

# How Merkel's Win May Hide Rising Discontent

**Exclusive:** With German Chancellor Merkel expected to win reelection on Sunday, the European elites may celebrate having turned back a populist surge, but their neo-liberal policies continue to fuel discontent, says Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

The citizens of Germany will head to the polls this Sunday, in the last of a series of elections in major European countries this year. Before the voting began, there were fears that populist, anti-system parties could actually win in some cases, in the wake of the victory of last year's Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. That hasn't happened, as Marine Le Pen of the National Front was defeated in a run-off in France, and Geert Wilders' Freedom Party failed to break through in Holland.

Germany is also expected to weather the populist storm, with Chancellor Angela Merkel set to be re-elected. Her Christian Democratic Party (CDU/CSU) now holds a comfortable lead over its main competitor, the Social Democrats (SPD), with the other opposition parties far behind. That will give Merkel, a reserved but effective politician who grew up in Communist East Germany, the chance to approach Helmut Kohl's record as the country's longest serving leader.

Due to the parliamentary system, which allows numerous smaller parties to send representatives to Berlin, neither of the large parties can win outright, which means that Merkel will need to form a coalition. Her preference would be to take on her party's historical ally, the Free Democrats, but it is possible she will be forced to continue with a "grand coalition" agreement between the CDU and SPD to share power in the name of stability, while keeping out the parties seen as more extreme.

The most feared of the smaller groupings is the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a "populist" party that has grown rapidly in recent years, drawing on economic and social discontent in the mold of other anti-system parties around Europe. The AfD is expected to draw slightly more than 10 percent of the vote, well below the totals for Marine Le Pen in France (21 percent in the first round) or the Five-Star Movement in Italy (25 percent in 2013), and closer to the level of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in Holland (13 percent in the March elections).

Nevertheless, the AfD's growth has caused consternation around Europe, as the governing elites struggle to explain why even in the country with the continent's strongest economy, where unemployment is low, and productivity and

budget surpluses are high, there has been a rapid increase in populist fervor.

The standard explanation, of course, is xenophobia and racism. Indeed the AfD plays to nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiment, and has increasingly identified itself with right-wing issues. As immigration from the Middle East and Africa has soared in recent years, European countries have struggled with accepting and integrating the new arrivals, causing considerable social tensions.

Germany was at the center of this crisis in 2015, when Merkel went against the grain of public opinion and announced that her country would accept hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers in order to do its part for those less fortunate, in particular refugees from the war in Syria.

It didn't take long for that policy to change though, as less than a year later Germany was decisive in reaching a deal with President Erdogan of Turkey that ended up limiting immigration by closing the land route towards Europe through the Balkans. The result has been a shift of migrant flows to the sea routes from Northern Africa primarily to Italy and Greece, accompanied by a notable change in attitudes among the respective populations.

### **Economic Inequality**

As with most populist movements throughout the Western world, the issues of immigration and race tell only a part of the story. The Brexit vote was fueled by a reaction against neo-liberal economic policies, effectively summed up by the headline of an article in the English newspaper The Guardian shortly after the referendum in June 2016: "If you've got money, you vote in... if you haven't got money, you vote out." Decades of economic decline had produced the desire to stick it to the governing elites, and the Brexit vote provided an excellent opportunity to do so.

In addition, there has even been academic research demonstrating the obvious, that racial attitudes are influenced by economic hardship, which provides fertile ground for the growth of extremist parties.

The same can be said for the United States, of course, as Donald Trump's victory was based in large part on his appeal to voters who feel left behind by globalization, and left out by a political system that has favored those at the top. Racist and anti-immigrant sentiment is clearly present, but Trump's decisive margin came from sectors of the population such as union workers in the Rust Belt, not pro-Confederates in the South.

As for Germany, the question is where the impetus comes for the rise of anti-system political forces, beyond the standard explanation involving immigration

and right-wing social issues. With the country considered to be doing so well economically, the narrative doesn't seem to fit as well.

A clear-eyed analysis, however, makes it clear that the conditions for a revolt of the voters based on economic hardship are present there as well. First there is the eastern part of the country, the former "German Democratic Republic" which belonged to the Communist bloc dominated by the Soviet Union. Despite the claims of great success in the years following German reunification, the reality is that much of the industry in the East was cannibalized by western companies, and a large segment of the population lives on welfare.

