About the authors and their positions

The whole text is written from the personal standpoint of the author. I will try to distinguish between the interpretation of the 15-M movement and the ideas we, that is the autonomous current, have today. I write with a perspective amid the 15-M movement in the city of Barcelona. This particular branch, or current, can be summarized by one of the 15-Ms motto *"ningú ens representa"* (nobody represents us).

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1. What is the key idea of the 15-M movement?
A heterogeneous movement with a common denominator

The 15-M movement was very heterogeneous. Nevertheless, the participants of the 15-M movement shared the following ideas as a common denominator:

- A critical stand on existing institutions (We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers, nobody represents us, etc.).

- Opposition to the antisocial measures of the economic policies implemented by the government and, in a deeper sense, criticism of the commodification of life, the need to express outrage and the need to find responses to the crisis.

- Opposition to the competitive principle and the need put an end to the alienation and individualization of life, to which this system condemns us. With the words of our friend Pablo Molano, who has recently left us: *A lot of people say that 15-M was an act of protest. It is true, but it was not just that. It was, and is, an encounter, a recognition and the abolition of personal and ideological barriers. We were one, because we were all and each with their own quirks, accepting each other.*

To sum up, we can say that the central idea is that society and the people must be placed on top, and that political and economic institutions must be subordinate to them.

The context

The 15-M movement in Spain developed out of a long series of protests following annunciations by the central government with regard to major wage and labour cuts, more privatization of public services and a drastic erosion of the welfare system. In response to this, and seeing that the major trade unions failed to call for a general strike and were instead negotiating with the established powers, people started to demonstrate and organize them-

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selves. In Barcelona, the Barcelona *Assembly* was created, a gathering of activists who wanted to unite everyone who was affected and oppressed by the neoliberal measures implemented by the government. At the same time, other collective platforms such as *Democracia Real Ya* (Real Democracy Now) emerged online as well as a way to express the people's outrage and their discontent with the governing elites. The following motto, which hung on the walls of an important squat building in Barcelona just a few days before the general strike, which then in September 2010 was called upon by the trade unions, nicely summarizes the collective mood of the time:

> *"Banks suffocate us. Employers exploit us. Politicians lie to us.*
> *CCOO and UGT[1] trade unions sell us. Fuck off!"*

In the same vein, *Democracia Real Ya*, whose main motto was "We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers", called for large demonstrations in all major Spanish cities on May 15th. These demonstrations, apparently without prior planning, turned into permanent camps which occupied major squares in the main Spanish cities and thus starting a long series of protests. This plural and diffuse movement of citizen's assemblies, which formed during the camps, was the beginning and the most important moment of what we know as the 15-M movement. In Barcelona, the camps remained there for several weeks until they were forcefully evicted by the Catalan police. Following this controversial act, they re-grouped in the neighbourhoods as part of a decentralization strategy. This consolidated existing projects and gave rise to new ones, but meant losing participation in town square occupations.

Some of the most important elements were the collective learning, the organic functioning, the general fraternal attitude and the almost forgotten feeling of having something in common. Again, something happened that had the force to unite us beyond the discourses of mass media and its alienating show. It was something that we, the people, shared, outside of the boundaries and regulations defined by the elites to avoid sectarian divisions and the prevailing individualism.

From the squares to the neighbourhoods

After the squares were evicted, the movement rooted in the neighbourhoods. At this time, two different projects started to emerge more clearly: one that wanted to plant the seeds for a new self-ruled society and the other that talked about a new constitution and the creation of new alternative political parties. The supporters of the first ones were few and without enough clear ideas or bases to create an anti-systemic movement or to change everyday life; so they continued to work in local projects as usual but with renewed energies and more people. To them, 15-M was a climax, but not a shifting point. The others, the majority, fell easily into a dynamic

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1 *CCOO (Comisiones Obreras) and UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores) are the main workers union of Spain.*

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of demands, denouncement, compromise and cultural events. Requests to politicians were watered down to preserve the rights and welfare system of the previous years, as if this were possible.

If we are very optimistic, we can consider 15-M as a turning in the context of a series of demonstrations and as part of a wider project that could become an alternative to the current system. The collective consciousness of the collapse in which we are immersed was not yet very distinct. The crisis was still very "new", and the claims of the time were therefore very strongly focused on not losing what had been achieved until then. This meant ignoring that we were in the middle of a changing era, a civilization shift. After many affluent years, when all came down, people felt lost and upset, even betrayed. There weren't any clearly discernible alternatives, let alone an organization to support them. Therefore, it was easiest to try to return to what people already knew.

