

# Andalusian Uprising: The Empire that Unites the Arab Spring and European Anti-Austerity Protesters

November 26, 2011

In the seventh century, Musa bin Nusair, born in Syria, traveled and fought his way through the Middle East and across North Africa, expanding the Muslim empire headquartered in Damascus, Syria. With his general Tariq bin Ziyad in the lead, he crossed the Mediterranean from Morocco with an army of several thousand, taking control of most of Spain. From 711 until 1031, the Umayyad Empire stretched from Córdoba to Damascus.

As a result of 1300 years of invasions, empires, occupations, colonies, population displacements, and cultural exchange that moved cultures and people across the boundaries that modern nation states have, the Mediterranean Sea proves to be an arbitrary boundary with more similarities on either side than we acknowledge. The Spanish southern coast is called Andalusia. A half-hour ferry ride away, northern Morocco uses the term "al Andalus" to discuss its own heritage from the empire. After North Africans ruled the Iberian peninsula, Spain, Portugal, and France ruled Moroccan El Andalus into the twentieth century. Spanish towns today retain "barrios Moriscos" ("Moorish neighborhoods"), and children in parts of northern Morocco greet visitors with "ihola!" as often as "bonjour."

The two countries continued to develop more parallels than we normally acknowledge. Spain called its economic stagnation during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco "the years of hunger." Neighboring Moroccans called their lost decades under the rule of King Hassan "the years of lead." *Los años de hambre* and *les années de plomb* have left both Spaniards and Moroccans with a passionate but contested commitment to political liberty. Though Spain escaped out from under its royalist despot before Morocco, citizens of both countries still work to secure a secular, liberal state against the background of resentment or resistance from the elite of the oligarchic era.

The boundaries of the Umayyad Empire encompass most of the major mass uprisings of the past spring—from Spain's anti-austerity protests to the Tunisian-led Arab uprisings, through Libya and Egypt, encompassing the anti-inflationary, cottage cheese, housing, and doctors' protests of Israel, and the unrelenting struggle and bloody repression that continues today in Syria.[1] The protests of the past year seem to have little to do with each other if viewed through the window panes that have divided political geography for the past century into Europe, North Africa, Israel, and the Arab Middle East. But comparing two protests in El Andalus—those in Spain and Morocco—identifies promises and pitfalls that these diverse movements share not only with each other, but with the burgeoning protests worldwide. These two protests, at the intersection of Europe and North Africa, reveal defining aspects of the much larger movement that has developed globally since the Arab Spring and anti-austerity protests began.

Though it is clear, as a disclaimer, that each of the two protests reflect particular, historically constructed discontents in their respective countries, their commonalities are notable. Both Spain and Morocco experienced mass protest movements this spring that came onto the streets with little advanced notice. First, in Morocco, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets in at least nine cities for the "February 20" marches. These were at least nominally organized by a group called Liberty and Democracy Now, following the protests in Tunisia.[2] Less than three months later, a group called Real Democracy Now organized the "15-M" (for May 15) marches in 58 cities in

Spain.[3] Tens of thousands participated, and in the following days protesters encamped in Madrid's Puerta del Sol.

Both the protests were born of deep frustration and indignation. The Madrid protesters are called "los indignados"—the indignant, the outraged. In Morocco, frustrated citizens complain about the culture of la Hogra, of elites' contempt for lives of everyday citizens. Moroccans feel themselves to be Mahgour, despised.[4] Both were movements of large groups of people who were fed up, angered by the blatant self-enrichment and entitlement that elites had benefited from at the expense of most people. After all, how similar is today's global banker to a monarch, given the banker's sense that his debts should be serviced before others', that he must be financed without regard for the wellbeing of the people who underwrite his adventures, and that he can parade his misdeeds in public, impervious to public opinion and invulnerable to legal sanction?

Nominally, the Moroccan protests were against the power of the monarch, King Mohammed VI. The Spanish protests were against austerity measures and the disproportionate power of the bankers. But beneath the surface, the longer lists of issues began to overlap, and in conversations with Spaniards and Moroccans in the months afterwards, the two overlapped even more.

