

## REPRESSING THE *MASSES*. NEWSPAPERS AND THE SECURITISATION OF YOUTH DISSENT IN SPAIN

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## LA REPRESIÓN DE LAS *MASAS*. LA PRENSA Y LA SECURITIZACIÓN DEL DISENSO JUVENIL EN ESPAÑA

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### ABSTRACT

In this article we analyse the discourse of conservative commentators and journalists who produced critical items against 15-M mobilisations between 16 May and 30 September 2011 in three newspapers: *Abc*, *Libertad Digital* and *La Razón*. The effort on the part of conservative journalists to deride and frame 15-M mobilisations as a threat should be considered repression; more precisely, these mechanisms should be seen as part of a broader strategy of repression of youth dissent, a strategy where conservative media outlets, through the securitisation of protesting, collaborate with conservative political parties, the police and some segments within the criminal legal system. The examination of the repressive behaviour of the Spanish media reveals a surprising parallelism between the present and a past that was thought to have been long overcome. In their fierce criticism of 15-M activism, Spanish conservative commentators have brought crowd psychology back to life – the popular theory that, until well into the twentieth century, summarized certain nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural elites' fear of middle and working-class activism.

### KEYWORDS

15-M; Crowd Psychology; Masses; Repression; Securitisation; Youth Dissent.

### RESUMEN

En este artículo analizamos los discursos de periodistas y columnistas conservadores, críticos con el movimiento 15M, que escribieron piezas en este sentido entre el 16 de mayo y el 30 de septiembre de 2011. Estas piezas fueron publicadas en tres periódicos diferentes: *Abc*, *Libertad Digital* y *La razón*. Defendemos que el esfuerzo de estos periodistas por denigrar al activismo ha de ser visto como una forma de represión de la protesta; la prensa, así, puede desarrollar mecanismos discursivos hostiles que se insertan en una estrategia más amplia de represión de la juventud. En esta estrategia, la prensa conservadora se alía con la policía y con partidos políticos también conservadores para 'securitizar' la protesta. El examen de la participación de la prensa española en la represión revela sorprendentes paralelismos con una visión del mundo que se creía ya muy superada: en particular, los periodistas y columnistas conservadores han resucitado la 'psicología de las masas', es decir, aquella popular teoría que resumía las ansiedades de la clase intelectual contra el activismo de la clase obrera.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

15M; Disenso juvenil; Masas; Psicología de las masas; Represión; Securitización.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Is repression a response to contentious mobilisation that is exclusively displayed by state authorities (e.g. police, courts, government officials)? Could civil society and other 'private' actors be part of the repressing efforts? And, how does it work? Is repression a modular strategy that is dependent on available opportunities? If so, what prepares the ground for repression? According to Charles Tilly (1978: 100), repression is any behaviour, by any group, whose effect is to increase the cost of collective action. Repression can be open or undercover. It can be exercised by coercion, but also by 'channelling', demotivating or simply through surveillance (Earl, 2003). Repression will frequently include actions of harassment, intimidation and hindering of the protest, which can lead to the arrest or incarceration of participants as a result of the active intervention of security forces; on other occasions, repression can simply materialise in a deterrent personal identity check or the issuing of an administrative warning against the protester.

In this article we seek to advance on the theory of repression, by asking about the participation of non-state actors in the repression of political dissent. More specifically, we focus on the role of the media as a repressive agent by analysing the discourse of conservative commentators and journalists who produced critical items against 15-M mobilisations, between 16 May and 30 September 2011 in the following newspapers: *Abc*, *Libertad Digital* and *La Razón*.<sup>1</sup> After identifying, coding and analysing more than 110 pieces of different length, we claim that the conservative press not only contributed to discrediting the protest – nothing new in the history of political activism – but also to the *securitisation* of 15-M activism. This crucially assisted the ongoing efforts by some state actors to issue legislation to further criminalize political protest.

By addressing the role of the media in the representation of dissent, we seek to engage with the calls for the consideration of repression as a site for alliance-making between public and private actors (Earl, 2011). The effort on the part of conservative journalists to *deride*, and also to frame 15-M mobilisations as a *threat to security*, should be considered repression; more precisely, these mechanisms should be seen as part of a broader strategy of repression of youth dissent, a strategy where conservative media outlets collaborate with conservative political parties, the police and some segments within the criminal legal system. Drawing on the insights of the literature on collective protest, and in particular on the work of Ferree (2005) on the repression of the women's movement, we search for patterns of speech in the way social movements are represented in the mainstream media. Rather than neutral actors in contentious politics, the media can actively create oppor-

tunities for repression. In this light, one can make a connection between the efforts to represent mobilisation in a certain way, and public policies (security laws, reforms in Criminal Laws, and so on) that are enacted to regulate involvement in protest.

We will point to the stark similarities of the ideas vested by Spanish conservative commentators with the old (and mostly presumed dead) arguments by the so-called 'crowd psychologists'; namely, the theory that, until well into the twentieth century, summarized certain nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural elites' fear of middle and working-class activism (Ginneken, 1992; Giner, 1979; Nye, 1975). Today, the ideas of authors such as Hippolyte Taine, Scipio Sighele, Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon are generally regarded as a biased and elitist attempt at silencing and repressing social movements (Stott and Drury, 2017; García-García, 2016; 2015; Carey, 2009). Activism was reduced by those authors to the category of irrational, barbaric, naïve and immature crowds (Stott and Drury, 2017; Reicher, 2008). Contemporary representations of activism as primitive and irrational, however, connect with those discredited ideas. Defying the perception that social movements have become a normal aspect of the political landscape of contemporary democracies, the representation of collective protest as a dangerous pathology invites thinking about the ideological underpinnings of repression, and also about the reasons why the contemporary conservative milieu remains deeply troubled with the political involvement of the *masses*.

