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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### TAKING TO THE STREETS IN THE SHADOW OF AUSTERITY A chronology of the cycle of protests in Spain, 2007-2015

**Martín Portos**

*European University Institute*

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**ABSTRACT:** Based on theories of cycles of collective behavior, this piece establishes a periodization of the cycle of anti-austerity and anti-political status quo protests in the shadow of the Great Recession that Spain faced between 2007 and 2015. More specifically, it tries to explain why the peak of protests persisted for so long: radicalization was contained, institutionalization postponed and protesters' divisions avoided. The crucial argument here, an innovation with regards to the classic theories of cycles, is that the high standards of mobilization persisted for a long time as the result of the issue specialization of a more general anti-austerity fight and the strategic alliances —with varying degrees of formality— that new civil organizations forged with the unions. For illustrating the longitudinal dynamics of the cycle of protests, we use original protest event data.

**KEYWORDS:** citizen's tides , contentious politics, cycle of collective action, indignados, Spain

**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:** Martín Portos, email: martin.portos@eui.eu

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## 1. Introduction

2011 has been defined as the year of protest. A large and visible number of mobilizations shook the socio-political scenario in many distant parts of the globe: from the Arab uprisings in the spring, to the anti-austerity demonstrations across South European countries in the summer, all the way to the Occupy movement in the US during the fall, to mention just a few examples.

In Spain, the 15M campaign gave rise to the *indignados*-“outraged people”<sup>1</sup> in May 2011. It embodied the most remarkable turning point in the socio-political mobilization scene of the last years. This crossroads was expressed through some of the most intense and crowded contentious activities taking place outside the umbrella of traditional intermediary institutions of representation since Spain’s transition to democracy in the 1970s. Over one million people were involved in the 15M protests all over the country, and above 70% of the Spaniards showed sympathetic feelings towards the events (Martí i Puig 2011; CIS barometer 2905, June 2011).

There is already a relatively wide range of studies on the 15M, of both a qualitative and quantitative type (e.g. Romanos 2013; CIS 2011, Nº 2921; Calvo et al 2011; Likki 2012; Calvo 2013; Masullo and Portos 2015). While these studies are undoubtedly useful, what I will argue for in this paper is that anti-austerity activities went on to transcend what happened across Spanish squares in May-June 2011. Many of these activities have been related to the financial crisis that has affected Spain drastically, represented in the profusion of protests that persisted until late-2013 (e.g. anti-evictions, citizen’s tides, urban movements, etc. that will be analyzed later). Reducing anti-austerity protests in Spain to the events represented by 15M would preclude us from seeing what in truth was in reality a much more complex cycle of social confrontation.

I explore the cycle of contention that Spain has faced since the onset of the economic crisis. Following Sidney Tarrow (2011:199, 1993), by a *cycle* I refer to a phase of heightened conflict across the social system, where collective action spreads rapidly from more to less mobilized sectors, flows of information and interactions between challengers and authorities are intense, and innovations occur in terms of frames, forms of collective action and tactics.

My aims in this article are twofold. First, I assess the development of Spanish protests in the shadow of austerity by providing a periodization of the cycle of contention. Second, I nuance the myth of spontaneity that often surrounds the 15M protest events

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<sup>1</sup> I argue that the *indignados* (Hessel 2011) involves a wider range of anti-austerity and for real democracy protests, than those represented by the 15M boundaries.

in 2011, and I analyze how protesters managed to maintain relatively high standards of mobilization over time after this climax, until late-2013: radicalization was contained, institutionalization postponed and protesters' division avoided. The crucial argument here— an innovation with regards to the classic theories of cycles of contention (Hirshman 1982; Tarrow 1991, 1993, 1995, 2011; Koopmans 2004)— is that the high standards of mobilization persisted for a long time as the result of the issue specialization of a more general anti-austerity fight and the strategic alliances —with varying degrees of formality— that new civil organizations forged with the unions.

The time span covered ranges from January 2007 to February 2015. I study the development of protests from the initial symptoms of the Great Recession (i.e. the first increasing ratios of youth unemployment, a peak in private household debt, and the global financial crisis resulting from the subprime mortgage crisis) until February 2015. This is an appropriate moment at which to finish the observation for two main reasons.

First, although it may be argued the crisis is still unfolding, there has been a change of tendency in the economic cycle when looking at macro-economic indicators: for example, the Spanish risk premium has fallen below 100 points for the first time since 2005, and the employment rate has stayed below the 24% threshold three terms in a row for the first time in the last 5-year period. Second, the timing of political dynamics marks a turning point, with the electoral campaign for the regional election in Andalucía, which began in early March 2015. Symbolically, this meant that there was a shift of focus towards the electoral side of political participation, as these regional elections were the starting point for a year with a cramped electoral calendar (municipal and regional elections were held in 13 autonomous communities in May 2015, Catalan elections were held in September 2015, and the general elections were held later in December). These events altered the socio-political scenario, as the media, public opinion and organizational-mobilization foci were oriented to the conventional side of political participation, especially after the irruption of *Podemos* and various municipal candidacies onto the political scene.

## 2. Data and methods

The data and figures reported in this paper come mainly from the protest event analysis (hereafter PEA) dataset that I collected to systematically map, analyze and interpret the occurrence of protests over time using content analysis (Koopmans and Rucht 2002:231). In order to do this, I used newspaper records. The printed media is a crucial arena for public claim-making, and most actors use it —even nowadays— to

make their views public (Earl et al 2004; Hutter 2014). The units of analysis are events, defined as “contentious and potentially subversive [collective] acts that challenge normalized practices, modes of causation, or systems of authority” (Beissinger 2002:14).

More specifically, I have collected my PEA dataset from *El País* (N= 2,002) through a keyword search from their digitalized printed versions stored in *El País Archive*. Every article reported in the newspaper is tagged with a number of keywords. The system automatically reports only those articles matching my input for the selected time span.<sup>2</sup> Articles that report any protest event performance were selected manually – or discarded.

No diachronic sampling techniques were necessary. Editorial and commentary sections were omitted. I gathered data on all sorts of protest events reported during the period of observation (i.e. not only those against austerity, the crisis, political status quo and labor issues). Given bias concerns, I complemented my PEA data with information from the Spanish Ministry of Home Affairs on demonstration occurrence, reported when available.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The cycle of anti-austerity protests in Spain

While PEA is a useful technique to assess longitudinal trends of protest performances, data collection often presents several challenges and must be handled with care (for reviews, see Koopmans and Rucht 2002; Hutter 2014). The main difficulty lies in media selectivity, as reported events are “never a representative (nor a random) sample” (della Porta 2014:451). In other words, there is a selection bias in reported events— although the importance of this bias is very strongly contested (see Hutter 2014; Earl et al 2004).<sup>4</sup> One of the most sensitive issues in this regard is the calculation and estimation of the number of protesters in any given event. Depending on the source, the data reported tend to differ dramatically, and may be scanty and partial.