In the case of the Madrid protesters, "anti-globalization" was anchored by local roots. According to a survey of protesters by the sympathetic daily paper *Público*, the "primary objective" of los indignados was to fight political corruption, followed by demands for electoral reform, and limits to the power of the financial sector.[5] (Two-thirds of Spaniards supported the protesters.[6]) The protesters were also displeased by media coverage of the economy and of the movement itself.

Likewise, the protests in Morocco activated deep frustration with political corruption; a sense that in a country with serious poverty (and illiteracy rates as high as 40 percent), the king, his family, and a circle of cronies helped themselves without shame to the nation's riches.[7] According to the sympathetic magazine *Tel Quel* (targeted to the French reading, liberal bourgeoisie of Morocco), needed changes included a shift towards democracy ("The king should reign—not rule," according to one slogan), limits on the royal and military budget, a more secular, modern, and tolerant society, and expanded social welfare policies.[8]

But the Moroccan protesters' demands were more diverse than that. Behind the unifying slogans were others: Some protesters demanded recognition of Berber (l'Amazigh) languages as official languages. Others demanded a new constitution outright (which was ultimately granted, but which retained power for the king). Women cloaked in niqabs held signs warning of the dangers that threatened the Koran while still others held signs demanding that the leader of the outlawed Islamist movement Justice and Charity (Al Adl Wal Ihsane) share his fortune with the people. Islamists, secularists, and skeptics, liberals, moderates, and conservatives all found space to voice their views in a protest that *Tel Quel* compared to the freewheeling debates of London's Hyde Park.

The protests in Madrid were similarly diverse, and disorganized. Given the diversity of views, there was an implicit (and sometimes explicit) "agreement not to disagree." Thus radicals, liberals, anarchists, students, and traditional trade unionists supported the march, but political parties and unions were banned from official participation. (Among other things, the two major unions had ultimately approved earlier austerity measures, including raising the retirement age. Left observers in the US have been concerned by this exclusion, while many left observers in Spain have seen it as a positive development that promises the movement independence.) But the polyphony of the protests was, while inspiring, a sign of its potential weakness. Unlike a coalition, which carefully articulates its members' shared goals, acknowledges individuals' priorities, and excludes areas of disagreement, these movements were not able to establish some kind of unity platform in advance. The risk is thus of one of two outcomes, should the movements gain the power to bring more

changes. The first is that the middle-of-the-road, upper-middle-class consensus will steamroll more radical visions. Contrary to some of the Madrid placards, many in the movement were not revolutionary but, despite the rhetoric, reformist in its uncertain platform. (While some signs said "It's not a crisis, it's the system," a survey of protesters found the majority sought a "reform of the system, not a rupture.")<sup>[9]</sup> Those reformist sentiments may come to dominate the movement.

That risk is evident in one of the movement's touchstone volumes, Stéphane Hessel's inspiring *iIndignaos!* (Get Indignant, published in English as *Time for Outrage!*).<sup>[10]</sup> The book was cited, along with George Orwell's *1984*, as one of the most influential for the Madrid protesters.<sup>[11]</sup> Despite a title that would sound at home at a Tea Party rally, Hessel addresses his activist readers on the basis of his left and progressive bona fides: he was part of the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation. He was captured and sent to concentration camps, and escaped. After the war, Hessel was involved in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hessel's story is unquestionably impressive. And he shies away neither from comparing neoliberalism to the evils of fascism, nor from pointing out to romantics that each political situation requires custom-formulated political responses: the Resistance for the Nazis, a new form of resistance to global capitalism. But while readers are called upon to resist—*iindignaos!*—Hessel offers his readers few signposts as to what indignation might lead to, what they might work for, what resistance means. The result is exactly what righteous indignation translates to in American English: a brusque pride at one's indignation, but the lack of a political program to do anything about it.