We will proceed as follows: after discussing our data and methods (section 2), we identify some gaps in the theory of repression (section 3); then, we will introduce 15-M mobilisations as the target of severe repression (section 4). We will present our analysis of the Spanish conservative media, describing the unfolding of the mechanisms of derision and securitisation (section 5). In the final section we conclude.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

The search for data started backwards; we departed from the tightening of legal restrictions against protests in 2015. By tinkering with criminal and administrative law, but foremost by passing a very restrictive security law that criminalized many forms of contentious mobilisation, the (conservative) Government of the *Popular Party* framed social mobilisations as risks (Calvo and Portos, 2018; see also Fernández de Mosteyrín, 2012). So we searched for articles and opinion pieces published by national newspapers about the 15-M mobilisations, to look for concordances between governmental framing of these mobilisations as a social danger and representations of protests by the media. We were guided by Bennett and Segerberg's ideas (2015: 369) about the mass

media as framing “stories according to cues from elites in power”. In this view, the media would often report on movements negatively, particularly if these movements were perceived, or *could be* presented as disruptive or violent.

Data collection unfolded in two stages. In the first phase, the goal was to set out the broad editorial positions regarding 15-M mobilisations. We read and loosely coded around 250 pieces published by *El País* (social-democratic orientation), *El Mundo* (Centre-rightist ideology), *La Razón* and *Abc* (conservative orientation), covering only a period of three weeks after 15 May 2011. We concluded that, despite some exceptions, *El País* followed a line that was supportive of the new social movement; the other newspapers, including *El Mundo* (which publishes the ideas of journalists and columnists who have been very hostile to the 15-M mobilisations), displayed a much more critical view. Scholarly research on protest mobilisation in Spain had already presented *El País* as the newspaper more sympathetic to the demands of protesters; this newspaper is also credited with offering the widest and most comprehensive coverage of protest events in the country (see, for instance, Calvo, 2017). In relation to the conservative press, while some articles published by these newspapers had a positive tone, particularly in what regarded survey societal support for 15-M mobilisations (Sampedro and Lobera, 2014), a hostile disposition eventually became dominant, particularly as the ‘urban camps’ started to be perceived as disruptive of daily urban life in Madrid and Barcelona. The position of the conservative press reflected the view of conservative political parties, and particularly that of the *Popular Party*: for this political party, 15-M mobilisation represented the consolidation of a societal discourse against some of its core policy preferences, including social cuts, deregulation and privatisation. The 15-M’s loud cry against corruption was also viewed by PP leaders as a menace.

Considering that our aim was not to assess the attitudes of the media towards 15-M mobilisations in general, but, instead, to discuss the development of a ‘securitising’ discourse against those mobilisations, during the second stage we focused only on those newspapers where the majority of news items were overtly hostile towards the ‘indignados’; namely, *La Razón* and *Abc*. At the same time, we enlarged the temporal scope of the analysis. To get a more nuanced picture of the discourse projected by conservative opinion makers, we expanded the analysis to include *Libertad Digital* (a digital outlet with a strong conservative orientation). We used digital engines (but also manual browsing) to retrieve news articles and opinion pieces that responded to a number of relevant search words (the most useful of which were ‘*protesta*’, ‘*15m*’, ‘*perroflautas*’ - a despective term used to refer to a (young) person of anti-establish-

ment beliefs and alternative life-style-, ‘*movilización*’, but also ‘*masas*’ [masses] and ‘*turbas*’ [mobs]). In the end, we worked with a sample of 117 pieces, published in any of these three newspapers from 16 May to 30 September 2011. The Appendix lists those pieces that were directly used in this article. We made theoretical informed decisions regarding coding during the second stage, particularly drawing on scholarship on crowd psychology to classify items according to the representations of mobilisation they displayed (‘crowds as madness’, ‘crowds as pathology’, ‘crowds as immaturity’, and so on).

### 3. SECURITISATION AND PROTEST REPRESSION

Considerable progress has been made in the understanding of crucial aspects of repression. For example, we are now ready to differentiate the numerous ways in which repression can be expressed, from extremism and mass arrest, to hyper-surveillance or the strong increase of red tape requirements in the management of the right to association. The literature has also advanced in the understanding of variation in the intensity, specificity and severity of repression, variations that are associated with factors such as socio-economic status, the extent of media coverage, the country’s institutional structure, the different policing cultures, or the very strategies of the participants in collective action (Nordas and Davenport, 2013; Davenport, 2005; Wisler and Gignani, 1999). In relation to the policing of protesting, we work now from an interesting classification that emphasises the transition from a style of ‘negotiated’ management of street protest, to a model that seeks its ‘strategic incapacitation’ (Gillham and Nokes, 2007; see also Soule and Davenport, 2009). Recent analyses of policing discuss the development of new police tactics, the role of police surveillance and monitoring, and also variations in the targeting of specific forms of mobilisation by security forces (see, for instance, Pickard, 2018; Atak, 2017).

There is clear consensus in identifying the criminalisation of protest as central to any repressive strategy (Oliver, 2008: 12). The intervention of law in redefining protest seeks to consolidate repressive efforts, thus reinforcing control, punishment and surveillance instruments while fostering a narration that condemns the social and political role of mobilisation. However, criminalisation is a concept that can be scaled; it draws on the combined effect of several instruments, which include both new criminal definitions, and the redirection of existing administrative regulations with dissuasive effects. The literature refers to this latter type of measures as ‘soft repression’ or ‘red tape repression’. We should not be misled by these labels. Many social movements in Spain and in other countries condemn what is perceived as a

gradual restriction against the development of citizen mobilisation that materializes in the form of these soft repression mechanisms. These include not only the very effective administrative fines and bureaucratic impediments to mobilisation (Comisión Legal Sol, 2015; Oliver and Urda, 2015: 77-78); perhaps more daringly, soft repression relates also to the articulation of a generalised environment that is hostile to activism, expressed in excessive surveillance and monitoring, the implementation of new techniques of 'crowd' control, and also in the promotion of a culture of fear and insecurity (Brandariz, 2018).