To deal with this issue I gathered information on the three main sources of information, whenever these were available. These three indicators are: the number of participants reported by (i) the police or Government, (ii) *El País* newspaper and (iii) the

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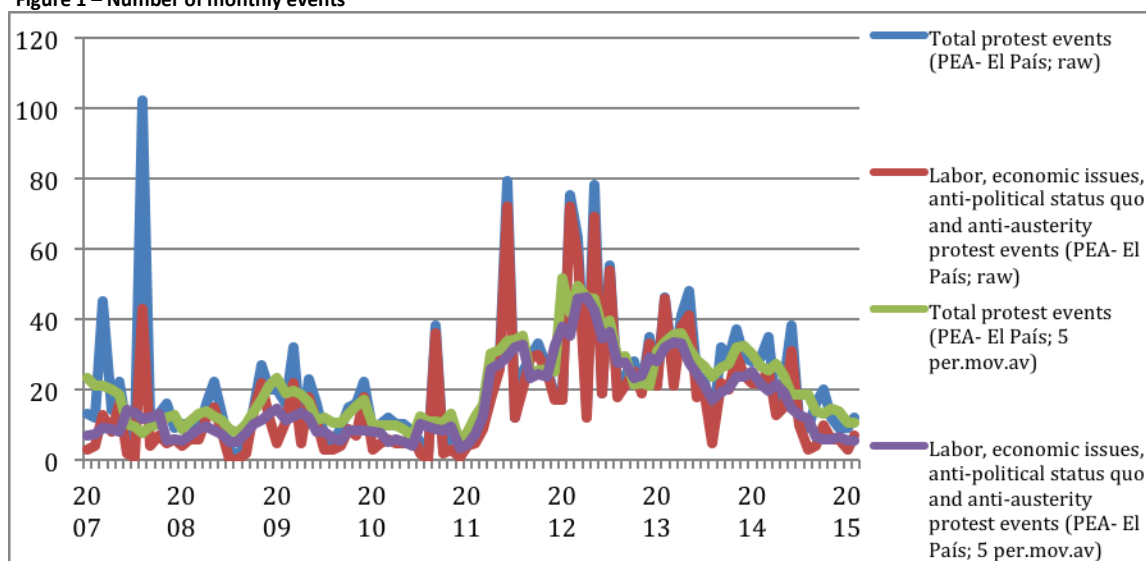
<sup>2</sup> I used a list of keywords (in Spanish): *protesta, manifestación, escrache, 15M, indignados, marea, movilización, marcha, acampada, sentada, boicot*.

<sup>3</sup> The figures for participants are not systematically disaggregated per event in the Ministry data.

<sup>4</sup> I ran a mini-test with the Spanish *El Mundo* to control for possible biases in the primary newspaper source comparing 2 months, pre- and post 15M (April 2009 and November 2013). No substantial differences regarding event coverage were found.

organizers. However, as police records usually underestimate the number of participants and organizers tend to overestimate them, weighting coefficients were used to calculate the weighted index of participants.<sup>5</sup> In addition, I included a fifth variable, used when non-precise data on participants were provided, and only estimations (e.g. a few tens, some hundreds, several thousands, etc.) were given.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 – Number of monthly events

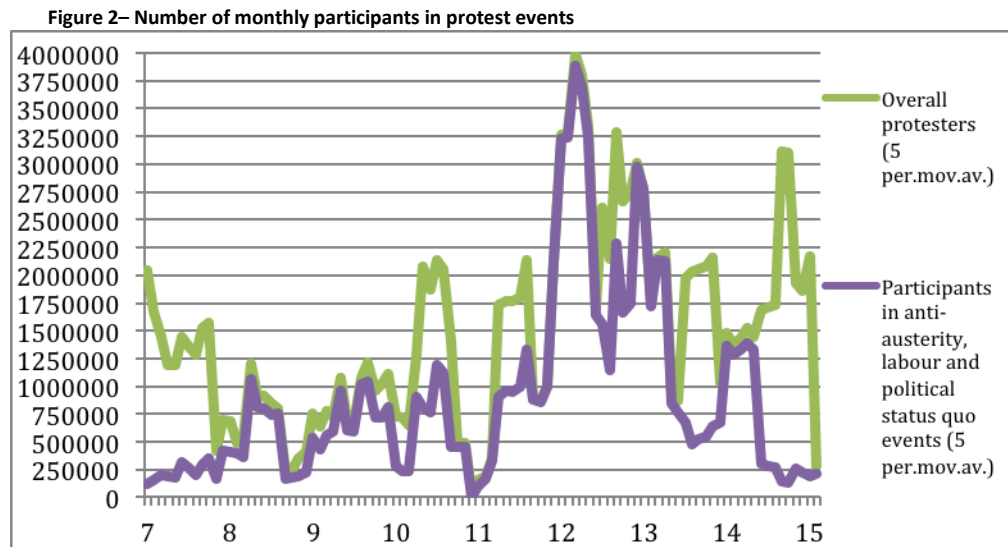


Number of monthly events. Y= events. X= years (01/2007-02/2015). Blue: all protest event types. Raw data. Red: labor, economic issues and anti-austerity protest events. 5-period moving average. Green: all protest event types. Raw data. Purple: labor, economic issues and anti-austerity protest events. 5-period moving average. All data retrieved from El País (N=2,002). Own collection and elaboration

<sup>5</sup> For calculating weights, all cases where the three values were reported were considered altogether (randomly distributed, N'= 45). A coefficient that measures average deviated estimation from the average value was calculated for each variable. Average reported values give us a weighted index of participants. If the number of participants was only estimated (N''=505), this was considered the final size, using the average value of the range of the size category.

The index of participants was weighted by the length of the event. In these cases (a relatively small proportion of the sample) for which information on the size of a demonstration was still missing, a search was made in the database for the closest similar events in time that occurred in the same city were organized by the same group, and forwarded the same demands.

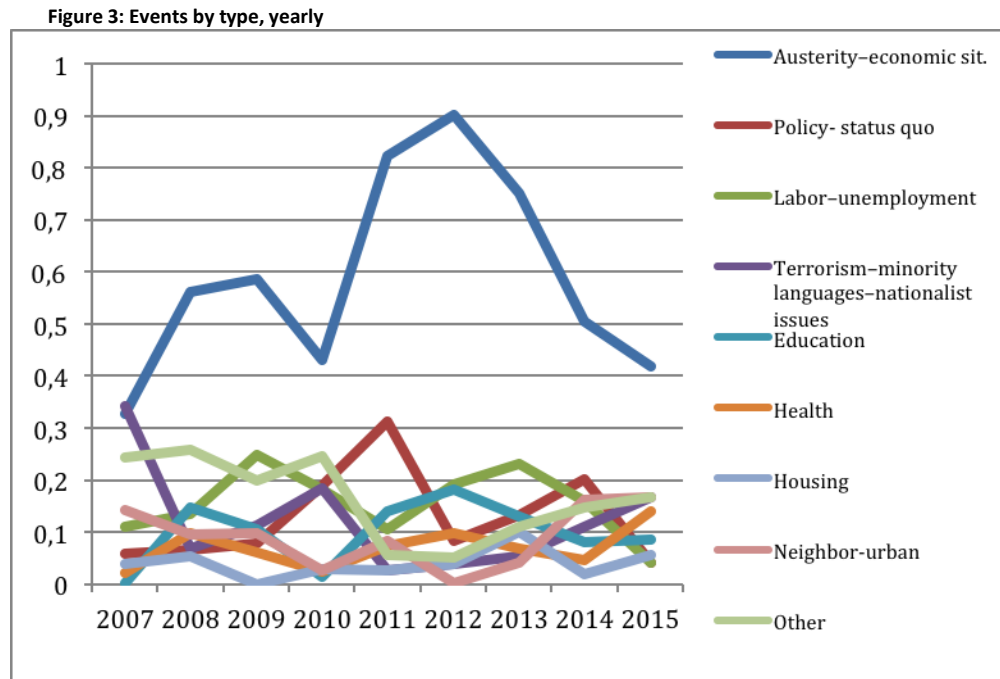
<sup>6</sup> Estimates were transformed into a continuous variable: 1) <100 participants; 2) 100–999; 3) 1,000–4,999; 4) 5,000–9,999; 5) 10,000–19,999; 6) 20,000–49,999; 7) 50,000–99,999; 8) 100,000–199,999; 9) 200,000–499,999 and 10) ≥500,000.



