dynamic and permeable elements that are receptive to the demands that civil society makes. Within this framework, the political repertoire is also assumed to be diverse, non-violence is the basic principle, and civil disobedience is the last resort in its attempts to influence the political centre.

Having looked at the theoretical approaches that distinguish the ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ political logics and understood civil society, it is worth investigating the extent to which these approaches can help us comprehend the many forms of actions that have emerged in Spain since 2011. Does either of the logics (vertical or horizontal) predominate in the recent activism of 15M? Do the neo-Tocquevillian views of civil society help explain 15M? Is civil disobedience as a last resort a central element of this citizen movement? Are civil society’s self-limiting character and openness of the political system (towards civil society’s claims) key elements of the current Spanish political system? To answer these questions, we now discuss in greater detail some of the most relevant forms of participation that have recently developed.

Towards the differentiation of 15M’s political repertoire

The diverse, changing nature of 15M makes it difficult to provide an explanation that completely covers this movement’s complexity. Therefore, the objective of attempting to create an approach to understanding 15M’s broad political repertoire must be pursued cautiously. In addition, it is worth remembering that any description of this complex movement cannot avoid problems of oversimplification. Among the heterogeneous forms of participation presented below, we will see the close connection between the online and offline forms of participation, a theme that has been extensively studied (Haro Barba & Sampedro, 2011; Postill, 2013; Toret, 2013). Although this matter is not the focal point of the present article, it is worth bearing in mind that 15M’s political repertoire mixes analogue and digital participation elements. In the following delineation of the movement’s political repertoire, the chronological component is taken into account.
Demonstrations without traditional intermediate structures (trade unions and political parties)

On 15 May 2011, the first demonstrations began after the grassroots platform Democracia Real Ya! (Real Democracy Now) called for marches around Spain with the slogan ‘We aren’t merchandise in politicians and bankers’ hands’ (Monterde, Calleja-López, Aguilera, Barandiaran, & Postill, 2015). Expressions of outrage (indignados) spread quickly through many Spanish cities. A special feature of the 15M eruption is that its organization lacks traditional political structures (Della Porta, 2013). Trade unions and political parties are notably absent in the organization of these new political expressions. This feature led to a creative explosion in the form of messages, symbols, and claims (Castells, 2012). Social networks played an important role in the organization and promotion of the original 15M rally and for all subsequent events (Anduiza et al., 2013; Postill, 2013). In this initial phase of the 15M movement, anger was expressed as a general criticism of the political system’s shortcomings and as a claim for ‘more democracy’.

‘Acampadas’ and assemblies

A few hours after the demonstrations started on 15 May, the option to continue with street protests by occupying public squares was raised. Images of Arab riots resonated with Spanish activists, who quickly decided to re-appropriate public spaces by organizing acampadas (occupations) in over 55 cities (Della Porta, 2013; Kaldor & Selchow, 2013; Taibo, 2013). The most relevant feature of these acampadas was the emergence of each of an assembly decision-making model, divided into two key structures: (1) the general assembly for adopting collective decisions and (2) numerous committees. Several committees (legal, action, communication, computing, medical care, and infrastructure) were organized so that each participant could be involved in accordance with his or her interests. The committees involved a certain degree of specialization in activists’ actions, but all key decisions were debated in the general assembly. Occupation lasted for approximately four weeks, during which time political activities and discussions were ongoing. The goal of these discussions was to reach some consensus on a reformist agenda (Romanos, 2013).

New monitoring mechanism

Shortly after the 15M launched, multiple platforms that focused on monitoring and scrutinizing centres of political (and economic) power in Spain appeared. Thus, there was an explosion of initiatives by which ordinary citizens became specialists in tracking politicians’ actions, compiling information, drawing up reports, sharing information or transcribing information in open formats. Some initiatives have continued up to the time of writing and are remarkably stable. Qué hacen los diputados (What Do Members of Parliament Do?), Cuentas Claras (Clear Accounts), Civio.org, or Sueldos Públicos (Public Salaries) are some examples. These platforms are characterized by their efficient use of digital tools and their concern about cases of abuse of power and corruption. Alongside these platforms, sporadic and collaborative scrutiny actions also appear, with citizens exploiting the potential of new communication tools to uncover possible abuses of power. A paradigmatic case of such initiatives is 15MpaRato (June 2012), which brought together the
possibilities offered by crowdfunding and crowdsourcing for collaborative work and has helped to bring to justice both Rodrigo Rato, former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, and board members of the Bankia initial public offering (IPO) relating to irregularities in the IPO of Bankia’s shares (Flesher Fominaya, 2014b). Specialized monitoring processes have thus been consolidated as a new political dynamic in Spain (Feenstra & Keane, 2014).