The sophistication of repressive mechanisms has opened new lines of research in repression literature. First, it seems increasingly difficult to identify repression as something that depends exclusively on 'public actors', meaning governments and state apparatuses (Earl 2011 and 2003). Ferree (2005) already warned of the need to extend observation to the behaviour of non-state actors that could, nevertheless, share a certain repressive purpose with political authorities. What is the role, for example, of interest groups, other social movements or the media in the repression of social protest? In fact, Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) clearly established the role of counter-movements in raising the costs of mobilisation for those social movements they were opposed to. It seems more reasonable to understand repression as a strategy where governments, the criminal justice system and security forces play a more or less active role and can forge alliances with different civil society actors ("private actors" in the words of Earl, 2011). The challenge, as noted by Jennifer Earl, is to identify the relative contribution of these private actors in each specific case (Earl, 2003). Secondly, further understanding of the long-haul factors that can generate opportunities for repression is still required. It is surprising how little attention has been paid to the question of what the grounds for repression are and also to the mechanisms that facilitate the deployment of a repressive strategy. Is repression a gradual social and political process that requires preparatory elements? Indeed, research in other areas suggests that the answer is yes: there are significant links between the consolidation of certain discourses on a specific social group, 'securitising' discourses, and the subsequent development of repressive mechanisms that elaborate on stigmatising and criminalising the behaviour of groups and individuals. The work of Bourbeau (2011) is a case in point: his analysis shows the influence of media representations of immigration on decisions on policy in Canada and France. Together with content analysis of news items, Bourbeau drew on interviews with senior bureaucrats and policy makers; these shed much light on the ways dominant public perceptions raise the costs of some policy alternatives, while making others almost unavoidable.

Building on these ideas, we address in this article the hardly explored issue of the media's role in general, and newspapers in particular, in the repression of social movements. Could newspapers be regarded as repressive actors? Incapable of inflicting physical violence against protesters, could it be possible that the media created opportunities for the passing of repressive legislation and other repressive measures? We find the concept of securitisation particularly fitting to address the role of the media in repression. The concept of securitisation, originally coined by scholarship in international relations, has quickly extended to other areas, including scholarship on migration and refugees, and also collective protest (Castelli and Morales, 2017; Dunn Caveltly and Jaeger, 2015). By securitising, powerful actors try to position a certain issue as a threat to society, always with the purpose of legitimising the subsequent "implementation of emergency measures" (McDonald, 2008: 567; Buzan et al, 1998). Securitisation fixes its attention on speech, proposing discursive formulas that catalogue a certain reality as a threat, placing emphasis on the risks (real or devised) associated to it. These formulas rest on the supposed legitimacy of those who suggest them, and who use their position to try to change collective perceptions, often in a very substantial way. Securitisation, it must be stressed, is narrowly linked to consequent punishment: it is an attempt at modifying collective perception to justify punitive actions that will be proposed once the meaning of something has been successfully shifted. Special attention has been traditionally paid to securitising efforts by governments and other state actors, such as security communities. Our argument, however, is that 'private actors' can also contribute to securitisation. We will use the idea of securitisation at a very general level (to refer broadly to the hostility of conservative opinion makers against 15-M mobilisations), but also at a more specific level, as one of the repressive mechanisms that we will identify later on in this article: namely, derision and securitisation itself. While these mechanisms share a general preoccupation with the moral underpinnings of protest and operate in a coordinated way towards the shaping of public perceptions, it is interesting to separate the emotional connotations that the different mechanisms seek to activate: disgust and contempt in the former case, preoccupation and fear in the latter one.

#### 4. REPRESSING 15-M MOBILISATIONS

Interest in repression seems especially justified in the light of the ongoing intensification of control, surveillance and repression against young people in particular, and against political dissent more generally. Both the spheres of youth sociology (Bessant and Grasso 2018; Pickard 2018; Bessant, 2017) and of critical criminology (for a review, see González and Maroto, 2018) emphasise the need to place the in-

tense strengthening of state surveillance, control and sanction devices in a context of severe social fragmentation associated with the rearming of neoliberal policies. Youth dissent is targeted both at the individual and collective levels. In relation to the former, Judith Bessant (2017: 216), for instance, worries about state action against individual expressions of dissent that make use of satire, humour or on-line provocation: in her mind, the sanctioning of these practices reveals the readiness of liberal democracies to quash practices of communication and debate that might have a radical impact on the broadening of the public sphere. In relation to the latter, the criminalisation of specific forms of collective action can be read as a direct reaction of political authorities against a new disposition by young people to do away with passivity and become politically engaged.

Key to understanding the upsurge of repressive dynamics against dissent is the broadening of the protest repertoire favoured by the new expressions of contentious mobilisations, such as the 15-M or 'Occupy' movements. Following a street march that was met with repressive actions by police, around 130,000 people moved on to occupy Madrid's Plaza Puerta del Sol, the heart of the Spanish capital, on 15 May 2011. Protesters contested the austerity policies implemented in the wake of the Great Recession and called for real democracy. Thanks to social media platforms, information on the sit-in snowballed, and protest actions escalated. Over the subsequent days, camps — organised around open, popular, grassroots and non-hierarchical working groups — were replicated in almost 200 cities across the country and abroad, involving hundreds of thousands of participants. 15-M triggered a broader cycle of collective action directed against austerity policies (Portos, 2016). Many of these activities defended specific sectors, such as housing and public services (e.g. the education and health systems). The overall wave of protest was unprecedented in the country's recent history because of its mobilisation capacity, media salience and impact on the institutional and extra-conventional arenas (Romanos, 2016). It has been widely acknowledged that young people were overrepresented in these events: the vast majority of participants were 19-30 years old (Calvo, 2013; Likki, 2012). The indignant generation represented the young middle class with uncertain personal biographies and future perspectives. For many (especially young) people, the recession shock and the socioeconomic consequences that came about were a reality check; they made it clear that their hopes for social mobility were unrealistic.