Weighted number of monthly participants in protests. Y= participants in protests. X= years (01/2007-02/2015). Green: raw data. Purple: 5-period moving average. Data from self-gathered Protest Event Analysis, 01/2007-02/2015. Data retrieved from El País (N=2,002). Own collection and elaboration.

A complex picture, characterized by strong fluctuations, can be observed when events are aggregated on a monthly basis. Sharp peaks and dips in the number of protest events and participants characterized the period running from January 2007- February 2015. This point confirms similar findings in some seminal contributions applied to different contexts, such as Crouch and Pizzorno’s study (1978) on industrial conflict intensity, Shorter and Tilly’s work (1974) on the French strikes in the mid-19th century and Beissinger’s contribution (2002) on nationalist mobilizations and the collapse of the Soviet state. More recently, Beissinger and Sasse (2013) find similar dynamics for Eastern Europe in the context of the 2008 global financial-economic crisis.

As this marked variability precludes us from recognizing trends, I also incorporated (5-period) moving averages to smooth out irregularities (figures 1, 2). Generally speaking, few events took place between 2007-2010, and massive performances were rare. Despite some preceding peaks, a relatively sudden climax of both events and protest participants in mid-2011 and early 2012 can be observed. Protest occurrence remained relatively high until late-2013. After this, performances decreased steadily.



Probability of event occurrence per each type. Multiple choice allowed, Aggregated probability per time point might go beyond 1. Data from self-gathered Protest Event Analysis, 01/2007-12/2014. Data retrieved from *El País* (N=2,002). Own collection and elaboration.

The proportion of protest events concerning anti-austerity, against the crisis, the political status quo and labor issues protest events is high relative to the total number of events— these account for 78.8% of the total events (figure 3). The figures of participants in anti-austerity, against the crisis and labor issues protests relative to the total number of challengers are much lower, especially in the early phase of the cycle (figure 2). There is neither a regular distance between the protest peaks (i.e. trends are non-stationary) nor can the intensity of the peaks be forecasted on the basis of previous peaks, as in Shorter and Tilly (1974).

In the following sections, I analyze the factors underpinning varying patterns, trends and shares of protest events and participants in anti- anti-austerity, against the crisis, the political status quo, for real democracy and labor issues protests over time. To make sense of these, I establish a periodization following the theories of cycles of contention and its key phases (ascending mobilization, climax –plus its extension through specialization– and demobilization). In so doing, the evolution and configurations of

key actors and interactions underpinning the wave of protests is pinned down. Following political process-oriented theorists (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989, 1991, 1993, 2011; Kriesi et al 1995; Koopmans 2004), along with resource mobilization and organizational aspects, I consider the conditions and traits related to the political environment that might account for mobilization dynamics.

### *3.1. Subtle steps and precursors: cooking something up during the low peak*

Conflict tends to escalate before reaching its peak, as massive performances and protest campaigns do not appear out of thin air (Tarrow 1991, 1993, 2011; Shorter and Tilly 1974). Reasons for voicing discontent are usually added to old ones (Walsh 1981), as grievances are cumulative and often concatenate.

The ascending phase of the cycle starts when new social movements that innovate in terms of mobilization repertoires emerge, stimulating citizens' propensity to participate. As the cycle evolves, new mobilizing agents emulate initiators and compete with them to reach new sectors of the population through more appealing performances, usually from key to peripheral sectors, following a tidal logic, until they reach the climax of protests (Tarrow 1991, 1993).

The Spanish context in light of the Great Recession scenario was no exception. In order to account for the emergence and dynamics of this cycle of contention, we first need to understand the mobilization background. Overall, protests in Spain have normalized since the 1980s (Jiménez 2011). While the proportion of demonstrators among Spaniards has risen dramatically in the last three decades, there is likewise more heterogeneity in their profiles and the issues underpinning mobilizations (Jiménez 2011; Oñate 2013). All the same, the ebbs and flows of participation have been far from constant.

Over the last half-century we can distinguish three main historical phases of extra-conventional sociopolitical mobilization in Spain (Viejo 2012). The first refers to protests related to the labor movement and the onset of the Francoist regime, for civil liberties and democratization, especially during 1975-1978. Contrary to the thesis that attributes Spanish democratization to the moderation of the elites, conflict and confrontation were at its very core (Tarrow 1995; Bermeo 1997). In the 1980s, a second major wave of contestation took place. The scope of protests diversified, giving rise to *new social movements* (feminist, ecologist, etc.). There were three main arenas of conflict: labor struggles, student mobilizations and pacifist protests. The third important phase concerns *anti-globalization* mobilizations. Since the late 1990s, the Global Justice



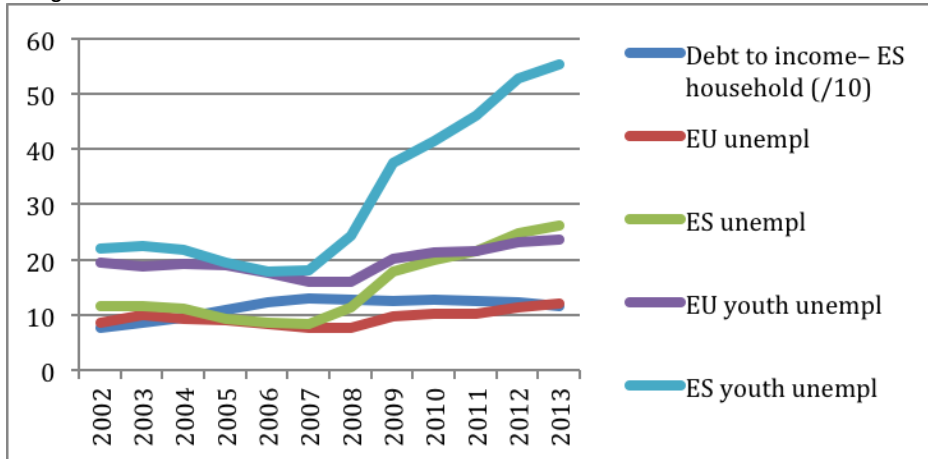
Movement (hereafter GJM) and its performances left a mark on the Spanish repertoires of protest, claims, targets and activist networks. A number of organizations in the autonomous political space flourished during this period (social squats, alternative media, forums for debate, publishers, etc.), such as 'Rebelión', 'Kaosenlared', 'Catarata' and 'La Directa'.

As well as the activities linked to the GJM, some important mobilizations took place across Spain in the early 2000s, such as student mobilizations against new plans to restructure tertiary education, against the war in Iraq and the protests by the ecologists *Nunca Más* as a reaction against the sunk *Prestige* oil tanker. Once the social-democratic PSOE took office in 2004, a number of patterns began to become apparent. First, left-wing institutions in civil society—surprisingly—lost ground. This was possibly because, despite their many activities, they remained invisible to most citizens and largely atomized, as they were loosely interconnected and small. Additionally, they shared some of the weaknesses that had traditionally hampered inclusiveness on the part of the traditional left: organizations were fairly impermeable and lacked transversal membership. As a result, they had limited mobilizing capacity and were dependent on trade unions.

The second pattern to emerge was that there was a conservative—arguably reactionary—upsurge and counter-mobilization campaigns were widely supported (figures 2-6). The activity and membership of various right-wing organizations such as *Asociación de Víctimas contra el Terrorismo*, *Hazte Oír*, *Foro Español de la Familia*, etc. rose dramatically in this period. These groups called for various reactive mobilizations between 2005-2010 to oppose the Government's progressive policies (same-sex marriage, abortion, terrorism, etc.) (see Aguilar 2013).