The economy of the former Communist country was obviously inefficient and required modernization, but the approach taken by the West was to shut down and sell off whatever was available, leaving the East in a perpetual state of inferiority.

Annual reports published by the German government show that significant disparities persist between the two areas of the country, with higher unemployment, lower wages and less investment in the East. The ownership and control of Germany's considerable industrial capacity also remains principally in the West.

### **Exploiting the Unemployed**

A second major factor is the system of labor market and welfare reforms introduced in Germany in the 2000s. The most famous is the "Hartz IV" law, which provides unemployment subsidies of just 280 euros (\$330) a month, and forces people to accept whatever jobs they are offered, even at only 1-2 euros an hour.

German companies have done very well with this system, that allows them to exploit extremely cheap and flexible labor. Critics points to this as one – although certainly not the only – factor contributing to the great success of German industry in Europe.

For the six million citizens trapped in the system though, things aren't so great. There are entire areas called "Hartz IV neighborhoods," indicating widespread socio-economic difficulties among the local population. If we add the high level of "working poor," a category that has reached 9 percent of the population in Germany, it becomes clear where the populist movements can look for votes on economic issues.

What scares the elites in Europe is that political parties that criticize European Union economic policies will eventually break through, thanks to support among these segments of the population. The E.U. is in fact rightly associated with the monetarist and neo-liberal policies that have contributed to

producing greater inequality and thus causing hardship for many across Europe.

In the end, Holland, France and Germany will succeed in keeping the populist parties out of government this year. (Italy will vote in 2018, and the 5-Star Movement is still challenging for the top spot.) The risk is that the European elites may take this as an opportunity to continue with their neo-liberal policies of recent years, which will ultimately only make the situation worse.

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## Trump, Trade and War

**Exclusive:** Neoliberal dogma holds that “free trade” brings peace and thus Donald Trump’s criticism of trade deals presages war. But that view is not only bad history but ignores valid points that Trump raises, says James W Carden.

By James W Carden

Shikha Dalmia, a fellow at the Koch brothers-funded think tank, the Reason Foundation, has castigated CATO’s Doug Bandow and *The Nation*’s Stephen F. Cohen for having the temerity to note that the Republican presidential nominee, Donald J. Trump, has raised several important foreign policy issues which need addressing, and soon.

Those questions include why the United States must play the role of world policeman, whether NATO’s mission is obsolete, why the U.S. always pursues “regime change” when the results – in Iraq, Libya, Ukraine, Syria, etc. – are a “disaster,” and why Russia has been made into an enemy.

Bandow has praised Trump’s independence from the “neoconservatives and militaristic interventionists who dominate the Republican Party,” while Cohen has argued that “Trump’s questions are fundamental and urgent, but instead of engaging them, his opponents (including President Obama) and the media dismiss the issues he raises about foreign policy as ignorant and dangerous.”

But Dalmia dismissed these “Trump-loving peaceniks” for “kidding themselves” because “above all, his militant protectionism will mean more war, not less.” In an article published in *The Week* on May 31, Dalmia maintained that Trump and

those who see some refreshing thinking in his policy statements fail to appreciate the salubrious (and if Dalma's analysis is to be believed, perhaps even miraculous) effect free trade has had on international relations since the end of the Second World War.

The story, as told by Dalma, is by-now familiar: World War II was brought about, in part, because European nations took refuge in mercantilist trade policies in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Today, it is virtually impossible imagining, say, France going to war with Germany. Why so?

According to Dalma's ahistoric piece of sophistry, prior to WWII "military conflict was practically *de rigueur* in Europe." (It wasn't. Between 1871- with the end of the Franco-Prussian war – and 1914 the peace was largely kept on the continent but for a brief Russian-Turkish war in 1877. But never mind.)

What caused this supposedly momentous change in the politics of the continent after World War II? Dalma tell us that it wasn't "NATO's security guarantee" that "put an end to the great wars of dictators. Trade did. Indeed, the more countries trade and the more partners they trade with, the less likely they are to go to war."

### **Trade Equals Peace?**

This is what is commonly known as the theory of economic interdependence which holds that high levels of trade between countries will inexorably result in global peace and stability. It is said that countries that trade with each other have less motive to fight one another and countries will avoid costly wars that only serve to undermine their mutually beneficially trade relations.

As Dalma puts it: "trade doesn't just eliminate reasons for war, it generates forces of peace: Attacking your trade partner means either destroying your buyers or your supplier or both. Trade gives each side a stake in the other's well being." This, she worries, is lost on Mr. Trump.