**Stopping evictions: Plataforma Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platforms of People Affected by Mortgages)**

Among the diverse groups linked to the 15M movement, Plataforma Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) has developed the most significant and heterogeneous political actions so far (Romanos, 2014). The existence of PAH precedes the 15M movement, although its growing importance is linked to the movement’s emergence in 2011 (Colau & Alemany, 2013). PAH is an organization involved in the movement against evictions and to reform the Spanish law on mortgages. This network, which today has chapters in 145 cities, was founded in 2009 as a part of a broader social movement that has been campaigning for access to decent housing since 2003 (Romanos, 2014). PAH has been able to raise awareness among citizens about abusive clauses in many bank mortgages and the importance of the acceptance of assets in lieu of payment. Among the forms of direct political action conducted by PAH, the blockage of evictions is the most significant. These actions are discussed via regular assemblies where working groups are formed. Notices calling for street mobilizations are posted using different digital tools (blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and so forth). In response to these notices, hundreds of activists create human shields outside threatened houses. Such actions have existed in Spain since 2009, but their proliferation accelerated in 2011. By the time of writing, more than 1135 evictions have been blocked by PAH activists.

**Popular legislative initiatives developed by PAH**

In February 2013, PAH managed to take the debate on mortgages and payment to the Spanish Parliament. To achieve this, the organization led a popular legislative initiative that received 1.4 million signatures from supporters. This proposal required preparation of a specific legislative proposal as an alternative to existing law. The proceedings of this initiative through the Parliament required the wide dissemination of the proposal and a large number of citizen signatures. Former PAH spokesperson Ada Colau participated in a parliamentary committee to defend the legal reform of the mortgage system. This political initiative revealed PAH’s decision to explore the possibility of political transformation through representative channels and mechanisms (Colau & Alemany, 2013; Romanos, 2014).

**Escraches**

Another form of political action carried out while the PAH-led popular legislative initiative was being discussed in parliament is known in Spanish as escraches. Escraches, as Romanos explains, ‘consisted in the visit of a group of activists to the home of politicians with the intention of better informing them about the social problems created by evictions.
and of inviting them to PAH’s assemblies and activities’ (2014, p. 299). During the course of the visit, activists put up stickers, chant, and generally make noise. Such political action originated in Argentina, where it was employed in the 1990s by human rights activists who denounced the impunity of the perpetrators of ‘los desaparecidos’ (‘the disappeared’). In Spain, these actions were started in March 2013 by PAH activists who sought to pressure politicians into approving the popular legislative initiative. There was some debate as to the legality of this method because it was employed in front of politicians’ homes. Still, it is considered (even in relevant court cases) a non-violent act of civil disobedience where activists seek to raise awareness about the lack of attention paid to certain human rights. The goal of this type of political action was to foster political discussion about public opinions and to pressure politicians into approving the popular legislative initiative. The idea that representative institutions remain the sites to reach political transformation is intrinsic to escraches.

**Citizen waves**

Protest marches known as citizen waves started in 2012 for the purpose of stopping austerity politics. These citizen waves have been expressed in the fields of health and education, among many others, and employ different colours to symbolize the sector each wave is defending (white and green, respectively). The novelty of this act lies in its hybridity, merging traditional structures, and new dynamics. The traditional strategies followed by trade unions are adopted by these citizen waves, but the acts are self-organized, inclusive, and horizontal in nature. These actions have been supported through the involvement of different actors: Experts, professionals, activists, citizens, users, etc. The halts of the privatization of several hospitals in Madrid in 2013 and 2014 have been the greatest successes achieved to date. The so-called white wave was able to prove power abuse and malpractices during this privatization process. Demonstrations, assemblies, the development of manifestos, and negotiations with politicians all form part of the repertoires used by different citizen waves.

**Peaceful siege of parliament**

In the second half of 2012, demonstrations started to adopt a new nature. On 25 September, ‘Surround the Parliament’ was organized in Madrid by the Plataforma ¡En Pie! and Coordinadora 25-S. This act consisted of a symbolic siege of the most important representative institution, the Spanish Parliament. This type of action was later extended to other representative institutions, especially town and city halls. The peaceful siege of representative institutions involves concentrating the protest to focus on a specific geographical area. These actions are followed live by other citizens, who use digital media tools (streaming is especially prevalent). With such actions, we should recognize the radicalization of the protest inasmuch as activists directly address those considered responsible for political unrest: Politicians.