15-M mobilisations centred on urban space as the main site for the expression of political demands, and also for the articulation of opposition against dominant practices in the field of politics and economy. There were encounters between police and

protestors at different sites: from the squares during the 15-M occupations (fighting police attempts to force activists out in Plaça Catalunya and Puerta del Sol), to attempts to surround the Congress (*Rodea el Congreso*) in September 2012, mobilisations in solidarity with people about to be evicted from their homes, and the urban struggles of 2014. For example, clashes between activists/residents and the police took place in the underprivileged Gamonal neighbourhood (Burgos) in light of the local government's plans to transform a boulevard for pedestrians into a parking area. Similarly, a violent outburst followed after the police forced the squatters out of the emblematic *Can Vies* social centre in Barcelona to demolish it. Attributing new meanings to squares, public parks, but also to the surroundings of public and private buildings became the signatory practices of forms of contentious mobilisation where young people took a very prominent position.

Some aspects of the highly controversial *Ley Orgánica 4/2015, de 30 de marzo, de protección de la seguridad ciudadana* ('Organic Law 4/2015, of 30 March, on the Protection of Citizens' Security'), known as *Ley Mordaza* ('Gag Law') seem to work as direct responses to the attention to space paid by 15-M activists. For instance, the law classifies as a very serious offence the "occupation of any property, dwelling or building owned by other parties or the continued presence on such premises, in both cases against the will of the owner, tenant or holder of other rights on it, when they do not amount to a criminal offence", or "the occupation of general utilities involving infringement of the Law or against the decision taken pursuant to it by the competent authority (art37.7, Citizens Security Law). Criminal law experts and social movement scholars have criticised this legal change claiming that it contributes to criminalising political dissent (Calvo and Portos, 2018; Avila, et al 2015). Amnesty International and other human rights organisations have described this law as a "threat to human rights".<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned before, however, the strategy of repression against 15-M mobilisations, by private as well as by public actors, includes mechanisms that are not strictly categorized as criminalisation. Not only the law, but also public perceptions are becoming the site of overt confrontation between activists, government officials, political parties, the courts and, of course, the press. The handling by the Spanish government of the so-called 2012 "Valencian spring" (*Primavera Valenciana*) illustrates how both government officials and police authorities accused activists of inciting fear and fostering crime. Scores of students occupied a high school to contest budget cuts in public education. Among other claims, they accused the Popular Party-led regional government in Valencia of denying students heating in the cold winter months. The police forced occupiers out of the school premises, using disproportionate violence.

According to *The Sunday Morning Herald*, “riot cops on Monday charged and beat demonstrators, leaving several bleeding and arresting dozens of people including several minors”, and then conflict escalated.<sup>3</sup> The head of police forces in Valencia used military language to explain the police’s brutal approach: according to him, the police “responds when it is attacked”. Similarly, he declined to give information on the number of policemen deployed, “as one does not give out information to the enemy”.<sup>4</sup> But law officials can also play a part in securitisation (Camps and García, 2015: 62): district attorneys (*fiscales*) in Spain issued petitions of pre-trial imprisonment for activists detained by police, something generally perceived to be a very harsh choice. District attorneys have also (unsuccessfully) requested permanent bans on future demonstrations, together with extraordinarily harsh prison sentences. The “*Alfon case*” has been particularly notorious in the Spanish context. A twenty-one-year-old man was put in jail with no trial for 56 days and subjected to a special juridical regime that is supposed to survey potentially troublesome criminals.<sup>5</sup> Confronted with a process allegedly ridden with irregular procedures, *Alfon* was eventually put on trial due to charges of alleged illegal possession of explosives during the November 2012 general strike, and was sentenced to jail for four years in 2015 (Comisión Legal Sol, 2015: p.83-84).

## 5. THE PRESS, REPRESSION AND THE FEAR OF CROWDS

The press can play an active part in framing the dominant discourses on certain forms of activism. Social movement scholarship is clear in seeing the media as a crucial actor in the fortunes of most social movements (Koopmans, 2004). Newspapers, radio and TV stations and digital news outlets can become key actors in the ‘virtual battles’ involving the state, social movements and other political and social actors (Davenport, 2005). A sympathetic and abundant coverage of protest events is what most movements wish for; most campaigners are well-aware of the need for such type of coverage to succeed in their mobilisation efforts, and also to be able to establish firm alliances with large segments of the public. Marx Ferree (2005), when addressing the feminist movement and its relationship with the press, proposed a classification of the different critical pieces written against social movements according to the various (repressive) mechanisms of communication they used. Ferree’s analysis paid particular attention to the issue of derision, a complex rhetorical device that combines insult with constant references to infantilisation, recklessness or absence of a clear direction. Applying Ferree’s ideas to the issue at stake, we can define two main discursive mechanisms: the already described *derision*, a mechanism that we argue incorporates not only offensive practices, but also a

goal towards *silencing* (discrediting and playing down the importance of associations, events, ideas and communities, whose prestige is undermined); and, secondly, *securitisation*, a mechanism not directly considered by Ferree, which, as mentioned above, seeks a conscious or unconscious identification of protest with threats to security.

To begin with, the large number of instances where columnists explicitly refer to 15-M mobilisations as a mass, crowd, mob, rabble, horde or throng is in itself telling. To offer but a few examples: Juan Morote (2011) talks of the Puerta del Sol “mob”. Antonio Burgos (2011c), of “mobs”, “rabble” and “manipulated hordes”.<sup>6</sup> Agapito Maestre, of the 15-M “rabble” (2011g) of “a small crowd that does harm, much harm” (2011b). Juan Manuel de Prada refers to the “idiotized masses (indignant!)” (2011e), to a people “reduced to a shapeless mass” (2011b). Jon Juaristi, to “anti-democratic mass frenzy” (2011a). Tomás Cuesta refers to the “flooding of the streets”, the “masses” (2011c), and “the screaming mob” (2011a). Ignacio Sánchez Cámara, on his part, mentions the “mass-man”: “...can’t we see them shouting everywhere?... violence becomes the premium ratio... The form of intervention in politics of the mass-man is direct action” (2011).