This kind of thinking, such as it is, was the regnant ideology in Bill Clinton's Washington and was used with abandon to disguise aggressive geopolitical actions – such as the expansion of NATO eastwards – by couching them in the benevolent rhetoric of neo-liberalism.

In a West Point commencement address in 1997, Clinton claimed that "our security is tied to the stake other nations have in the prosperity of staying free and open and working with others." NATO expansion would, according to Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, help to create a Europe "increasingly united by a shared commitment to open societies and open markets."

From the vantage point of 2016, the increasingly authoritarian nature of the governments in Poland, Hungary and Estonia, to say nothing of the war in Ukraine, have put an end to these grand ambitions.

### **Contrary Facts**

Yet, is there any compelling reason to give credence to Dalma's claim that "the more countries trade and the more partners they trade with, the less likely they are to go to war?" Not really.

To see why, let's examine the years leading up to the First World War. In *The Economic Consequence of the Peace*, John Maynard Keynes opens his account of the Versailles negotiations by describing the situation on the continent as it obtained during the mostly peaceful 45-year period from 1870-1914.

"What an extraordinary episode in the economic progress of man that age was which came to an end in August 1914!" he exclaimed.

What was taking place was nothing less than what the neo-imperialist economist and historian Niall Ferguson has called "the first age of globalization."

Keynes tells us that before the war, an illusion of permanence held sway over the middle and upper European classes, indeed, "the projects and politics of militarism and imperialism, of racial and cultural rivalries ... appeared to exercise almost no influence at all on the ordinary course of social and economic life, *the internationalization of which was nearly complete in practice.*" [emphasis mine]

Still more, according to Keynes, "the interference of frontiers and of tariffs was reduced to a minimum, and not far short of three hundred millions of people lived within the three Empires of Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary ... over this great area there was an almost absolute security of property and of person." Keynes observed that "the statistics of economic interdependence of Germany and her neighbors are overwhelming."

Sounds like a free trader's paradise, one which Dalima and the rest of Washington's neoliberal cheerleaders would happily approve. And yet, by August 1914, the war came. Trade was no match for the toxic brew of nationalism and populism unleashed by an assassination in Sarajevo.

Nevertheless, while the idea that free trade paves the way for peaceful inter-state relations is wholly unsupported by the historical record, it remains oddly pervasive over a century after the commencement of the Great War. Even worse, it becomes the trusted panacea that prevents a critical examination of other foreign policy illusions that could be laying the groundwork for another war.

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## Chavismo's Sturdy Legacy

**Exclusive:** Right-wing parties are staging a comeback in Latin America, with the most dramatic victory in Venezuela's parliamentary elections. Yet, despite troubled leftist regimes facing weak economies and corruption charges, their social reforms have slashed poverty and appear safe for now, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

A string of recent electoral and political setbacks for Latin American leftist governments brought about by voter fatigue and an acute economic crisis is swinging the regional political pendulum in a revisionist direction with some analysts foreseeing a return to "free market" neoliberalism. But reversing a generation of social gains for the poor will not be easy or likely.

On Nov. 23, 2015, Argentines elected center-right Mauricio Macri as president, replacing the 12-year Peronista regime led by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. But the sharpest blow to the Left came in Venezuela on Dec. 6, when Chavismo, the most radical of the so-called Pink Tide regional movements, suffered its first electoral defeat in 16 years and a massive one at that when the opposition won an absolute majority in parliamentary elections.

In Brazil, the center-left regime that came to power in 2003 is fighting a recession and a string of corruption scandals that are raising popular and congressional pressures on President Dilma Rousseff to step down. Even Ecuador's charismatic President Rafael Correa is facing increasing opposition, although like his ally, Bolivian President Evo Morales, he is not up for election in the near-term.

But these reversals do not mark the Pink Tide's end, nor a return to the infamous neoliberal era of last century that deepened economic inequality and contributed to harsh political repression. Indeed, the decade-and-a-half pendulum swing to the left started slowing years ago and is now clearly moving in the opposite direction. But the new Latin American Right will be hesitant to reintroduce failed economic policies from the 1990s that ended up empowering the

Left.