The risk of dissolution into middle-class discontent notwithstanding, the Madrid protests suggest that the Andalusian Spring has a more critical objective. After all, while Moroccans were marching behind demands for what sounded like liberal democracy, Spanish protesters were articulating the inadequacies of the motions of liberal democracy. In fact, both sought something more: real democracy, democracy now. Two days before the 15-M protests, the group Real Democracy Now occupied a bank. During the February 20 march, protesters had burned down one bank in Tangiers, and another in Al Hoceïma.<sup>[12]</sup> For both movements, "Democracy Now" means more than formal democracy or political reform. It represents the more radical demands articulated through action, the demand for popular power, not its institutionalization through negotiated reform. Such power is not a demand that states readily or easily accommodate.

If middle-of-the-road indignation is not the outcome, one thinks, alternately, of the Iranian revolution, when a similarly diverse group of trade unions, communists, and Islamists took to the streets, but when political power was seized from the Shah, there was suddenly room only for those following Ayatollah Khomeini, and the others suffered severe repression from their former allies. Samir Amin recently warned that in Egypt, the US actually prefers the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood (who do not oppose the West's neoliberal agenda for Egypt) over a more democratic, and therefore radical, resolution.<sup>[13]</sup> Protesters in both countries will face both "anti-political" perspectives among protesters and reactionary threats supported from outside.

Without a "big tent" platform, or projects like early twentieth-century Popular Front groups that sought to organize broad movements behind concrete left political objectives, the movements around the Mediterranean have remained dispersed. They have great potential, but without the time to build strong coalitions, they lack the political coherence to avoid political domination by either the less-critical center or the most-organized minorities. Distinct though these countries are, the movements of the Andalusian Republic cry out for recognition of the shared experiences of citizens constrained under global neoliberalism, and for a vision that speaks to those experiences.

Throughout the twentieth century, Marxism united anticolonial, anticapitalist, and antiroyalist movements. Postmodernists sought to present the decline of that master narrative as a victory of radical skepticism and idiosyncrasy over totalizing narratives. In the post-Soviet vacuum, al Qaeda

had hoped to provide an alternative master narrative for the Arab World's dissatisfaction. Commentators now argue that the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East have relegated bin Laden's theology to the dusty shoulder of the highway to Tripoli.

Such master narratives are constructed in the course of actual events, and respond both to the larger, historical materialist realities of capitalism and their local, immediate manifestations of colonialism, neoliberalism, and crisis. In addition to the immediate political gains that are already being made, such an articulation may be a vital legacy of the protest movements in 2011: if diverse narratives still must articulate their place in a larger mass movement, if religious extremism no longer organizes modern societies, then a new framework is needed. The work of protesters and their allies—in Spain and Morocco, in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, and Israel, in Great Britain and Greece, in the Occupy Wall Street encampment and simultaneous occupations—and the cities and countries that are joining this list daily—may of necessity articulate a cohesive position toward the shared opponents of these movements. The ideology of the Andalusian Republic would challenge political corruption, of course, along with cronyism and the overweening expectations of corporate bankers. It would necessarily include a frank critique of contemporary global capitalism, and a justification of deeper, radical democracy as an antidote to elites' power and brazen sense of entitlement. It would incorporate in that platform (as activists and organizers have tried to do), the political needs of movement participants including ethnic groups, women, religious minorities, LGBTQ, bread-and-butter trade unionists and hedonistic students. In the United States, at least, it will need to link its economic populist message to a vision of racial justice if it is to overcome the racial obstacles that have scuttled so many other progressive movements. Though the list of concerns is long, the short version is that the kind of expansive, inclusive political vision needed to articulate the demands of the diversity of protesters across al Andalus would expand the sphere of progressive and grassroots politics.