Columnists not only use the notion of mob, crowd, rabble or mass; they also clearly and unequivocally refer to old crowd intellectuals and theoreticians, from Tocqueville to Canetti, from Spengler to Ortega y Gasset. Thus, in the mentioned article by Sánchez Cámara, he states that Ortega’s diagnosis of mass rebellions is still valid to explain the “violence” and “barbarism” that afflicts European societies (“what Ortega predicted has, to a large extent, become true”). José María Carrascal (2011b) cites another critic of the mass society and the decline of the West: Oswald Spengler. Similarly, in the context of new mobilisations, Ángela Vallvey (2011) expresses her distrust of all revolutionary social change processes and suggests reading Alexis and Tocqueville. And Mercedes Monmany warns against the dangers of real democracy, quoting Elias Canetti (*Crowds and Power*) to evoke the rise of mass movements in interwar Europe:

“... the night of the 27 and 28 February 1933, four weeks after Adolf Hitler’s appointment as Reich Chancellor, the Parliament building, the Reichstag, burned... The political rights guaranteed by Weimar’s Constitution were quickly suspended, and the most basic civil guarantees were revoked. The rest is already known. The individual had ceased to exist, from then on only the mass existed, as Canetti also announced in his book *Crowds and Power*” (2011).<sup>7</sup>

### Derision (and Silencing)

Paraphrasing Barrows, derision as a rhetoric device could be defined as an attempt to “rationalise

the refusal to listen to dissident voices, a deep-rooted reluctance to assess proletarian movements in their own terms" (Barrows, 1981: 191). Social movements have often been subject to mockery and discrediting by opinion-makers and political elites alike. To provide an example: on May 2017 it was known that Susana Díaz, from the Socialist Party PSOE and head of the regional government in Andalucía, had referred to the 'indignados' as capricious and spoiled youngsters, who protested solely on the grounds of the difficulties they were going to face to 'buy a house by the seaside'.<sup>8</sup> Back to 2011, most commentators condemned 15-M activism as the product of ignorance, recklessness and impulsivity, when not directly labelling protesters as uncivilized and immature creatures (and also, as will later be seen, comparing them with barbarians and savages). In this reading, protesters could be seen as individuals who would have been almost effortlessly manipulated by an elite. "Sincerely, Democracia Real YA are fools" –claimed Jorge Valín (2011). "The camp mobilisation has been abducted by the Marxist left" –declared Yulen Rossy and Miryam Lindberg (2011). Hermann Tertsch (2011a), José Raga (2011) and Jorge Vilches (2011b) expressed similar views. 15-M commentators noted how a minority of politicians and agitators would be manipulating the movement's drive at their own convenience. Antonio Burgos speaks of a socialist elite that resorts to agitprop "to use and manipulate the hordes" (2011c). Tomás Cuesta (2011b) and Alfonso Merlos (2011) blame socialists for the "intoxication and manipulation" of the masses. "These agitators –said Merlos- are the younger brothers of the others [of 2004], messing with Twitter, playing around on Facebook, alike in illiteracy and group drinking, but with the unflagging will of harvesting a new success with the old formula of mass agitation". Numerous commentators placed all responsibility on Pérez-Rubalcaba, a politician who –as expressed by García Domínguez (2011b)- "flatters the crowd" and satisfies "its instincts". And who, in the words of Pablo Molina, "is always several bodies ahead of the pack" (2011).<sup>9</sup>

Columnists stressed infantilisation. Thus, there was talk of "kids", "cubs", "spoiled child-citizens", "little ones", "babies", "punks", "youth", "unruly kindergarteners" or "tots throwing a tantrum" (Molina, 2011; Tertsch, 2011b; Monmany, 2011; Burgos, 2011a; Martínez-Abarca, 2011a; 2011b; Ruiz-Quintano, 2011d; Cuesta, 2011a; De Prada, 2011f; 2011a; López Schlichting, 2011). Luis Ventoso referred to "the square's protest spree" (2011); Cristina Losada, to "the camp, happening or great drinking get-together based at the Puerta del Sol" (2011b). There were also countless references to the drinking of alcohol and the use of drugs:

"... 'Spanish Revolution'? Wow, mate! A shot of hallucinogenic *sangría* gets you high (or brings you down) to a far lesser degree than that utopic substance that is traded in TV shopping. Because, behold how the

indignant herd hits you suddenly with no blows involved, the screaming mob, the surfers of chaos, the unruly kindergarteners, keen on sitting on squares after a tantrum that has gone unpunished, in the martyrdom of rebellious humanity. Slow down, Ben-Hur... The Puerta del Sol is not the Tahrir Square... The indignation rash that we are suffering is closer to a camp fire than to the zero-mile of the new era... Yet, in Tahrir there is blood spill and here, luckily, what flows in abundance is beer" (Cuesta, 2011a).

By discrediting the protesters as underage or completely immature, conservative critics contributed to silence the reasons or political arguments used by the citizens to justify their protest. The masses are immature and childish, capricious and hedonistic, always irresponsible (García-Domínguez, 2011a). This is why they are easy to mobilise and manipulate through social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. "The unfathomable wave of foolishness that has come upon us" –said José María Marco- "is related to the famous social networks" (2011; see also Ferrari, 2011; Losada, 2011a). According to certain authors, the success of 15-M summons was mostly due to the new communication forms and channels rather than to the ideological content of the movement's messages and demands. The movement's extravagant appeal is related to its success in terms of media coverage, claimed Edurne Uriarte:

"What has been important is the movement's staging and aesthetics, not what it demands. Young people, the hippy look, the square, social networks, the medium is the message. And the anti-capitalist, populist and demagogic contents matter little. In fact... hardly anyone is fully aware of them" (Uriarte, 2011).