No doubt, the right-wing political movements will be more Wall Street friendly and challenge policies that have institutionally handicapped them, such as appointments to the courts and limits on press freedoms. But the Right lacks the political mandate to undo years of economic devolution from the old concentrations of wealth toward a more equitable sharing of the region's riches. Social gains that have spread throughout the region, even into countries ruled by the Right such as Colombia, would be hard to take away, even if trends toward greater equality stall.

As for the Left, some setbacks can be blamed on its own mismanagement and corruption, which along with the global economic crisis and for Venezuela the drop in oil prices, fed popular discontent. The electoral reversals could prompt a needed period focused on correcting mistakes and regaining the confidence of the citizens.

### **Chavismo Legacy**

The legacy of the populist Left movements in Latin America which started in Venezuela when Hugo ChÁvez came to power in 1999 and spread in other forms to Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, El Salvador and a few Caribbean countries is the improved welfare of millions of citizens who had been confronting some of the greatest inequality on earth.

Under populist reforms, poverty was more than halved and social services, namely education and health, improved vastly. The middle class in Latin America grew more than 50 percent since 2003, according to the World Bank, benefiting from a commodity-price boom and more equitable distribution of wealth.

Government institutions have become more stable and political violence which once made Latin America infamous for "disappearances" and "death squads" fell to historically low levels.

Geopolitically, the region grew more independent from U.S. dominance and wrestled back some control over its fiscal affairs. Even in countries that resisted the leftist ascent, such as Colombia, social investment reached historic highs.

But not all was good. Money was squandered on corruption and inefficient schemes sought by "client" groups. Authoritarianism and political polarization increased over the years. When oil and other commodity prices started falling, political capital also was drained away.

In the case of Venezuela, ChÁvez's death in 2013 left behind a mismanaged



economy that continued to sink under the government of his successor, the far-less charismatic Nicolás Maduro. The economy contracted around 10 percent in 2015, the biggest decline in the world; oil production and incomes tumbled; shortages of food and consumer goods became widespread; inflation soared into four digits; and foreign investment, even from close friends like China, evaporated.

Maduro was unable to assert his authority, even within Chavismo itself. While jailing opposition figures who were accused of coup plotting, he wavered in his timid efforts to reform the economy to alleviate the suffering of his own followers. While it's true the country faced "an economic war" from internal and external opponents of its socialist policies, the fact remains that Chavismo was all but paralyzed.

Venezuela's political stalemate also is far from over. Maduro is seeking to block the newly formed parliament, threatening an escalating institutional tit-for-tat that will deepen the crisis. The opposition too is seeking to undo the firm grip of Chavismo on the country's institution. The standoff between Chavistas and the opposition is fluid and could worsen to eventually invite a coup from one of the sides.

But even in the context of extreme political polarization, social policies have not been threatened, and with ample Chavista support still among Venezuela's poor and Maduro's term running until 2019, the opposition will likely target macroeconomic policy and legal reforms as its first priorities.

In Argentina, Macri has shown his willingness to take on Peronismo, resorting to some of the same unilateral policies and bypassing Congress that he criticized Fernández for doing. His government will seek to access international financial markets that his predecessor shunned, and he has already removed some export taxes, foreign exchange controls, and moved to attract foreign capital. But again, there is no sign yet he will undo the social policy of Peronismo.

In regional powerhouse Brazil, Rousseff will more than likely survive the impeachment attempts by the opposition over corruption scandals involving some of her closest aides. In fact, her mentor and predecessor Lula da Silva has come to her rescue and is rumored to be planning a comeback for 2018.

But in no case are Brazil's social policies at risk, a reality underlined by the fact that not even Rousseff has been able to introduce the kind of unpopular cuts in programs that some financial advisers say are needed to jumpstart the sputtering economy.

And, while not Chavista or populist, Uruguay and Chile have developed their own

socialist strategies even while defending more “free-market” economic policies; Peru and Colombia, while even more market-friendly and governed by the Right, are using their economic growth, even amid the commodity slump, to integrate their largely impoverished populations more fully into their economies.

Still, times are tough for Latin America which saw the year ending with an economic contraction of 0.9 percent, a downturn particularly acute in South America as the Brazilian and Venezuelan economies tanked.

In 2016, the economy is expected to be flat regionally, but contract more than 2 percent in South America, according to the World Bank. Of the large economies, Colombia, Peru and Chile will fare better than Brazil and most notably Venezuela. Argentina will grow marginally.

The incoming right-wing leaders will have to deliver meaningful economic turnarounds, without hurting social policies, to convince citizens they are a better alternative to Chavistas, Peronistas, Lulistas and others on the Left.