The third identifiable pattern was more unexpected. Once the PSOE came to office, windows of political opportunity were generally expected to open, in the sense that it was widely assumed that channels of communication and access to officials and institutions would be built with social movement organizations. However, the regime's capacity to integrate challengers and ability to accommodate claims decreased compared to previous phases of mobilization. Additionally, as Martí i Puig (2011) notes, even though Spain had become an international paradigm illustrating a successful transition to democracy, followed by the regime consolidation and an "economic miracle", two elements formed a painful Achilles' heel to this situation: the large private debt and the high unemployment rate, which doubled the European average by 2011 and whose main victims were youngsters.

Figure 4: Macro-economic indicators



Macro-economic indicators (unemployment and debt). X-axis: years. Dark blue: Gross debt-to-income ratio of households is defined as loans, liabilities divided by gross disposable income with the latter being adjusted for the change in the net equity of households in pension funds reserves. Detailed data and methodology <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/sectoraccounts>. Restandardized: /10. Source: Eurostat.

Unemployment indicators: Unemployment rates represent unemployed persons as a percentage of the labour force. The labor force is the total number of people employed and unemployed. Unemployed persons comprise persons aged 15 to 74 who were (green for Spain; red for EU-average; <25 y-o, purple for EU-28 average and light blue for Spain): a. without work during the reference week, b. currently available for work, i.e. were available for paid employment or self-employment before the end of the two weeks following the reference week, c. actively seeking work, i.e. had taken specific steps in the four weeks period ending with the reference week to seek paid employment or self-employment or who found a job to start later, i.e. within a period of, at most, three months. Source: Eurostat. Own elaboration.

During the 2007-2015 period, the political and socioeconomic aspects described above led to relative deprivation, and this gave rise to an accumulated latent tension during the growth phase, as well as contributing to spread discontent and feelings of social failure. Discontent was even more acute after the Government did a U-turn in regard to its economic policies and its subsequent embracing of neoliberal dictates to the detriment of Keynesian stimuli.<sup>7</sup> As Tarrow (2011) shows, a major change in the political opportunity structure, such as elections, can facilitate the mobilization of discontent. In the Spanish case, we can indeed observe a step increase in protest activities in the weeks preceding the 2011 regional and local elections.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the PSOE Government implemented the harshest package of pro-austerity measures in the Spanish democratic history in May 2010. This implied cutting child benefits and pensions, slashing salaries of public servants by up to 15%, rising the retirement age from 65 to 67, lifting bans on employing workers indefinitely on temporary labor contracts, etc.

Despite the abovementioned weaknesses, a multi-organizational field of activist networks proliferated and consolidated during the low peak of the mobilization wave, between 2003 and 2010. At least seven different movements created a deposit and developed an expertise on which protesters in the shadow of austerity built:

1) From mid-2000s, *V de Vivivenda* ('V for Housing') and other groups demanded better housing conditions, especially for young people, in a context of rising costs and unaffordable mortgages due to financial speculation (Aguilar and Fernández 2010), all of which led to a "housing bubble".

2) In the 1980s, the squatter movement abandoned its "ghetto logic", especially in Madrid and Barcelona, and created a network of self-managed open social centers (Romanos 2013), which contributed towards reinforcing its grassroots, promote assembly practices, etc.

3) Student mobilizations in the late 2000s were also important. European policies implemented to reform and harmonize university degrees across Europe created resistance among students and educational communities (Fernández 2014). These regarded the reforms as an attempt to privatize and commercialize education. The organizational structure of these protest groups was atomized, reliant upon small, autonomous and loosely interconnected assemblies across the country, very closely linked to grassroots organizations. In addition, the groups adopted assembly practices and adapted innovative strategies, such as symbolic occupations of public facilities and *escraches*<sup>8</sup>, later used by anti-evictions activists.

4) Given the housing conditions and high unemployment, pessimism increased incrementally among young people, especially among those who had been highly educated and deprived, the so-called *precariat* (della Porta 2015). For the first time in recent times, the prospects of an upcoming generation were worse than that of their parents' had been. The organization *Juventud sin Futuro* ('Youth without a Future'; hereafter JSF) was created in February 2011 in order to tackle this situation.

5) By early 2011, two main platforms, *Democracia Real, ¡Ya!* ('Real Democracy Now!'; hereafter DRY) and *No Les Votes* ('Do Not Vote for Them!'), had been set up to gather support against bipartisanship and the majoritarian parties (the PP and PSOE), to promote a more proportional electoral system, and to ensure the inclusion of citizens in political processes.

6) As Fuster (2012) points out, online activism and the *Free Culture and Digital Commons Movement*, created in the face of legislative plans to guarantee copyright

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<sup>8</sup> An *escrache*, a form of action originating in the Argentinian Dirty War, consists of a gathering of people next to homes or workplaces to influence decision-makers into taking a certain course of action (see Flesher Fominaya and Montañés Jiménez 2014).

and to limit Internet downloads, also had an impact on the protests, in terms of composition, agenda, framing and organizational logic.

7) Finally, mobilizations concerning the territorial accommodation of Catalonia, new organizations such as the *Plataforma pel Dret de Decidir*, non-binding referendums held across hundreds of municipalities between 2008-2010 and their framing (democratic–emancipatory, based on the right-to-decide) all contributed to empower Catalan civil society and fostered its will to mobilize.

In short, after 2003, public contestation and massive collective actions decreased dramatically, although a multi-layered network of activists with different trajectories and experiences forged spaces for dissent and encounter besides those of the mainstream channels. Likewise, the abovementioned seven different movements and relatively large campaigns cohabitated and developed during the low peak of the mobilizations and after the crisis started (2003-2010). Most of these events were far from crowded and were not given much media space, thus rendering their impact fairly low. However, had this infrastructure not existed, a climate among the public opinion willing to mobilize against the status quo would not have been built.

### *3.2. The explosion of the 15M: a turning point (May-June 2011)*

During the months preceding the onset of the 15M protests, intense network activity unfolded both online and offline (Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2013). *Juventud Sin Futuro*, *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, *No Les Votes* and, more notoriously, *Democracia Real Ya!* are illustrative examples of this activity. These information exchanges, intense debates and collaborative endeavors that preceded the May 2011 mobilizations yielded an unexpected —although not exactly spontaneous— outcome: the 15M mass protests.

On 15 May 2011, *Democracia Real Ya!* managed to gather several thousands of (mostly young) people in a demonstration that made its way through the main arteries of Madrid and other cities under the slogans “They [the current political class] do not represent us!” and “We are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers”. Local and regional elections (in 13 out of 17 autonomous communities) were scheduled to take place one week later. Following the demonstration, some young people improvised a pacific sit-in in *Plaza del Callao* (Madrid), which the police repressed, evicting protesters from the square. The demonstrators then converged in *Plaza Puerta del Sol*, the heart of the Spanish capital, which was occupied, following the modus operandi of protesters in Tahrir Square in Cairo. After police action became harsher, the protesters

were joined by hundreds of additional sympathizers thanks to the online diffusion of the event (*#SpanishRevolution* had become a *trending topic* in *Twitter*). Likewise, within less than 24 hours, outraged crowds (with varying size) occupied the main squares of many Spanish cities.

A non-partisan and heterogeneous campaign gradually took form in open, public and popular assemblies, which set up specific commissions and working groups that ensured grassroots voluntary involvement and horizontal organization. Within the wide array of appeals and claims emerging from the 15M campaign, Taibo (2011) distinguished three core mental schemata that brought participants together: a) the first underpinned the push towards changes in the democratic system *senso stricto* (electoral reform, pro-accountability and anti-corruption measures, remuneration of appointed officials, etc.); b) the second, more generally, framed the demand for solutions to combat the excesses of neoliberalism in the face of pressing financial hardship (e.g. housing speculation); c) the third promoted the need to give continuity to the strategies forwarded by alternative social movements in their opposition to capitalism and its institutions.