In sum, columnists associate the behaviour of the crowd at Sol with the irrationality of impulses, instincts and urges. Sometimes, this same view is expressed by journalists who show greater understanding and closeness to 15-M protesters' position. Since history –claims José Luis Alvite- has more than enough "formidable flashes of almost youthful euphoria where instinct was stronger than reason" (2011a). Or, as stated at another time:

"Every time people gather in a crowd, something important happens: a revolution, Olympic Games, a war... It is clear that, when summoned with an ideological motivation, it becomes that which conservatives, always fearful, call 'a horde', meaning a mob possessed with the fury of a hazy idea that the instigators of the attack sometimes combine with incendiary chants and a plentiful supply of cheap gin... people organize themselves around an idea that has its effect precisely if it is not discussed... impulse is stronger than reason" (Alvite 2011b).

The aforementioned way of framing protest bears remarkable similarities with the ideas first put forth by crowd psychologists (Le Bon, 1896; Sighele, 1892; Tarde, 1890). In the late nineteenth century, many western scholars still had faith in the laws of prog-

ress and evolution. According to one of the most well-known interpretations of the time, progress or the development of society was to inevitably go from a simple to a complex order, from a socially homogeneous organisation to a heterogeneous one, and from the undifferentiated and incoherent matter of past times to the triumph of differentiation and individualism, a stage where people were called to behave like self-aware beings, free and rational. The optimistic and self-satisfied account of early evolutionism had begun to take shape with psychologists' more negative readings and views of crowds and masses. Thus, French authors Hippolyte Taine and Gustave Le Bon believed that the troubling presence of the new working-class masses that inhabited major urban centres also posed an alternative scenario for degeneration or evolutive regression, the dissolution of the modern and civilized society into a crowd with no hierarchy or moral standards (McClelland, 1989; Pick, 1989). The individuals that made up the mass were characterised by their irrationality, recklessness, impressionability and brutality. They were presented as underdeveloped beings (*the savage*), lacking in judgement and maturity (*the child, the madman*), easy to manipulate (*controlled, hypnotised*) by a more rational, mature and developed minority or elite. Insisting on stigmatisation, those that are part of the mass are labelled as "primitive", barbarians that have "sneaked about the old backstage that is civilisation" –as stated years later by the philosopher Ortega y Gasset ([1983] 1929: 92).

The likening of the crowd with apes, worms or germs gave strength to the assumption of evolutive regression and stripped the individuals that made up the crowd of all human status (Carey, 2009). These authors held conservative, if not openly reactionary, views. Taine and Le Bon's conception of crowd conveyed, above all, the meaning of a temporary human group -crowd, mob- such as the one involved in the insurrectional phenomena of French modern history (French Revolution, Revolutions of 1848, Paris Commune, etc.). Thus, the most repeated image of the masses involved -for them- the presence of a crowd or mob of individuals gathered on a European city's streets or squares, committing countless outrages and massacres. By reducing the political voice of new crowds or urban masses to a status of irrationality, madness and/or underage concerns, the potential reasons or arguments that could justify the protest are brushed aside (Barrows, 1981).

### **Securitisation: The threat that feeds on sickness**

Crowd psychologists referred to the masses as groups of individuals afflicted by some sort of mental disorder, such as hysteria; alternatively, masses were represented as marginal minorities that share a deficient and unhealthy constitution or nature: common offenders and criminals, vagabonds, beggars,

alcoholics, prostitutes, dissolute individuals... Recalling the words of Taine, who, in his account of the French revolutionary crowds, mentioned the throng of wretches and sinister characters who roamed the capital's streets and squares during the days of the revolt: "Thieves, galley slaves, all sorts of outlaws are those that would be at the vanguard of the insurrections... Society's slime surfaces in all revolutions. Never before seen; like forest badgers or sewer rats, they had been hiding in their dens. They pour out in flocks and, all of a sudden, the characters that can be seen in Paris!" ([1876] 1996: 168).

Spanish conservative article writers used a very similar rhetoric to describe a political phenomenon that is far from the working-class mobilisations of the nineteenth century in its social composition, forms of organising and type of leadership. They linked stigma to danger, sickness to risk: these members of the conservative milieu employed a wealth of stigmatising metaphors that associated the crowd's behaviour with that of criminals, barbarians, lunatics and/or beasts. This, of course, aimed at creating fear.

"Perhaps the first thing that should be acknowledged is that there is currently a European barbarism, and that barbarians do not await us at the other side of our borders... The new man that prevails, the rebellious mass-man, denies the principles of culture, which are, above all, demands, requirements and rules" (Sánchez-Cámara, 2011).

Commentators on the 15-M mobilisations set individual reason against the crowd's instincts. The idea that masses will listen to "concepts" rather than to "emotions" must be dismissed –according to Mercedes Monmany (2011) and José Carlos Rodríguez (2011b). The unleashing of instincts and passion –says Miquel Porta Perales (2011)- is at the root of the dangers that we are now threatened by, a key idea to understanding the relationship between activism and security. 15-M is a primitive movement, very primary, "a sentimental, visceral reaction, but never a concept, a reason" –claims Maestre (2011e; 2011a). Some go beyond this and unearth the old hypothesis that contagion or suggestion is one of the fundamental causes of mass movements. "...a lie that is repeated a thousand times can become truth, especially among suggestible people" –says Juan Manuel de Prada (2011d; see also De Prada, 2011c). "No matter how painful, it must not be ruled out that the camp is partly the fruit of contagion [by the Arab Spring]" - writes Emilio Campmany (2011).