The economic hardships could spark more instability in the region, especially if Chavismo implodes in Venezuela and the Right overplays its hand. But Latin America’s transformation over the past 15 years has created an opportunity for a more mature region to leave its violent past behind and to address its challenges through more peaceful political means.

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## Pope Francis’ Appeal for the Future

Pope Francis is pleading for world leaders to defend the rights of mankind and the future of nature against the power of corporations and the pillage of “free market” dogma, a warning about the planet’s survival that vested political and media interests reject out of hand, writes Daniel C. Maguire.

By Daniel C. Maguire

The Right has no applause for Pope Francis’s powerful encyclical *Laudato Si* (See, for example, David Brooks’s June 23 [column](#)) What the pope sees and his conservative critics do not is that the world economy is in crash mode, an accelerating train hurtling down the track and ignoring all the signs that say

## Bridge Out Ahead.

The instinct for self-preservation is strong: but in the human species, it seems, not strong enough. Like any good preacher, Francis tries to stir hope as he calls for radical reforms and the reforms he calls for *are* radical but the shrill of despair keeps peeking out at the brim of his Jeremiad.

At no point in this eloquent *cri de coeur* is the pope playing Pollyanna, but at times he seems close to Cassandra who was blessed with the knowledge of the future but cursed with the realization that no one will believe her.

The oceans with their coral treasures and rich animal life are dying of acidity and poison. The pope asks: "Who turned the wonder-world of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?" Arctic ice is in a death spiral and ice sheets are melting in Greenland as well as in the Himalayan-Tibetan glacier that provides water to hundreds of millions. The portents are nightmarish.

The governments of low-lying nations states like Tuvalu and Maldives have plans in place to remove their entire populations. To where? Topsoil and rainforests are perishing as we turn up the heat. We have double-based the planet with CO2 and we are near to passing or have passed some tipping points in the "big melt" where human efforts to stay catastrophic results will avail nothing. Agricultural scientists calculate that for every degree Celsius that temperature rises, wheat yields drop 10 percent in the earth's hotter midriff.

Clive Ponting notes grimly: "About 40 million people die every year from hunger and related diseases, equivalent to 300 Jumbo jet crashes every day, with half of the passengers being children."

The Pope sees all this and cries ***crisis!*** The neoliberals, drunk on our 300 years of nature-rape, insist we are doing fine. Minor tinkering like carbon credits will do all that we need but the overall system is fine, indeed sacrosanct. Beyond that, conservative critics complain that Francis has no practical alternative vision to the status quo he criticizes. Nonsense! He has an alternative vision replete with practical details that the Right finds abhorrent.

## The Alternative Vision

The two dirtiest words in the neoliberal lexicon are *redistribution* and *regulation* and the pope repeatedly calls for both. Indeed he calls for *regulation* on a "global" scale by a supranational authority, "a true world political authority," a concept tribal nationalism cannot abide.

He addresses governments and those gargantuan corporations that roam the planet like rogue behemoths; their legitimacy depends on their commitment to social and distributive justice. He mocks the self-serving naivete that says “the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth.” He scores the “numbing of conscience and tendentious analyses” that ignore the “excluded” poor, the expendables, “the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people.”

As Eduardo Galeano says, the reigning economic system vomits out the poor. The nub of the Pope’s message is: the poor need nourishment and it is murder for greedy hyper-accumulators to deprive them of it.

### **Redefining Social Life**

Government, by definition is *the prime caretaker of the common good*. Francis redefines the “common good” to include the rest of nature, animals, and future generations. He *conscientizes* basic concepts like “development” and “progress” to encompass the well being of nature and future citizens of the earth. He forcefully redefines the most morally pregnant word in our vocabulary ***owning***.

There is no *absolute* ownership, he says; *owning* imports *owing*. There is a “social mortgage” on everything we own.

As Warren Buffet says, he could not have built his wealth in the Gobi desert. We *receive* from society more than we ever *contribute*. We owe back: *taxes are not evil* but are essential forms of social and distributive justice to repay part of that debt.

Francis condemns the speculative financial games played by the rich and the accumulation of “virtual wealth.” This casino economy is divorced from “the real economy.” It lacks contact with flesh and blood and soil.

As Nicholas Fargnoli says, it’s not capitalism; it is “greedalism.” And as Thomas Piketty has shown, this form of capitalist economy bleeds inequality. Pope Francis calls the dominant form of capitalism “structurally perverse.”