**Blockades and occupation of institutions and megaprojects**

A new type of political action that has been consolidated since 2013 is blockades and occupations of institutions and urban projects. Blockades consist of actions in which the normal
daily life of institutions is altered by activists for the purpose of publicly denouncing wrongdoing or injustice. Such actions have recently spread to banks and town/city halls and have involved such groups as iai@flautas and PAH. To date ‘Toque a Bankia’ (‘Pulling up Bankia’) has been the most influential campaign. This initiative, held in May 2013, blocked many Bankia bank branches all around the country to protest the cash injection of 18,000 million euros of public funds. Among the blockades of megaprojects, the most prominent is the ‘Gamonal case’, which started with neighbourhood protests of the construction of an 8 million euro boulevard in an economically depressed area of Burgos (northern Spain). The conflict ended with the cancellation of the boulevard construction.

Emergence of citizen-based political parties

A more recent, and highly striking, trend has been the emergence of many new political parties promoted by 15M grassroots activists. Since 2011, the emergence of new parties has been constant and includes the parties EQUO (2011), Partido X (X Party, 2013), Podemos (We Can, 2014), and Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona in Common, 2014). Other parties that preceded the 15M movement, such as Candidatura d’Unidad Popular (CUP) and Escaños en Blanco (Empty Seats), are also linked to this movement with regard to their claims and members. These new political parties differ from traditional parties, not only in their demands but also in the promotion of new dynamics (transparency and participation) within their own party structures. In addition, these initiatives conceived the party form as one tool for political participation. The whole idea is that citizen groups try to use the party form and participate in elections as an additional strategy to foster political transformation (Tormey, 2015). Digital media tools have become a key aspect of these parties, employed for internal organization matters, for the growth of the party, and for the promotion of their proposals. In the European elections in May 2014, Podemos obtained a historic result by obtaining five European Parliament seats (over 1.2 million votes). These new political formations have erupted into the Spanish electoral arena after years of ‘street politics’. These parties take up 15M claims, but the difference now is the goal of defending them in representative institutions. Ada Colau, PAH’s spokesperson for several years (2009–2014), is now the leading figure of Barcelona en Comú, a political project born in Barcelona in 2014 for the purpose of winning the 2015 local elections.

15M’s political repertoire along the vertical and horizontal theoretical axis

The diversity and evolution of the forms of participation that have developed thanks to 15M enable us to observe some notable elements that politically reflect this movement. One particular aspect that stands out is how the repertoire elements we have identified in the vertical and horizontal theoretical axis have been combined or mixed.

The national and international importance and repercussion of the occupations and assemblies that have taken place might lead us to think a priori that the horizontal logics of citizen participation clearly predominate. It is conceivable that these forms of political expression did indeed predominate when 15M originated. Moreover, the analysis of the political repertoire that has unfolded in recent years enables us to see how complex the matter actually is. At the same time, however, the recent proliferation of new political
parties (with grassroots activists linked to 15M) makes us think about a tendency towards political institutionalization and, therefore, towards the vertical logic model.

In the above-described political repertoire, interesting combinations of vertical and horizontal forms of participation, or hybrids, can be observed. Furthermore, as the repertoire evolved, several new forms of direct participation emerged that seek solutions for specific problems. The mortgage law matter, for example, is dealt with both by proposing a popular legislative initiative and by pressuring and negotiating with representative institutions. That is, when ‘following’ the vertical model, the rules of the democratic game are followed to bring about a political change through Parliament. However, such political action performed through ‘traditional’ channels, with the collection of over 1.4 million signatures, is accompanied by actions such as the occupations of banks, or escraches, i.e. acts of civil disobedience. Such pressure-based acts, non-violence, and the defence of universal rights—all on the fringe of unlawfulness—are where participants accept the possibility of being submitted to punishment by law. We observe how a platform such as PAH employs elements of both vertical and horizontal logics, as long as the political demands are better heard and the strategy accomplishes political change (Flesher Fominaya, 2014b).