It, therefore, comes as no surprise that, alongside stigmatisation, commentators developed the idea of danger, of threat: activism was portrayed as a source of insecurity. This notion is, as mentioned above, key to the construction of the concept of securitisation: the redefinition of a reality into a threat with the aim of laying the foundations for the subsequent development of repressive mechanisms. The

idea of barbarity is often linked to the 15-M movement's noncompliance with law, occupation of public spaces and paying no heed to electoral regulations, when not directly referring to episodes of violence. "I'm sorry for the pilgrims that have suffered the rabble's fits of rage –says Alfonso Ussía... that clueless and wrathful scum ... [those at Sol] act from the greatest ordinariness. What is difficult is to respond to the barbarity..." (Ussía, 2011; see also Del Val, 2011; Maestre, 2011d).

A social movement's public image is exposed to the results of virtual battles: public views lean in one or another direction inasmuch as arguments gather and build a coherent and comprehensible account. The identification of 15-M mobilisations as a threat draws upon, as we are describing, a systematic discrediting of a certain activism that is labelled as irrational and violent; the suggestion is that these forms of participation are a security problem. In this regard, alongside the barbarian or the savage, the likening of the mass with the behaviour of animals is also a very common rhetoric device. "...some crow-like species, a small group of carrion birds... swarm freely around the Puerta del Sol" –states Juan Morote (2011). As already done by Le Bon in his denunciation of socialism, the thought leaders of our time use animal metaphors to build an account that is critical of the 15-M –the movement of the *perroflautas*. Thus, there is further writing about "hordes" and "herds", "viruses" and "germs", "dogs" and "packs", or "crows" and "worms" (Alvite, 2011b; Juaristi, 2011b; Burgos, 2011b; Carrascal, 2011a; Dietz, 2011 a, 2011b; Merlos, 2011; Molina, 2011; Morote, 2011; Ruiz Quintano, 2011a). As already stated by the author of *Mein Kampf*, claims Mercedes Monmany (2011), masses know and understand nothing: "Amidst the crowd, the individual is 'like an insignificant worm' that only feels the energy of 200,000 people struggling together for an ideal, which he himself fails to understand and which has no why or wherefore". According to the commentators of *Die Zeit* –says Tomás Cuesta approvingly (2011b)– "the street rash that are our 'indignados' is, really a folkloric reflection, lifeless and unstructured, of the emotional scabies outbreak that has put half of Europe in democratic quarantine... No matter how much it may upset those who insist on masking the (brown) plague with incense, the argument collar of bloodhounds is the same that is worn today by the *perroflautas*".

Partial neglect of the content of political grievances led a small number of authors to establish comparisons between ideology, religion and myth. "The myth of the indignant people, rising spontaneously against the system in the name of 'social justice' –says Jorge Vilches (2011a)– has haunted socialism in the form of that Marxist ghost that has been roaming Europe". Like the catholic congregation, states Bernd Dietz, 15-M protesters have their own "mythologies", those

of communism – "the most enslaving, deranged and genocidal to see the light of day on the face of the Earth" (2011b). This is another rhetoric device used frequently by Le Bon and the rest of crowd psychologists in the repression of socialism. It surfaces again –though less often– in the discursive strategies of 15-M censors. More than issues and concepts of a profane and ideological nature, the citizens of the Puerta del Sol gathered around a "myth" or "superstition" that ultimately refers to the prevalence of erroneous ideas and prejudices that are deeply rooted in the popular mind (Dietz, 2011a).

Finally, who are the individuals that participate in the *masses* or *crowds* that conservative columnists are so worried about? As seen, Taine, Sighele and Le Bon often spoke of masses made up of suspicious looking individuals, thugs and criminals, marginal individuals, the underclass of the "rabble". We find human types of similar social extraction and *questionable* morals in current descriptions of collective behaviour. Amando de Miguel talks of "shabbiness" (2011); Francisco Reyero, of "troublemakers, jailbirds and bums" (2011). José Antonio Martínez-Abarca refers to the "underworld" and the "rubbishy" (2011d); to individuals who "have no love for work or order" (2011e). Gloria Lomana speaks of "the worst mob still camped at the Puerta del Sol" (2011); Alfonso Ussía (2011), Agapito Maestre (2011g) and Antonio Burgos (2011c) of the 15-M "rabble", "scum" or "riff-raff". Thus, *indignados* are often portrayed as marginal individuals and criminals. In the words of Serafín Fanjul, they are "gangs of slackers and freeloaders lying about on the floor, who yell and harass the city councillors of the PP" (2011).

Nonetheless, these are not the only human types that feature in descriptions of *masses*. Once more, as with Taine and Le Bon's rhetoric, the very concept of *mass(es)* also refers to a majority, or to society as a whole. Thus, 15-M detractors seem to observe at other times that the mass is everywhere (or that we are all part of the *mass*). "... the conspiring troublemaking of the indignant... –says Ignacio Ruiz Quintano– is the dominant culture in Spain" (2011d). We are before a "childish indignation", says José Carlos Rodríguez, "characteristic of an infantilized society" (2011a; see also Albiac 2011). The people, the citizens, warns José Manuel de Prada, have been reduced in their entirety to a "shapeless mass" (2011b). "Spain is perhaps the mass-man's paradise", writes Ignacio Sánchez Cámara (2011). Using admonishing and prophetic language, masses are often described as a ubiquitous danger or a looming threat throughout Spain, the West or humanity as a whole:

"...What Ortega predicted, has to a large extent, become true... 'this new barbarian is an automatic product of modern civilisation'. It is not a haphazard and fortuitous disease. Nineteenth century Europe was headed resolutely towards it. That's why there is room for talk about a 'dissatisfied little rich boy', a

spoilt child who, after squandering the inherited treasure of culture, is now broke... Spain is perhaps the mass-man's paradise, but the phenomenon is European and, probably western... the crisis is deep, abyssal" (Sánchez Cámara, 2011).