Are all these the words of an innocent impractical idealist? Hardly. What the Pope offers is what Franklin Delano Roosevelt late in his life said we need badly: an Economic Bill of Rights. Such rights-talk has to get down to facts and the Pope does. Francis calls for “steady employment for everyone, no matter the limited interests of business and dubious economic reasoning.”

As Economist Alice Rivlin says: “It does not seem, from an analytical point of view, that there is any magic number below which we cannot push unemployment. It

is a question of the will and of choosing the right mix of politics." It is a question, the Pope says, of ethics.

The practical wisdom of this encyclical talks details: we need "small scale food productions systems ... using a modest amount of land and producing less waste." We need to break the power of monopolistic seed providers, not mentioning Monsanto by name but referring to it and other "oligarchies."

People need to be free of noise, overcrowding, lack of safety, poor quality food. The right to clean water is a "human right," not a consumer item for those who can afford it. "Saving banks at any cost, making the public pay the price" is immoral as is the corporate love of socializing costs while privatizing profits.

None of the needed changes will occur without public pressure, including boycotts since purchasing is a moral act. A more attentive and passionate and less compromised press is needed to call constant attention to the ongoing wrecking of the earth. This Pope hits all of that and more.

### **Where the Pope Fails**

Pope Francis has a problem with women and it bedevils this encyclical. While citing the various groups who are exploited the Pope does not call special attention to the worldwide sexist exploitation of women and girls.

Moreover, he insists that "concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion." In so saying he insults the millions of women who end their pregnancies for reasons they perceive as serious. A blanket condemnation of all these choice by women is wrong and even violates Thomas Aquinas's insistence that "human actions are good or bad *according to the circumstances.*" This sorry part of the encyclical is a lamentable remnant of long-tenured woman-free Catholic ethics.

The Pope should realize that there is not a single topic he discusses in this otherwise marvelous encyclical that is not impacted by overpopulation. Every four and a half days a million people are added to our planet, most of those in the poor world. Yet, seemingly deaf to the limits of this planet, Francis says "demographic growth is fully compatible with an integral and shared development."

As biologist Harold Dorn says, no species can reproduce without limit: "There are two biological checks upon a rapid increase in numbers, a high mortality and a low fertility. Unlike other biological organisms [humans] can choose which of these check shall be applied but one of them must be." Otherwise, famine and disease will do it for us and have already begun to do so.

## On the Art of Looking

Pope Francis in this encyclical makes a point that is often missed. There is an inexorable link between aesthetics and ethics. He stresses that the disenchanted cannot save and serve this good earth. He repeatedly urges that we open our wizened hearts to the beauty of this blessed plot. A human spirit that is not alive to the splendor of life, to its poetry and its art, is ill fitted to do earth ethics.

Curious as it may seem, the Pope's stress on aesthetics recalled to me the witness of my son, already terminally ill, when he was around five years old. Danny was severely retarded by Hunter's Syndrome and would die at age ten. I took him one day to see the lovely lagune near our home which is also a kind of bird sanctuary.

I had passed this scene regularly on my way to Marquette University, thinking serious thought to be sure, but not really looking. When I first took Danny there, he took one look at the sparkling lagoon waters and the mallards and other water fowl bedecked in lovely colors. He grabbed my leg excitedly and shouted: "Daddy, look! Daddy look!!"

This little boy with blighted mind but exquisite affections was retarded but not blasphemous. He was stunned at the beauty of the scene, and he begged me to "look." In his eulogy, I said that that one word "look" was Danny's valedictory to the world, a world more retarded than he in the art of looking and relishing and rejoicing in the gift we have received on this privileged planet.

That too is the heart of the Pope's plaintive appeal. Policy without ecstasy will be barren and ineffectual.

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## Spain's Challenge to Austerity

Though the anti-austerity protests in Greece have grabbed most of the international attention, a similar movement rejecting neo-liberal economics and challenging the traditional

political elites has emerged in the much larger nation of Spain, as Danny Schechter observed during a recent visit.

By Danny Schechter

June 18, 2011

Spain is justly proud of the Paella, a distinctive dish that mixes diverse vegetables or seafood into a tasty fusion of delectability.

They have now created a political version in the form of Tahrir Square-type encampment in Madrid's Puerta del Sol where a diverse mix of activists old, young, male, female, disabled, immigrant (including activists from Western Sahara) have created a beachhead for what many say is the closest this country has come to a popular and distinctive revolutionary movement since the 1930s.