Citizen waves also combine heterogeneous elements from horizontal and vertical models. On the one hand, these waves follow traditional trade union models that are oriented towards public bureaucracy and address the representative structures that the vertical logic ‘expects’. On the other hand, these citizen waves are characterized by having incorporated the new culture and codes that emerged from 15M, expressed by organizing assemblies and open identities in which professionals, affected parties, mothers, fathers, students, etc., participate. These are institutionalized platforms that develop manifestos and attempt to negotiate with representative structures (vertical model). However, they are also openly understood as inclusive and distributed self-organization spaces (horizontal model).13

Finally, we look at what is perhaps the most novel aspect of the proliferation of new political parties created by grassroots activists. In the last few years, the formation of political parties has been an expanding phenomenon in Spain and has coincided with the decline in popularity of traditional parties. New parties, such as Podemos, Partido X, and Barcelona en Común, have been created by activists who, after having considered the alternative, external channels to exert pressure, have changed strategies and decided to participate by way of their own parties in representative elections. What they have done is given way to institutionalized politics with its structures, programmes, and internal rules. By following the steps of most vertical logics, they believe it is impossible to escape from representation as an element to transform political reality (Tormey, 2015). Nonetheless, all these new parties demand the necessity to incorporate horizontal elements into their own structures to avoid the formation of elites, and they remain open to civil society and grassroots activists. Thus these new parties insist that forms of participation, assemblies, or groups can be incorporated into their internal dynamics. In fact, they are now facing the challenges of making this combination of horizontal and vertical elements possible and of keeping their identification with civil society alive.

In short, we can see how 15M has opened up a repertoire of complex, dynamic actions where horizontal and vertical elements are creatively combined. Of course, this combination is not without tensions and new challenges, as Flesher Fominayaya has analysed in historical and analytical terms for the Spanish case (2014a, b). However, as we can observe from the plural political repertoire, there are some general and interesting
trends that show a tendency and evolution towards experimentation and towards hybrid forms of participation. We can see how the initial phase of 15M was centred on ‘conquering’ the public space by showing its interest in promoting forms of political participation that incorporated horizontal models. Nevertheless, the evolution of the political repertoire has shown that it is more specialized in demands and actions. With time, some vertical model elements have gained sway, at least in terms of institutionalizing political practices, but without ignoring certain elements of horizontal logics that were previously experimented with. It is worth exploring at this point the possible determining factors of the hybridity of strategies. This takes us back to key theorists, such as Habermas, Keane, Cohen and Arato, and their reflections on civil society.

Civil society in the context of minimal state permeability

The political repertoire described above now faces the challenge that 15M still plays a role in association with (or what is expected of) civil society, especially in two aspects: (1) its relation to the political system and (2) the means employed to accomplish political transformation. This, we will remember, is where civil disobedience is considered the last resort of civil society’s contribution.

The emergence of 15M in 2011 can be explained by parts of the population feeling that they need to demand reform and to ask for the democratization of the political system. In the beginning, the forms that the political expression took combined classic forms of participation—similar to street protests—and some novel elements, such as acampadas and assemblies. However, these forms of participation soon progressed to specialization and institutionalization. The evolution of the political repertoire has also led to the proliferation of acts of civil disobedience, expressed as escraches, blocking institutions and stopping major public projects (megaprojects). Indeed the ‘Habermasian metaphor’ that describes the siege of a castle without intent to conquer it can be applied to the ‘Surround the Parliament’ initiative. While this alternative political repertoire evolved, the institutional channel has also been used and has even been perfected with the emergence of monitoring platforms. Finally, the development of the political repertoire has ended with the formation of new political parties. Thus, the evolution of new political forms has been expressed by a tendency not only towards civil disobedience but also towards the specialization and institutionalization of forms of action. Why did this evolution occur? Applying elements from civil society theory to the citizen initiative case might provide some answers.

The proposal to reform the law on mortgages is especially relevant, not only because of the various actions employed to promote it (preparing manifestos, looking for support, political negotiation, escraches, etc.) but also because of the level of popular support it had and the answer that the government gave it (Romanos, 2014). As noted above, this proposal reached Parliament after more than 1.4 million signatures had been collected (Feenstra & Keane, 2014). The governing party, Partido Popular (PP), initially refused to submit the proposal for discussion in Parliament, but gave in to pressure on 12 February 2013 after ‘the latest suicide to be provoked by evictions became known’ (Romanos, 2013, p. 229). Although permission was given for it to be discussed, the citizen initiative had no chance of being approved as PP had long made its opposition quite clear. Finally on 2 April, PP voted no to the citizen initiative by way of a law that its own parliamentary group proposed as an alternative that did not include PAH’s demands. During the
weeks that the citizen initiative lasted, and despite citizens’ pressure being expressed through street protests and escraches and the popular support for the initiative, the main demand of the initiative’s proposal (the acceptance of assets in lieu of payment) was never the government’s main point of interest. Once again, civil society’s external pressure came up against a political system that was barely amenable to outside claims.