Protesters in Madrid continually reoccupy the square. Citizens in Morocco are unimpressed by gestures toward reform made by the king. Dissatisfaction continues to percolate, and a network of online media, alternative press, and sympathetic mainstream news outlets are providing the forum in which the movement can frame the issues and articulate coherent, comprehensive, revolutionary solutions. The Andalusian Republic that encircles the Mediterranean—and has spread from there—holds the potential to articulate, for all of us, a libratory ideology for the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. Regarding the class composition of these movements, note the difference between the conservative *Financial Times*' account emphasizing that the Israeli protesters were "middle class," and progressive *Haaretz*'s characterization of the protesters as an "organized effort led by a cross-section of Israeli society—including the middle class, young people, students, Holocaust survivors, and the elderly." See Ilan Lior, "Israeli police arrest dozens following Tel Aviv housing protest," *Haaretz*, July 24, 2011, and Tobias Buck, "Swelling List of Demands Fuels Israel Protests," *Financial Times*, August 9, 2011.
2. In French the group is called "Liberté et Démocratie Maintenant." Youssef Aït Akdim, "Ça ne fait que commencer..." *Tel Quel*, no. 461, Feb. 19-25, 2011.
3. In Spanish the group is called "Democracia Real YA."

4. Abdessamad Dialmy, "Le Marocain, Ce 'Mahgour,'" *Tel Quel*, no. 485-486, Aug. 6 - Sept. 9, 2011, p. 29.
5. "Primer Estudio Sociológico Sobre El 15-M," *Público*, July 17, 2011, pp. 2-5.
6. Miles Johnson, "Indignados' Begin Long March To Madrid," *Financial Times*, June 26, 2011. On the "fuzziness" of an anti-corruption campaign, see Prabhat Patnaik, "Afterword on a Movement," *MRZine*, Sept. 12, 2011.
7. Tahar Ben Jelloun, *L'etincelle: Révolte dans les pays arabes*, Éditions Gallimard, 2011. Note that while Jelloun provides a useful overview of the "Arab Spring," he seems to write with a clear desire to be welcomed back into the Royal Kingdom of Morocco, pulling his punches by concluding the chapter on Morocco with the line, "Morocco continues to advance its peaceful revolution *with its king*." (p. 99, emphasis mine.) Jelloun's formulation—of a revolution without dethroning the monarch—echoes *Tel Quel's* account of "La révolution avec lui" (revolution with the king). Morocco has enjoyed increased press freedom in recent years, and criticism is widespread. But criticism of the royal family is still verboten, as the royal family has made clear with the recent jailing of an editor and a blogger. Thus, revolution with the king may indeed represent Moroccans' preference, but from my conversations with Moroccans who were fed up with the king, it is more likely to represent a cautious course between criticism and prison.
8. "Le 20 février, ville par ville," *Tel Quel*, no. 461, Feb. 19-25, 2011. See also Jelloun, p. 96. The two movements also share significant, but not necessarily majoritarian, secular (or "laica") commitments: Spanish protesters returned to the Puerto del Sol to protest the government's support of a visit by the Pope (a politically provocative visit for a country ruled for forty years by an ultra-Catholic autocracy). (See "La policía disuelve a gloopes la concentración laica en Sol," *El País*, Aug. 18, 2011, pp. 1, 22.) And *Tel Quel* has hoped that changes in Morocco will include greater religious freedom and a more secular state. Working-class Moroccans I spoke to sought to present their country as relatively secularizing. (See "La revolution... avec lui," *Tel Quel*, no. 461, Feb. 19-25, 2011, pp. 18-29.
9. "Ni apolíticos ni antisistema," *Público*, July 17, 2011.
10. Stéphane Hessel, *iIndignaos! Un alegato contra la indiferencia y a favor de la insurrección pacífica* (*Indignez-vous*, translated by Telmo Moreno Lanaspá), Destino, 2001.
11. *Público's* coverage included surveys of what protesters said were their most influential books. Rosa Fernández and Claudia Seva, "La revuelta está en los libros," *Público*, Aug. 3, 2011.
12. Five young people were found dead inside the bank in Al Hoceïma. According to official sources, they were protesters trapped in the bank when another group set it on fire. See "Le 20 février: ville par ville."
13. Samir Amin, "2011: An Arab Springtime?" *Monthly Review*, Aug. 22, 2011.

*GREGORY SMITHSIMON is assistant professor of sociology at Brooklyn College, CUNY. He is the author of September 12: Community and Neighborhood Recovery at Ground Zero (2011) and, with Benjamin Shepard, The Beach Beneath the Streets: Contesting New York City's Public Spaces (2011).*