The autonomous perspective within 15-M

As already mentioned, 15-M was a heterogeneous movement. The autonomous perspective within 15-M is an autonomous and local approach that existed before the 15-M mobilizations, and like many others, participated and was reinforced by it. From my point of view, 15-M was a climax in this current, not a shifting point. Also like other currents it is not an explicitly self-recognized movement.

This current shares the common points we've listed before, but we don't think that the problem we have to face are bad rulers or evil bankers, but that it is something inherent in the capitalism-state system. To solve it we have to go to the roots of the system and deactivate it.

Autonomy and Heteronomy in history

We can analyse history as a struggle between autonomy and heteronomy. In a political sense, autonomy is the self-determination of the communities and heteronomy is the opposite. We understand autonomy in a broader sense, not only as a political regime, but also as a way of life, with regard to how we use time or resources, how we relate to each other and so on.

The history of the movement for autonomy goes back to Antiquity. It is the history of self-organization, of the commons, of neighbourhood assemblies, of countless revolutions. During history, different movements have continued the heritage of their predecessors, as we try to do nowadays. In Catalonia we are heirs of the libertarian movement of the first decades of the 20th century, and the workers struggle during the 1970s. We are also heirs of feminist, ecologist and anti-globalization movements, who influenced and nourished our practices, analyses and discourses.

In our country, the movement almost disappeared due to draconian repressions during the Franco dictatorship. After the end of the dictatorship, the

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resistance and any revolutionary approaches were minimized, especially during the period 1980-2000 and due to the growth of the welfare state. In the first years of the new millennium, it started awakening, little by little, especially within the anti-globalization movement. In the years before and during the 15-M movement, this autonomist movement became more visible, and neighbourhood assemblies started to form. Thanks to 15-M and the work that was done during the following years, as well as the relentless strengthening of the dynamics of the capitalist system, this current is more present now and starting to gain strength.

Today it is obvious that heteronomy is winning the struggle, and that we are facing a multidimensional crisis (social, economic, ecological, …). We are not only damaging the planet and other forms of life, we are even risking the survival of humanity.

In addition, it is clear that we must overcome capitalism not only as an economic system but also as a world view, a set of values and its associated lifestyles (or, should we rather say lifeless-styles?). Personal interest, selfishness, and commodification are central elements that permeate our relationships and attitudes. So if we want to change this system, we need to thoroughly rethink our strategy, proposals, discourses and practices: We need a new cosmovison of ourselves and the world.

The alternative

The consensus of the 15-M movement was to regain sovereignty over our lives. However, there are different proposals and visions on what sovereignty means and what could be the strategy to achieve it. In some cases, the proposals are revolutionary and in most cases, they are reformist.

From the perspective which I feel part of, the alternative is a society that is self-determined, self-managed and based on communal life and sovereign public assemblies, without the state or any dominating power. The alternative also implies another world view, our relationships with each other, with time, with nature. We think of communities rooted in a territory, self-reliant, mainly living of their own resources, and confederated with other communities. In this context, we find the ideas and practices of Democratic Confederalism[2] interesting, which are currently applied by a majority of the population in Kurdistan.

The idea of societal change, to achieve this alternative, is to build and defend a common life, another lifestyle with another world view, and a political and social movement that can spread, coordinate and defend this communal life. The idea is that this movement can also challenge the current

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2 *Democratic confederalism is a [libertarian socialist](#) [political system](#) developed by Abdullah Ocalan, and currently applied by the Kurds, especially in the Kurdish part of Syria. It is based on direct democracy and on a grass-roots approach. It "is open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, [multi-cultural](#), anti-monopolistic, and [consensus-oriented](#).*

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system of domination with enough power to replace it, to end it.

There are different points of view on how to accomplish this shift from the existing system to this new stateless form without capitalism and other forms of domination. The most feasible for us is a transitory process allowing the new forms to be tried and tested within the current system; the construction of a "parallel society", not only to create this "new world" here and now in a small scale but also to have enough power to resist and disable the existing one.

2. Who is part of the 15-M movement, what do they do?
Concrete local and political action

We can identify 3 levels of participation within the 15-M movement:

- The core, consisting of the most committed and persistent activists. There are a few thousand of them all over the country and they are in charge of planning and coordinating actions.

- The active citizenship (hundreds of thousands), who participate in the multiple forms of collective expression.

- Outraged or unhappy citizens (2/3 of the population) who somehow sympathize with the aims and actions of the movement.

The movement is organized around specific actions, working areas and groups that are organized in committees and a general assembly (no matter how large[3]).