Along these lines, it is worth remembering that although many claims made by 15M—such as reforming the electoral law, reforming the law on mortgages, promoting public transparency, democratizing and transforming key representative institutions, further promoting citizen participation, and reforming the Tribunal de Cuentas (Court of Auditors)—have become deeply rooted in the public domain, calls for democratic regeneration seem to be far (beyond pure rhetoric) removed from the interests of the traditional parties dominating Spanish politics. Furthermore, such laws as the 2013 Law on Public Safety (popularly known as the ‘gag law’), the electoral reform of 2011 (that made it more difficult for candidates of new parties to run for elections), and the 2013 Transparency Law (very much discussed because it leaves key power institutions out of reach) have gone in the opposite direction of 15M demands.15 This suggests that the general way that forms of citizen participation have progressed is related to a lack of permeability in the political system. The non-compliance with the normative (ideal) demand behind civil society’s various neo-Tocquevillian versions, which are based on the understanding that the constitution is an unfinished project that can be revised, allows us to theoretically frame the transformation that now addresses the specialization of political action. It also explains the reasons for renouncing civil society’s self-limiting nature to favour the ‘power conquest’ option.

Conclusions

Analysing the evolution of the political repertoire in Spain demonstrates how we have gone from an initial stage in which 15M was erected as a civil society movement dedicated to considering generalized criticisms of the system to a new phase characterized by a commitment to specializing and institutionalizing political forms of action. As part of this tendency towards specialization, the propagation of many scrutinizing mechanisms and platforms is typical of monitory democracy models (Keane, 2009). Nonetheless, because permeability is lacking in the political system, numerous strategies have led to the proliferation of new political parties, erected by civil society actors who seem to renounce the self-limiting character as they opt to acquire power. In addition, this process is taking place in the context of traditional parties that are becoming delegitimized, manifesting as an outburst of new parties within representative structures.16 The outburst of these new parties implies a change in strategy where vertical and horizontal elements are combined and where people begin to consider that change is possible only from within representative institutions, given the minimal effect of the pressure placed by civil society from the fringes of politics.

To summarize, civil society’s neo-Tocquevillian approaches insist on civil society’s self-limiting nature and on the importance of a dynamic, open relationship between it and the political system. The case of Spain and the evolution of the political repertoire used by its citizens precisely demonstrate the importance of this aspect and allow us to see how civil society extends its strategies and political repertoire when the political system continues to be stubborn or impermeable. The lack of connection and feedback between civil society and the political society and its influence on these changes in
citizen participation strategies are responsible for the incorporation of the partisan form, even among activists who are traditionally more connected with horizontal aspects and logics. It remains to be observed in the near future whether this evolution and transformation of Spanish civil society actors will foster more democratic and permeable relations with the representative structures.

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Notes

1. Since 2009, surveys from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Sociological Research Centre, CIS), have noted a steady discrediting of the political class. During this period, the quality of political leadership and political parties has become the third greatest concern among citizens and, since July 2013, the constant proliferation of scandals has put corruption as the public’s second greatest concern. Information retrieved from http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/ES/11_barometros/indicadores.html

2. The reach of the economic crisis in Spain was highlighted in a 2014 Fundación Fomento de Estudios Sociales y de Sociología Aplicada (FOESSA) (Caritas) report, which concluded that 11.7 million (of 46 million people) in Spain suffer from social exclusion. At the same time, the level of child poverty reached 36.3% (Fundación FOESSA, 2014). Another key report on the level of poverty in Spain has been developed by Cruz Roja (2014).

3. In the process of writing this article, the author has consulted diverse sources of information and opinion polls. Particularly significant are the reports and data collected from CIS, Eurobarometer, DatAnalysis15M, IGOPnet, Human Watch Reports, Righths International Spain, FOESSA (Caritas), Cruz Roja, and GfK group.