Moreover, these 15M challengers took a strong position against *politics-as-usual*, represented in their view by malfunctioning chains of delegation and institutional closure in a supposedly representative democratic regime, the implementation of neoliberal and austerity policies, the corporatist behavior of political and business elites and the accumulation of power in the hands of the big corporations, among others ('Toma la Plaza' n.d.). The 15M brought about two innovations in terms of the frames used to describe this kind of protest: outright opposition to austerity was used for the first time by a set of social actors with remarkable media impact and, second, this opposition worked actively at delivering a transversal and massively supported campaign (beyond the anti-system small groups) that openly sought to throw out the mainstream parties. The 15M protesters were, generally speaking, young, highly educated, and politically active, reformist left-wingers (Calvo et al 2011; Likki 2012; Calvo 2013), with the most committed protesters describing themselves as highly dissatisfied democrats who were interested in politics (Masullo and Portos 2015).

In general, then, the 15M was a by-product of socio-political discontent in a context of recession. Placing this in a more theoretical perspective, we can say that the political crisis concatenates with material hardship (Oñate 2013). That is, overall, mobilization peaks come into being through a combination of the abrupt stop in the satisfaction of expectations during the expansion stage of the economic cycle and the accumulation of cultural and political resources before the turning phases, which is where uprisings tend to happen. This finding resonates with Screpanti (1987) and Cronin's (1980) in-

quiries on the historical association between economic cycles and the timing of socio-labor unrest.

Two interesting questions remain to be answered, however: first, how were general standards of mobilization kept high after the first uprisings? And second, how has the 15M been able to persist for long? I will attempt to answer these two questions in the following.

### *3.3. Perpetuating the peak through specialization:<sup>9</sup> containing radicalization, postponing institutionalization*

After several weeks of occupations, with *Puerta del Sol* (Madrid) and *Plaça Catalunya* (Barcelona) functioning as neuralgic points, the movement disaggregated into neighborhood assemblies in June-July 2011. Once the thrilling atmosphere of the initial occupations was over, many described the 15M performances as one of those quick “moments of madness” (Zolberg 1972), where discrepancies rise and instrumental aims take them over (Tarrow 1991, 1993).

From this perspective, it seemed as though 15M was doomed to vanish into thin air. However, absolutely against the odds, it did not, and it went on to contribute decisively to the rise of broader and parallel anti-austerity activity via organizing events, designing strategies, providing organizational settings, and supporting campaigns. It also played a crucial role in launching some of the most massive events of 2011, such as the marches against the Euro Agreement (19<sup>th</sup> June 2011), the so-called “columns of indignation” that formed all over Spain and converged in Madrid in July 2011, and the 15-O worldwide mobilization against austerity policies (15<sup>th</sup> October 2011). These events gathered tens of thousands of protesters all around the country.

Despite these successes, during the second half of 2011, the 15M underwent a period of transition, and even confusion, as it decentralized and took on a more active role at the local-level. Although by *going back* to neighborhoods the 15M lost media visibility and overall participants in the short run, this transformation helped activists to reconnect with the everyday problems and pressing needs of citizens, beyond the ideational and pre-figurative type of practices that had been carried out in the big 15M camps. In figures (1-2), we see that the peak of protests lasted through 2012-2013. Overall, I argue that the ongoing persistence of these mobilizations was related to what

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<sup>9</sup>A persistence in protest peaks has been observed in other mobilization waves, such as in the 1965-1975 Italian cycle (Tarrow 1989).

can be described as a delayed radicalization, aimed at spurring divisions and preventing further campaigns from appealing to broad audiences (Tarrow 1991, 1993, 2011).

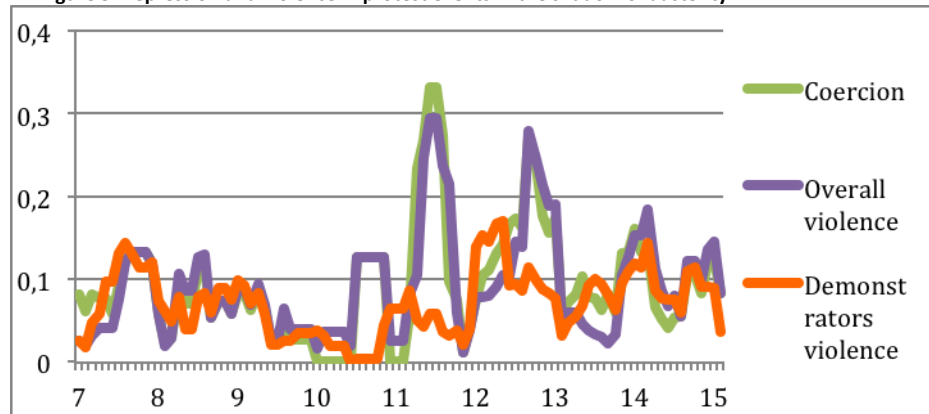
I now go on to analyze how the 15M, despite its pacific strategies and its rejection of any violent tactics as one of the mottos and defining features of its occupations, coped with some attempts at radicalization in this period. Some of these attempts came from inside the movement, but they mostly came from outsiders, as some of the satellite organizations often pushed in this direction.

The peaks of confrontation often coincided with a rise in the level of police repression and intolerance with respect to the challengers' tactics.<sup>10</sup> My data shows that various peaks of conflict and critical junctures can be observed through the 2007-2015 period. First, the so-called *popular siege* of the Catalan Parliament on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2011, supported by 15M activists, left dozens of people arrested and injured. Some regional MPs were attacked and their access to the chamber was blocked in order to stop them from passing budget restrictions. Second, what started as isolated student mobilization in a secondary school in Valencia in early 2012, led to massive mobilizations and further confrontation with police due to the disproportionately harsh methods of repression that they used (known as the "Valencian spring"). Student organizations linked to the 15M, such as the *Sindicato de Estudiantes*, were actively involved in these mobilizations. Third, various urban conflicts took place in this period. The two most well known of these, both for their media impact and the intensity of the encounters, took place in 2014. Local government plans to transform a boulevard for pedestrians into a parking area in the underprivileged Gamonal neighborhood, Burgos, was met with rage on the part of residents in January. In addition, there were clashes in May when squatters were expelled from the emblematic Can Vies social center in Barcelona in order to demolish it. These urban conflicts attracted the support of many 15M activists and sympathizers.

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<sup>10</sup> The policing of protests remained far from stable over time. Some events (e.g. student protests in Valencia in early 2012, camping on the 15M's first anniversary, and the demonstration that gave rise to the 15M) were met with disproportionately harsh methods of repression on the side of authorities. The increased public outrage, media monitoring and citizen contestation towards these highly repressive tactics led to a gradual change in the policing of protests. As the cycle unfolded, the authorities opted for more dissuasive, indirect and less visible tactics, such as fines, to keep insurgency under control rather than using more obvious and disruptive measures, such as police charges.

Figure 5: Repression and violence in protest events in the shadow of austerity



Coercion refers to the overall degree of coercion, based on the type tactics taken by authorities against demonstrators (green line). Demonstrators violence assesses whether protesters used violence at all (orange line). Overall violence captures intensity of disorder severity, taking into account both coercion, demonstrators violence along with other factors (adapted from Spilerman 1976); purple line. See appendix for coding and further clarifications. Data from self-gathered Protest Event Analysis, 01/2007-12/2014. Data retrieved from El País (N=2,002). Own collection and elaboration. The picture for the subsample of anti-political status quo, labor, crisis-related and anti-austerity events only do not change substantially (not reported here).