After the 15-M demonstrations and square occupations different projects and initiatives arose. At the beginning all the initiatives were based more on local and horizontal projects. With the new electoral processes after the 15-M mobilization came new parliamentary political projects in addition, which are considered to be the heirs of the 15-M movement. So we can differentiate two groups in the evolution of the movement practices:

- a) Those who decided to participate in state institutions. Most of them think that the problem is bad rulers (such as the political party *Podemos*), and some of them think that the problem is the system but it is important to be in state institutions to slow the system dynamics (such as the political party *Candidatura de Unidad (CUP)* or some

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3 *During the occupations there were for example daily assemblies on site, with the participation of thousands of people. These daily gatherings were obviously far from being actual democratic assemblies as there was neither the culture nor the technique for meetings with such participation. They were not very relevant because the discussions weren't sustained through several sessions; each daily gathering was an isolated event, and the communities were not empowered, had no common basis to be managed by the assemblies... they suffered from "assemblitis", the making of a procedure into a way of life, rather than using assemblies for self-governance.*

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parts of *Barcelona en Comú*). It comprises few thousands of activist who are active on these platforms and the millions of people who vote for them in elections.

b) Those who refuse to participate in state institutions and continue with direct local work (many local projects, cultural centres, cooperatives, etc.). There are few thousands of activists who participate in these projects, and it is difficult to determine how many people sympathize with them. The 15-M was a nourishing moment for existing projects and for the creation of new ones. It was a moment that energized existing activists but also brought a lot of new people to the existing groups. Most of them became inactive a few weeks/months after the square occupations, but the few who remained considerably strengthened the projects.

The organization of this second option is very ephemeral, not formally organized and operates on two interrelated levels:

- Projects with a local perspective (what unites them is a territory) which aim to defend the neighbourhoods, to strengthen communities and breathe life into the commons.

- Thematic projects with a broader territorial perspective. What unites them is a common perspective, a struggle, an area of activity etc. Regarding such projects, it's worth noting that in recent years there have been several organizational proposals (Process Embat, Apoyo Mutuo, ...) to come together and give voice to the second kind of groups, the more autonomist ones. Also during the last two or three years there have been a number of gatherings to generate thought and reflection or to get organized. Awareness is growing about the need to build a more organized and coherent movement.

The strategy consists also in acting on these two levels, by looking at the long-term aspect (building a new world and ending with the existing order), but making everyday actions. We think that strategic awareness is of key importance in determining fate, evolution or stagnation, of different projects, and to give purpose and strength to each action.

3. How do you see the relationship between the 15-M movement and Degrowth?
Inspiration from as well as advancing and implementation of degrowth ideas

We can talk about the 15-M as a movement of movements. Most importantly, all the social movements in Spain participated in it. The degree of involvement varied, some of them participated more actively, more enthusi-

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astically or more sceptically, but we can say everybody was there. Most of the social movements sympathize with the 15-M movement.

The 15-M movement was influenced directly by the degrowth movement. However, due to the heterogeneity of the movement, and the fact that the degrowth perspective was shared only by a minority, it didn't have an important presence. It is very difficult to describe the relationship between the two, as it was non-coherent and not continuous. For what I know it had a clear presence in some committees and working groups and no relationship with others.

The most distinct influence of the degrowth movement consisted in some practices and in bringing in the awareness of peak oil and environmental problems. However, this turned into something like an ecological label, rather than being established as a movement within 15-M.

In Catalonia the degrowth movement started around 2007, with an activist approach. After two years a crucial part of activists moved on to other frameworks or created broader movements, which considered the strongest degrowth ideas, but took them further. We want to highlight the *Cooperativa Integral Catalan* (Catalan Integral Cooperative) which started and is still supporting a lot of self-managed projects – it was created by degrowth activists – and the *Democràcia Inclusiva* (Inclusive democracy Action Group), a reflection and action group for inclusive democracy, which was also initiated by degrowth activists. From my point of view, in Barcelona, the academic section grew stronger than the activist section of the degrowth movement over the last years.

We believe that many of the basic ideas of the degrowth movement are related to the autonomous approach I feel part of. Practices related to the degrowth movement have been gaining strength as well. We can say that we were inspired by ideas and practices from degrowth in significant nuances, and we are therefore interested in the debate that might arise around those ideas. We very much welcome this publication because it allows us to delve into that debate.

4. Which proposals do they have each other?
Growth is not the only problem und lifestyle change is not a solution

From my point of view, the role of the degrowth movement has to be to participate in and contribute to other movements or struggles, but I don't think of it as "The movement" of social transformation. We don't want an ecological movement with a holistic perspective but a holistic movement with a strong ecological view. In order to achieve this, we think that it is also important that the degrowth movement doesn't turn into a mainly academic movement.