4. Among some of the most relevant actors linked to 15M we can differentiate the following: In their origins: No Les Votes, Juventud sin Futuro, Democracia Real Ya, PAH; in their new monitoring mechanisms: Qué hacen los diputados, Cuentas Claras, Civio.org, or Sueldos Públicos; in terms of new political parties: Podemos, Partido X, Guanyem Barcelona (and the mainfold ‘Ganemos’ across Spain, Málaga, Madrid, Zaragoza, Castellón, etc.); in the action groups: Iai@flautas and the multiple Mareas. A much wider description of 15M actors is available at http://wiki.15m.cc/wiki/Portada

5. Habermas’s interpretation of participation as deliberation is developed by Seckinelgin for a special issue in the Journal of Civil Society, ‘European Social Space or Europe’s Social Spaces?’ (p. 269)—An analysis of the limitations for newcomers to make their voices heard (Seckinelgin, 2012).

6. This initiative began gathering information on the case with the collaboration of Internet users. A legal court case eventually resulted. The case cost around 15,000€; an appeal through a crowdfunding campaign raised 18,359€ in less than 24 hours from 965 donations, and, within days, a complaint was filed. Information retrieved from http://15mparato.wordpress.com/

7. Human Rights Watch research has revealed the lack of attention towards Spanish housing problems. A recent report concludes that ‘neither the central government nor parliament has conducted any in-depth inquiry into banking practices with respect to mortgages, or into the role of intermediaries such as real estate agencies’ (Human Rights Watch, 2014b).

8. In March 2013 the European Court of Justice considered Spanish laws too tough and contrary to the European Council Directive 93/13/ECC of April 1993. Court of Justice of the European Union Press Release No 30/13 (14 March 2013). Retrieved December 7, 2014, from http://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2013-03/cp130030en.pdf
9. See PAH website, http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/
10. See escraches web campaign, http://escrache.afectadosporlahipoteca.com/
11. A high-profile escrache was held in front of the house of the Vice President, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría (5 April 2013). Despite complaints from relevant politicians in the government, the Court of Madrid (number 4) considered the escrache a ‘legal mechanism of democratic participation’ and an ‘expression of citizens’ pluralism’ (author’s translation). See the judgement, http://ep00.epimg.net/descargables/2013/05/10/cb072919b0b0bac890565b82873b2f89e.pdf
12. Between 2009 and 2010, the Spanish Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that 295 new political parties were registered. This doubled in the period of mobilization between 2011 and 2012, with 492 new parties created. Though a large percentage of these new parties operate only at local level, the figures show an extraordinary rate of new parties emerging since 2011. Information retrieved from https://servicio.mir.es/nfrontal/webpartido_politico.html
13. See http://mareaciudadanademadrid.blogspot.com.es/p/quienes-somos_19.html
14. A 2011 CIS Study on Opinions and Attitudes 71 (Font et al., 2012, pp. 88–90) shows a high level of distrust among Spaniards towards the political system and its main actors. According to this study, the lowest level of trust is towards the government (2.9 on a 10-point scale) and political parties (3.0). The most highly rated is the judiciary system (with just a value of 3.4). Font et al. (2012) Opinions and Attitudes 71. Retrieved June 3, 2015, from http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/-Archivos/Publicacioness/ OyA/OyA71a.pdf. GfK studies on confidence in various professions shows that Spain is the country (from a total of 25 countries around the world) with the least confidence in politicians: 5%. This is a 22-point fall from 2005 to 2013. See, GfK Verein (2014). The 2014 DatAnalysis Survey ‘#Encuesta15M2014’, led by Manuel Castells, concluded that for 88.9% of respondents, the motivation for participation in 15M protests was the lack of democracy in Spain (Castells, 2014).
15. On the 2013 Law on Public Safety, Rights International Spain (RIS) considered the Transparency Law a limitation of citizen participation (Rights International Spain, 2013). Further Human Rights Watch concludes that the new Public Safety Law is ‘a direct threat to the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression in Spain’ (Human Rights Watch, 2014).
16. Political disaffection is directed primarily at the two major political parties (PP and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)), which dominate Spanish politics. The CIS survey for October 2014 reported voting intentions at 27.5% for the PP and 23.9% for the PSOE, a total of 51.4% of all votes, down significantly from previous decades. These polls mirror changes in support for the two dominant Spanish parties: In the March 2008 general elections, 83.81% of all votes went to the PSOE and the PP (43.87% and 39.94%, respectively). This discrediting of the party duopoly benefits especially Podemos, a party that, less than one year into existence, reached a 22.5% intention to vote (CIS, 2014).

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