Last but not least, the collective *Plataforma j'en pie!* called on people to “occupy” (formally, in the end, “surround”) the Congress to empower citizens and “bring sovereignty back to the peoples” in September 2012. Thousands participated in a peaceful demonstration, supported by some 15M and DRY local assemblies, but the police broke up a sitting in front of the Congress. The resulting incidents led to 34 arrests and 64 injured people. In April 2013, the same platform called on protesters to “seize” and “siege” the Congress (note the deliberate radicalization in the framing). Most previously supporting organizations withdrew their support and went out of the call. This event thus failed to mobilize, as only a few thousands joined it. Rioters were met with a strong display of police force— many were injured and arrested. Following this, most anti-austerity organizations (including 15M assemblies, participants in various tides and former supporters of *Plataforma j'en pie!*) opted to moderate their tone, and started to promote more positive campaigns to “save”, “recover” and “hug” not only political institutions, but other public facilities such as schools and hospitals. These occasional attempts at radicalizing (so-called “radical shocks”) as the cycle unfolded were, as my data show (figure 5), more typical than any general trend towards radicalization in protest tactics.

One aspect that contributed to restrain radicalization in these anti-austerity performances was strategic, and concerned the relationship of new organizations with the



trade unions throughout this process. The emergence of new organizations and campaigns beyond the traditional intermediary institutions of representation, such as *JSF*, *DRY*, *15M*, sectorial tides, etc. did not, perhaps surprisingly, eliminate the traditional unions. Indeed, according to Protest Event Analysis data displayed, which confirms the findings by Accornero and Pinto (2014) for Portugal, unions are still fundamental actors to understand the dynamics of protest in times of austerity. The Spanish unions were thus not replaced by the new organizations, but— instead—cohabitated with these in a complex manner. Similarly, earlier theories of cycles of contention emphasize that new movements do not take over old organizations. For instance, even though unions neither expected to nor initially led the escalation of labor conflicts across Western Europe in the 1970s-1980s, they quickly recovered, re-took their central position and adapted to new formations formed in the cycle.

Following this line of reasoning, however, most of the new organizations openly criticized the mainstream unions, such as the *CCOO* and *UGT*.<sup>11</sup> They regarded the latter as actors belonging to the political status quo, as being rather archaic and impermeable, and as unable to connect with real demands of the worse-off and the underprivileged. On the other hand, the larger major unions have a much better developed infrastructure, with stronger grassroots, and were indispensable to achieve mass participation in public collective performances. Hence, the new civil society-driven organizations often used the infrastructure and expertise of the unions to gain support for events and campaigns, and to appeal to specific professional sectors, such as doctors or teachers. In most campaigns, some forms of action with some degree of “eventfulness” are needed to keep standards of motivation and solidarity feelings high, to consolidate networks, to boost public outrage and to experiment with new tactics (della Porta 2008). Indeed, the *15M* (and subsequent anti-austerity campaigns that followed) needed these massive performances every now and then for its survival.

For these eventful performances to take place, coalition building is necessary. A social movement coalition or alliance “exist[s] at any time two or more social movement organizations work together on a common task [...while] partners maintain separate organizational structures” (van Dyke and McCammon 2010:xiv-xv). These alliances may involve varying duration (collaborations may be occasional or persist over time), different interests (pursuing more or less similar goals), degrees of formality (as regards to the nature of the links between organizations), resources, etc. Certainly not all the campaigns in this cycle emerged out of a collaboration between old and new organizations, but several did. Coalitions do require neither a high degree of agreement nor

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<sup>11</sup> These stand for *Comisiones Obreras* and *Unión General de Trabajadores*.

dense exchanges of information between players. Actions could be very loosely coordinated provided that the ties between them were informal. Furthermore, as van Dyke and McCammon (2010:xv) continue, “groups may, for example, plan a joint protest event together but not pursue further collaboration”. In the Spanish case, old and new organizations cohabitated amidst tension, performing only intermittent and occasional joint endeavors.

As my data show (Figures 1-2), many peaks of participation in public collective performances are associated with specific events that were launched by unions and new organizations together. For instance, one the most crowded countrywide performances took place against the PP Government’s Labor Law reform (it gathered approximately 1.5 million participants around the country in February 2012), and was organized by the largest unions in collaboration with organizations fighting the *precariat* and austerity policies, such as various 15M assemblies and the JSF. Nonetheless, the latter formed a critical sector within the demonstration, carrying banners against the soft positions of the unions and urging them to call for a general strike. Shortly after this, two general strikes were held (March and November 2012), and were complemented with massive demonstrations across the country called for by the main unions and intense involvement of anti-austerity activists. Another symbolic campaign that reflected this strategic alliance was the coal miners’ march for hundreds of kilometers from the catchment areas (Asturias and León) to Madrid in July 2012. The marches were jointly organized by the unions and sectorial committees, and were welcomed by thousands of anti-austerity challengers and sympathizers, who contributed to their performances by providing expertise, support, resources, etc. However, the most obvious— and more formal— stances of collaboration between old and new actors were the (especially green and white) tides, which I will explore in detail below.

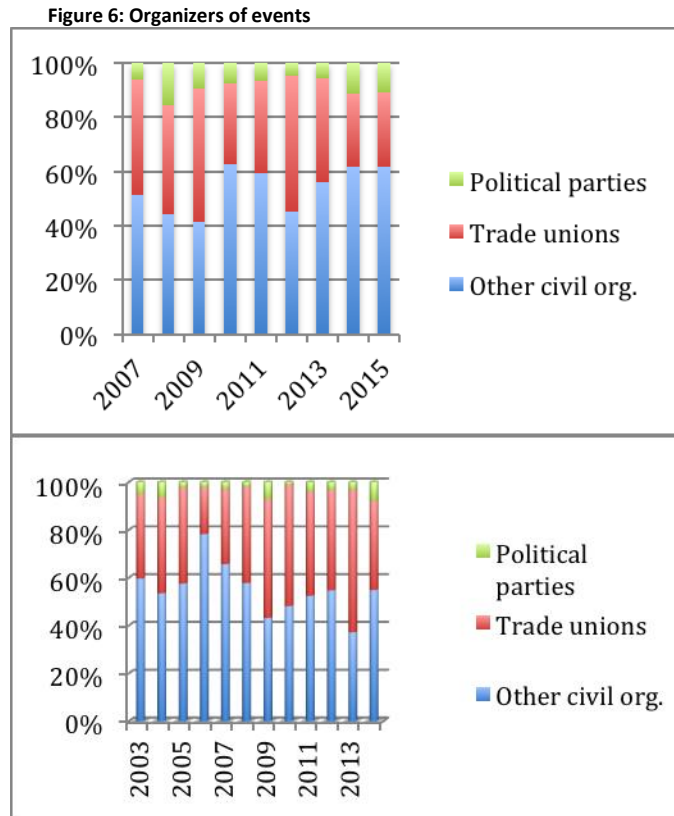
Hence, the unions were necessary for multiple mass events to succeed and they were— and still are— relevant with regard to event counts (Figure 6).

In some ways, classic theories of cycles of collective action seem ill-suited to account for this situation. They predict that peaks of mobilization lead to the creation of new organizational forms, pushing old organizations towards the social movement sector and bringing about competitiveness (Tarrow 1991, 1993). These entail a radicalization of tactics and repertoires.<sup>12</sup> A re-intensification of conflict also reduces the audience to which the movement appeals and leads to a parallel sectarian involution along with a shift of aspirations. However, as in our case, when some collaboration is in the interest

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<sup>12</sup> Della Porta (2014) does not observe such tendency towards radicalization in the declining phase of protest waves during democratic transitions across Central and Eastern European countries.

of both unions (i.e. to maintain a preeminent role) and new organizations (i.e. to appeal to broader audiences and deliver eventful performances), radicalization might not—so—readily follow.