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The 15-M movement has implicit proposals in its practices that can be inter-
preted and applied to any social movement, including the degrowth per-
spective. Above all, we think that the degrowth perspective could learn from
the 15-M movement concerning the multiple faces of the system and its
ways of oppression, and how this translates to specific problems for the
people. This knowledge can help to carry out an analysis and to broaden the
perspective, allowing us to consider the fact that the strategy to overcome
such oppressions can't just consist of reforms.

- I have identified a number of contributions from the degrowth per-
  spective that the 15-M movement would benefit from adopting. You
  can probably find more with deeper and more extensive knowledge
  of the degrowth movement than I have. The most important ones I
  can identify, are the following:

- To understand and accept the planet's physical limits, and the rela-
  tionship between economy, ecology, energy, resources, etc.

- To understand the consequences of economic growth.

- Voluntary simplicity and changing our own lives.

- To offer people who are concerned about the specific environmental
  or economic crisis a certain anti-systemic perspective, a broader
  view and analysis, including different struggles or problems within a
  common analysis, identifying a common root.

From our point of view, I would like to propose the following issues to the
degrowth perspective:

1. Growth is a problem, but not the main issue: The degrowth perspect-
   ive sees growth as the main problem of the system. We hence ask:
   Why do we have a growth economy? This is the key question.
   Growth is a big problem, but it is just an inherent feature of the cur-
   rent economic system. Growth is a consequence of a competitive
   scheme, whose purpose is the concentration of power and to serve
   private interests. In the words of Ted Trainer (Trainer 2010: 1): *...we
   are dealing with extremely important initiatives, which are heading in
   directions that are admirable...but which are unfortunately mistaken re-
   garding the nature of the global problem and the way out of it.*

2. A market system implies growth: Growth is not only a consequence
   of a growth ideology, it is also caused by the dynamics of a market
   economy. This is obvious for projects such as some cooperatives.
   They don't follow the growth ideology but have to grow to survive in
   a market economy.

3. Degrowth and capitalism: Degrowth within capitalism, particularly
   in a globalized economy, is an oxymoron. Capitalism requires growth
   to reproduce itself. When growth is not possible there is an econom-

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ic crisis or a war, and a restructuring takes places, which usually implies more concentration of power, more inequality, and also more oppression towards the environment and/or the population.

Proponents of the degrowth perspective have to ask themselves which social organizing system could cause a reduction in material consumption? Which social organizing system could reintegrate human life with nature? We think that this is impossible in a market economy. Which system could also end most structural oppression? We don't think that this can be done if we maintain the nation-state system in which elites and hierarchies are a precondition to survive, as they control most of the things we need to survive: food production, health centres, energy production. All this implies that the growth economy cannot be overcome with reforms, nor with isolated projects.

We need both a new collective imaginary and new values, as well as new institutions and public spaces, which can reinforce and maintain these values. These institutions must have structural elements such as self-reliance and local assemblies, and be empowered through direct relationships within the neighbourhood, as well as direct relationships with the things that sustain life.

4. It is not only a lifestyle manner: In order to end the problems of growth and the current system, it is ineffective that we think of it only as a matter of lifestyle, or as if we could solve those problems only by having a "better" lifestyle. We have to change our lifestyle, but if we want to achieve a societal change, we have to make this change of lifestyle as part of a political strategy. We need a broader social change strategy capable of connecting all actions we develop of establishing new social institutions and replacing the existing ones.

5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes
Open-minded discussions and local projects to deconstruct the current system

Our wish is to integrate practices and some analytical viewpoints from degrowth could into a broader common movement, with the aim of changing society from its roots, to end domination in all its forms (political, economic, ecological, social...).

We learned many things during the 15-M demonstrations, however it wasn't enough for the changes we want and need. Our opinion is that the 15-M movements didn't go further because there weren't enough clear ideas, practices, resources, examples, etc. There wasn't enough focused strength

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that would allow to change people's everyday life, what in turn would enable to build a broader movement that could change the world as we know it.

Therefore, our proposal is to continue working in two main areas:

- share spaces of open-minded discussion, to build common narratives of how we analyse the world and also how we want to live.

- create local projects where we can test the world we envision, from where we can showcase and rethink our ideas, from where we can defend what we are doing and where we can establish a common life that has the power to disable, to deconstruct the current system.

Links und Literature

Links

Decocracia Real Ya platform website: http://www.democraciarealya.es/

15-M article on the 15-M Wikipedia: https://15mpedia.org/wiki/15M

Can Batlló project website: https://canbatllo.wordpress.com/

La Base project website: www.labase.info

CanTonal project website: www.cantonal.net

Applied as well as further literature

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