"... the Spanish 15-M, ideologically inscrutable if we consider its manifestos, involves a sense of trouble, defiance, against authority. It is embedded in the mosaic that, on the western world's floor, is crumbling and bringing down with it centuries of culture and civilisation that have marked... History's progress... We could be facing the end of an era... or... the decadence of a time when authority was the ongoing catalyst of coexistence and development" (Martín Ferrand, 2011; see also Robles, 2011; and Carrascal, 2011b; 2011c).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The recuperation of old ideas about crowds and multitudes might be a common trend across different experiences of repression, and not simply a case-specific phenomenon. Atak's work (2017) on the values and discourse of police forces in Turkey find stark similarities with the data discussed in this article, in terms of the presence of the ideas of crowd psychology in the underlying values guiding responses to dissent, and also in relation to the speech practices deployed to justify police brutality. Le Bon's imprint, it seems, lives on in today's political discourse.

Crowd psychology theories fell out of academic favour quite some time ago, their ideas widely regarded as biased and ideological. Back in the late 19th century, the identification of the people as irrational mobs worked in the direction of eroding the meaning and legitimacy of the new claims for civil and political rights (Drury y Stott, 2011; Reicher 2008; Barrows, 1981; Apfelbaum y McGuire, 1986). In Reicher's words, if crowds articulated grievances and alternative visions of society, Le Bonian psychology silenced that voice, legitimating repression: "crowds, having no reason, cannot be reasoned with" (Reicher, 2008: 187). Crowd psychologist theories might have lost prestige within academic circles; the influence of their ideas, however, has remained. The thesis that mass behaviour represents an example of collective irrationally found new momentum during the late 1950s and 1960s. As it has been very well explained by scholarly work on the civil rights and anti-war movements of those years, security forces in general, and metropolitan/local police forces in particular, justified brutal forms of repression against civil activists on the grounds of the irrationality of collective protest. Rights were a site for social and political contestation, and security communities worked under the as-

sumption that the protection of societal order was at odds with the acceptance of 'unruly' expressions of dissent and resistance.

Protest, of course, is now generally accepted as a recurrent feature of the political landscape of representative democracies, particularly when it comes to the political participation of young people (García Albacete, 2014). Regardless of the fact that disruptive forms of protesting have always infuriated some social groups, it is safe to say that social movements have gained a new status as polity members; they are widely regarded as recurrent elements of the political system, with a say in the definition of political problems. Would this mean that the time for Le Bonian ideas on multitudes and crowds has definitely expired? Apparently not. As we have shown in this article, conservative journalists and opinion makers in Spain displayed a number of discursive mechanisms against 15-M mobilisations. Protesters were derided, silenced, stigmatised and, above all, presented as a security threat. The Spanish conservative media participated in a virtual war of meaning, where ideas of democratic regeneration and civic inclusion were contested through appeals to danger, insecurity and risk. Such a response, we would like to stress, not only coincided in time with acts of speech by Government and Law officials who also framed 15-M mobilisations as a threat; they facilitated the subsequent criminalisation of some forms of protest through the passing of a very tough security law.

The so-called "Gag Law" was not only contested in the domestic arena, but it was also controversial in the international sphere. A number of anti-Gag Law protest campaigns unfolded across the country, which combined traditional and innovative repertoires of action (e.g., petitioning, marching — including the world's first ever demonstration by holograms<sup>10</sup> —, theatrical performances). The legislative change was enacted in part as a response to the preceding cycle of popular contestation against austerity policies, where the (often precarious) youth was over-represented. In order to place popular dissent under control, authorities deployed a mix of coercive forms of repression, which evolved towards subtler, softer tactics (including penalties and identity checks) and surveillance activities. This trend, of course, does not only represent a narrowing of the structure of political opportunities for mobilisation; more generally, it points at a profound transformation in the cultural dispositions of elites and political authorities against the acceptance of the democratic practices that best represent the political orientation of young people in contemporary representative democracies.

## NOTES

1. 15-M stands for 15<sup>th</sup> of May, and it has become the most common way of referring to the social movement born amidst the calls for the democratic generation back in 2011. Acknowledging the ongoing debate as to whether or not 15-M was a social movement in the traditional sense of the concept, we will refer to it as a site for mobilisation and contentious politics.
2. See <https://www.es.amnesty.org/actua/acciones/espana-ley-seguridad-ciudadana-oct14/>; accessed on 16 March 2017.
3. See <http://www.smh.com.au/business/world-business/spain-budget-cuts-spawn-valencian-spring-protests-20120221-1tme3.html>; accessed 21 January 2017.
4. See [http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2012/02/20/valencia/1329764951\\_838007.html](http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2012/02/20/valencia/1329764951_838007.html); accessed 5 March 2017.
5. See [http://www.eldiario.es/politica/alfonfies\\_0\\_78392640.html](http://www.eldiario.es/politica/alfonfies_0_78392640.html); accessed 12 February 2017.
6. Information on these articles is included as an Appendix after the bibliographic references.
7. Many authors compare, more or less explicitly, the 15-M movement with the collapse of democracy in the Germany of the 1930s. See other examples in Ruiz Quintano 2011b; Cuesta 2011b; Martínez-Abarca 2011c.
8. [https://www.huffingtonpost.es/2017/05/16/polemica-por-un-video-de-susana-diaz-de-enero-sobre-los-indignad\\_a\\_22093549/](https://www.huffingtonpost.es/2017/05/16/polemica-por-un-video-de-susana-diaz-de-enero-sobre-los-indignad_a_22093549/); accessed on 15 September 2019.
9. On this issue, see also the articles by Maestre 2011c; 2011f; GEES 2011; González 2011; Carrascal 2011a; and Ruiz Quintano 2011c.
10. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/spains-hologram-protest-thousands-join-virtual-march-in-madrid-against-new-gag-law-10170650.html>, accessed 14 April 2017.

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