UPPER figure: Type of organizer by total protest events across time, 2007-2015 (yearly aggregation). Multiple choices were possible. Data were weighted and adjusted to a 0-100% scale. PEA, data retrieved from *El País* (N= 2,002). Own collection and elaboration. LOWER figure: Type of organizer by total demonstrations, 2003-2014 (yearly aggregation). Multiple choices were not possible. Source: Ministerio del Interior. Own elaboration.

In this section, we have seen thus far how, following the occupations in May-June 2011, the 15M faced a turning point, which led to its decentralization through local assemblies and reconnection with its grassroots public. Despite several attempts in the opposite direction, the radicalization of 15M was contained, and any need to resort to unions for strategic purposes (i.e. to deliver mass performances) contributed to hinder radical behavior— and to facilitate the persistence of the protests—. If new organizations had resorted to more confrontational tactics, coalitions between them and old

organizations would, in fact, have been impossible. Beyond containing radicalization, however, another crucial reason for the survival of the mobilizations over such a long time span was, I argue, the specialization of the anti-austerity movement issue.

The idea of specialization recalls Tarrow's (1989) "shifting bases of social conflict" in the 1965-1975 Italian cycle of protests. He argues that collective action spread from a few central actors (students and workers) to other sectors (prisoners, public officials, women, the urban poor, etc.): "rather than rising like a volcano on a plain consent, [protest] was like a rolling tide that engulfed different sectors of society at different times" (Tarrow 1989: 339). In our case, this allowed the 15M, on the one hand, to connect with people's pressing demands, and to join forces and take advantage of the synergies that certain types of mobilizations from below generated, such as the housing movement, for example. On the other hand, by focusing on issue specific conflicts, often widely supported across society (e.g. against the privatization of public hospitals' management), anti-austerity activists maintained the focus on more concrete and smaller battles. These battles often had clearer goals (e.g. to stop the partial closure of a public hospital due to efficiency arguments), made potential rewards from sticking to collective action more attainable, and favored alliances with various sector-specific agents.

In addition, this specialization contributed to develop and adopt distinctive and innovative strategies, such as *escraches*. Likewise, frames and discourses (claims such as 'austericide' or 'violence is evicting families, not resisting authorities' or 'let's defend what is ours: let's fight privatizations') became widely accepted. The generalization of frames and repertoires thus favored public acceptance and the social legitimacy of anti-austerity claims. Hence, anti-austerity activists succeeded in generating a space for inclusive conflict (with a modular strategy, open to feedback and negotiation, but pushed by radical formats and rhetoric) while taking advantage of rewards from sticking to pacific tactics— keeping standards of credibility and endorsement high.<sup>13</sup>

The 15M was important not only because of its numbers, visibility, and media salience, however, but also because it served as a platform to spur a wider range of subsequent anti-austerity mobilizations in the Spanish cycle protests. As Sánchez (2014:10) describes this metaphorically: "a turmoil on the high seas called 15M has unloosed change in all directions. [...] A strong collective force that, by making concentric circles, reaches the coast by means of tides, which dashes against fortified dykes". It is to these *tides* that I next turn.

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<sup>13</sup> Unlike its US counterpart, OWS, whose public support dramatically reduced to 15% a few weeks after the occupations started, two years after the May 2011 occupations, 75% of Spaniards still supported these mobilizations and their offspring (Sampedro 2013).

### (White and green) tides

By early 2012, approximately one thousand organizations, platforms and assemblies fighting austerity coexisted (Gómez 2013). These shared a common trait: their transversal character. Temporary atomization and parallel decreasing levels of protest engagement quickly showed the importance of organization to keep the population mobilized. For this reason, autonomous collectives and assemblies created ties to build networks of activists. As these grew and became stronger, the traditional organizations' monopoly of the mobilization arena faded— although unions are fundamental within tides, as previously argued.

These so-called *mareas* ('tides') are large citizen movements born out of the 15M, but they are not exactly the same. They are its evolution. Using the 15M expertise and experiences, the *mareas* both structure and mobilize popular outrage on the basis of issue-specific platforms created to defend public services. However, sectorial tides are not corporatist. In their performances we can observe claims for a broader resistance to the implementation of austerity measures. Furthermore, they are clear attempts to empower people, to make pedagogy with protests, to show the path undertaken deepens social inequality, and to give voice to the speechless and the marginalized (Gómez 2013; Sampedro 2013). The nexus between *tides* and traditional intermediary institutions of representation is complex: *tides* welcome support from unions and – occasionally– from political parties, but they neither rely on them nor do they delegate representation to them. The two most well known of these are the *white* and *green tides*. While the first was created to fight against plans for privatizations in the health system and for the defense of good conditions in public hospitals (cutbacks in public spending in the national health service amounted to €10 billions between 2011 and 2013), the second contended education policies where additional €10 billions in public investment were slashed between 2010 and 2015 (Gómez 2013).

Although tides were not restricted to these two sectors, these were the most rebellious. Other sectors with some level of resilience were the public administration and civil servants (black tide), social care and benefits (orange tide), feminists and LGTBQ rights (violet tide), precarious young people and emigrants (purple tide), etc. (Sánchez 2013). Exchanges and cross-fertilization between activists and different sectorial tides were recurrent, while overlapping membership accounted for claims resonance, the adaptation and adoption of strategies, and organizational structures between tides.

From the 1980s, an increasing tendency towards privatizations and subcontracts in public hospitals took place across Spain. This led to the private management of public facilities –supposedly– for the sake of efficiency. The *marea blanca* was the response

to multiple legislative measures (i.e. not one single package), most of these implemented by regional governments, which tightened access and worsened the quality and conditions of health assistance. This was particularly the case in the region of Madrid, and to a lesser extent in Catalonia and Castille–La Mancha, especially in light of the privatizations and closures of various public hospitals throughout 2012-2013 (e.g. *La Princesa*). In addition, some measures adopted by the central Ministry, such as the ban on providing health care to illegal immigrants, were heavily contested.

In relation to the protests against these privatizations and subcontracts, action repertoires were wide, ranging from the classic strategies (sitting, striking, demonstrating) to more innovative ones (escraches, human chains to “hug” and protect hospitals). Describing organizational dynamics in the *marea blanca* is however a challenge, as the constellations of actors changed rapidly. Among the key umbrella platforms in Madrid, which involved activist professionals and patients likewise, the *Plataforma en Defensa de la Sanidad Pública* and *Mesa por la Sanidad Pública* stood out. In addition to unions, some labor organizations were active in the protests, such as the *Asociación de Facultativos de Madrid* and *Movimiento Asambleario de Trabajadores de Sanidad*. In contrast to these, the Catalan *marea blanca* was more atomized and fragmented, without any clear central nodes, very closely linked to neighboring and union *petit fights* (i.e. coping with specific local problems).

The participants and development of the *marea verde* (called *marea groga* in Catalonia) were similar in some ways. There were two main poles of tension, in Madrid and Barcelona, and although some countrywide campaigns were launched, there was no state-level coordination and the organizational settings were different. Two momentums motivated the green tide actions. First, cuts approved by regional governments in 2012-2013 were met with opposition from students, parents and teaching staff. In Madrid, ten general strikes –and demonstrations– were called for in the education sector between September and November 2012 and were massively supported. These were coordinated by the *Red Verde* platform, with fluctuating support from the unions. In Catalonia, the universities forwarded these protests, with the PUDUP as coordinator, and supported by some unions (e.g. SE, FIVEC, SPC).

Second, popular contestation against the Government’s intention to pass the bill of education (LOMCE) rose since 2011. This bill brought about criticisms related to individual schools’ autonomy, university access, discrimination of minority languages, etc. The mainstream unions in the sector did not show any outright opposition towards the bill and did not fight it (e.g. UGT, CCOO, STE). Indeed, the unions slowed down any collective actions against the LOMCE. The law was finally passed in 2013. However, after their stagnating performance, unions lost the social lead in the education sector in fa-

vor of transversal teachers' assemblies; it was these latter who led multiple — although not really mass — performances.

#### Housing and the stop evictions movement

Building on such previous experiences in the housing movement, as V de Vivienda, a group of activists set up the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH) in Barcelona in 2009. They switched the focus from difficulties for housing ownership due to rising prices and rents to the consequences of the Spanish housing bubble.<sup>14</sup> The movement had three aims: to stop evictions, to promote social housing and to guarantee retroactive payments on account. With these aims in mind, the PAH built a network of volunteers and assemblies, with legal advisers to ensure support with individual cases. The organization consisted of an assembly-based structure, where a balance was enforced between the plural and autonomous grassroots units and the confederation.

The profile of the activists in the movement was mixed. Among the core groups, there was an overrepresentation of immigrants (mainly Latin Americans and Arabs). Despite the active presence of some radical assemblies, most of the activists were *ex ante* depoliticized. In fact, emotional characteristics drove militancy above ideological features. The movement, its claims and its tactics gained huge legitimacy over the last years. In terms of action repertoires, it resorted to blockades and pacific resistance (chaining, sitting, etc.) in private houses to avoid evictions (2,500 evictions were stopped by the PAH by the beginning of 2015). The movement adopted and introduced *escraches* in Spain. The most important campaign of *escraches* sought to show politicians up in order to compel them to support the PAH's Popular Legislative Initiative for legally safeguarding the three abovementioned objectives. This petition gathered 1.4 million signatures, but it did not succeed in Parliament. However, the PAH became a hegemonic actor in the housing movement.

#### *3.4 Declining phase: amidst exhaustion and institutionalization*

From late 2013, a clear and generalized sense of exhaustion affected the actions of activists and their repertoires of action. From social movements literature we know that collective action is costly because the rewards from engaging in action are limited, especially when immediate demands are (partially) satisfied (Tarrow 1991, 1993, 2011). In our case, many people still joined collective actions, but this was now done

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<sup>14</sup> 500,000 Spanish families faced a mortgage foreclosure between 2008 and 2014 (PAH 2015).

with lower intensity. The initial euphoria of the *springtime of peoples* evaporated. Declining numbers of events and participants capture this (figures 1-2). The movements and their repertoires achieved varying degrees of success, but room for attaining further aspirations through the same tactics was limited.

There was no trend towards radicalization and violence in the declining phase of the cycle (figure 5), in contrast with the observations made by Tarrow (1995, 1989, 2011) and Jung (2010) for other cases. As mentioned above, radicalization was contained for strategic reasons (i.e. the need for alliances with unions to deliver mass performances) and thanks to the issue specialization of protests, with more specific goal-oriented actions and attainable rewards. So, now that activist strategies and demands were increasingly directed towards the legislative apparatus, they also began to find other forms of participation, such as traditional movements, that were more effective in affecting public policy (e.g. feminist mobilizations contributed to block the new abortion law). New institutional alternatives, such as *Partido X*, linked to the 15M and free software activism, were launched.<sup>15</sup>

Looking at my data, the declining phase begins in January 2014, when a descending trend in numbers of event occurrence started (figure 1). This coincided with the foundation of *Podemos*. Despite the fact that *Podemos* is neither the 15M nor merely its institutionalization, the party borrows some core messages, frames, demands and aspirations from the cycle of anti-austerity mobilizations.

Along with the strength and popularity that *Podemos* gained in the first few months of the year and during the campaign for the European election in 2014, there was a reverse trend in the levels of anti-austerity mobilization, like a sort of zero-sum game. Only one mass event took place ever since, the *Marcha del Cambio*, coordinated by *Podemos* in January 2015 (which gathered 300,000 participants according to the organizers). Furthermore, we see how distance between the line of the anti-austerity protests and that of the overall events increased (figures 1-2) and the share of anti-austerity, economic and labor protests decreased steeply— even when taken together with the anti-political status quo performances (Figure 3).

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<sup>15</sup> This initiative was linked with the appeal and challenge that counter-movement actors had posed to anti-austerity activists since the emergence of the 15M. For instance, PP sympathizers proclaimed that “This is democracy, not Sol’s” when they were celebrating their good electoral results in May 2011, meaning that in their view the only democratically legitimate mandate was the one that emerges from the ballots.



#### 4. Conclusion

The first objective of this article was to establish a periodization for the cycle of anti-austerity and anti-political status quo protests in the shadow of the Great Recession that Spain faced, in relation to theories of cycles of collective behavior. The second aspect that I have attempted to clarify was how high standards of extra-conventional mobilization persisted over the subsequent years, until a declining trend, at the beginning of 2014, can be observed.

A multi-layered network of activists, who created their own forums and spaces, was created during the low peak phase. Building on the legacy of the three phases of mobilization (pro-democratization, 1980s and anti-globalization) and the sediment of the seven movements that emerged from 2003 (for good housing, squatters, anti-Bologna students, precarious youth, against bipartisanship, Free Culture and Digital Commons and pro-right to decide over Catalan self-determination), in May 2011 the 15M emerged. This movement represented an outburst of popular discontent with politics-as-usual in a scenario of ongoing (and forecasted) financial hardship.

The movement did not break up and vanish into thin air over the subsequent months, however, going against all the odds. On the contrary, the high peak of mobilizations persisted through 2012–2013. How was this possible? I have argued that the movement(s) managed to contain radicalization attempts and postpone institutionalization. In explaining this, I contend traditional theories of cycles, which are limited to accounting for a situation in which new and old organizations are not rivals — as this would supposedly breed radicalization, reduce audiences and lead to a sectarian involution.

All the same, new (civil society-driven) organizations in the Spanish cycle needed traditional unions to deliver recurrent mass performances, as they could provide the resources to appeal to broader sections of the population. These recurrent eventful protests enabled the movements to keep the activists together, just as the fragmented and sectorial fights allowed mobilizations to survive. These were more specifically goal-oriented, with rewards (i.e. victories, concessions) that were more immediately attainable and with strong popular legitimacy. I analyzed some of the most successful of these, namely the housing/stop-evictions and two *mareas* have been studied in detail (*green* and *white tides* against cuts in education and the public health system, respectively).

Finally, I study how the declining phase of the cycle emerged from the combination of two factors. First, the activists and repertoires of action became exhausted, while, second, institutionalized means began to be regarded as more effective and plausible

to meet new expectations, and these were increasingly oriented towards legislation. Thus, contrary to the predictions of theories of cycles of collective action, demobilization did not come in this case from the divisions between challengers deriving from a combination of some degree of radicalization and— for other factions— the option of institutional progress.

Further analyses should take this work ahead and analyze cycles through comparative lenses to assess whether similar dynamics hold in other Southern European contexts. Another strand of research could specifically address the link between demobilization in the cycle and the emergence of institutional alternatives such as *Podemos*.

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**AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:**

**Martín Portos** is a Salvador de Madariaga PhD candidate at the European University Institute, Florence, working on anti-austerity protests in Southern Europe. He holds a BA (Hons) in Political Science from the University of Santiago de Compostela (best Spanish performance in all disciplines, 2011), a MSc Politics Research from Oxford University and a MRes from the EUI. He has been awarded fellowships from Fundación Caja Madrid, Obra Social La Caixa, Linares Rivas–Oxford University, EUI-MECD, and CIS, among others.