It's been a month now since Real Democracy Now!, a grassroots "platform," began a march that initially attracted only a relative handful of activists. However, by the time it reached the shopping district at Puerta del Sol, it had swelled to over 25,000, surprising its organizers, participants and politicians from the two major parties.

This march turned into a movement when many of its supporters decided to stay in the square, no doubt inspired by events in Egypt.

In Cairo, the vast multitudes agreed on one demand, Mubarak Must Go, though its causes, like those in Spain, were later traced to a collapsing economy and mass joblessness among the young. In both countries, the protests also were driven by social media and then spread to other cities.

In Spain, the movement became known as "#spanishrevolution" after the Twitter hash-tag used to spread news, pictures and footage of the revolt. The marchers were dubbed "indignados" (The Indignant.)

Activist/writer Pablo Ouziel articulated the feeling, "Amidst local and regional election campaigns, with the banners of the different political parties plastered across the country's streets, people are saying 'enough!'"

"Disillusioned youth, unemployed, pensioners, students, Immigrants and other disenfranchised groups have emulated their brothers in the Arab world and are now demanding a voice – demanding an opportunity to live with dignity."

In Spain, the activists said they were expressing "indignation" with their country's economy and the parasitic nature of its two main political parties, the Socialists (PSOE) and the Center Right People's Party (PP), which carried on business as usual in a predictable dance of mutual bashing and few new ideas while markets melted down.

They also denounced corruption demanding fair housing, jobs, and a more responsive government.

But they had moved beyond electoral politics creating a liberated village with tents and makeshift structures. They had no leaders and didn't want any. They practiced a form of consensus, backed by small d democratic decision-making.

It reminded me of what I read of utopian communities in which “the people” run the show. Soon, the spirit of what they are doing and asking for resonated in more than 160 cities and towns.

I got to Madrid a month after this May 15<sup>th</sup> movement started and almost by accident.

On my way to South Africa, I flew the Spanish carrier Iberia only to discover I would have a 12-hour layover. Since I was going through Madrid, my revolutionary tourism gene mandated me to hop on the marvelous Madrid Metro, and three changes later surface face to face with the revolution even if the weather seemed well over 90 degrees.

Yes, there was plenty of sol on hand. Some of the activists, like Liam who hails from Ireland, were slathered with suntan lotion because of the afternoon rays. “We are all fried,” he told me.

Although many in the media have already written this movement’s obituary, it seems to keep chugging along, almost amoeba-like, decentralizing, going deeper by organizing popular assemblies in neighborhoods throughout the city. They have several committees working on a program for what they will fight for. Many are common-sense ideas.

While Puerta del Sol still functions as their public base, the protesters already have deemphasized its importance by spreading out, almost block by block.

On the day I was there, a small contingent left the square to stop an eviction and was successful in confronting a landlord and the local bank.

The “indignatos” exercise an enormous amount of moral authority as they talk about issues in personal ways, free of political rhetoric and bombast. They politicize by example, not by throwing slogans around. They act in a post-partisan manner.

This approach seems to make sense to many who see their society in crisis with politicians blaming each other. In contrast, the May 15<sup>th</sup> movement encourages citizens to voice their grievances and act on their own behalf.

The “indignados” tend to think like anarchists and talk in terms of self-management, seeing it as a principle of political economy.

They are very clear about not wanting to replace one conventional hierarchal party with another. They are nervous about grooming or projecting leaders even as one activist told me that rule by consensus can be excruciatingly slow and subject to obstructionist tactics by a few who can hold the majority hostage.

“We have had people praise us for standing up,” Liam told me, “We tell them not to put their faith in us either but to get involved in the process of change. We can’t do it for them.”

Much of the Spanish press seems ready to pronounce the movement a failure even as the country’s economy continues in free-fall. But one newspaper, called Diagonal, reports on the movement’s every activity. Activists also use social media and blogs.

When a local newspaper sampled public opinion, it found many voters estranged from their traditional political parties and sympathetic to the idealism and energy of the protests. The movement’s very presence seems to be politicizing people by starting a discussion of



political alternatives.

Many Spaniards were open to the new movement's style and interactive discourse. Bernarda said, "democracy is really bad here. There are two parties but no one really likes either one."

Juan said, "I think it's very interesting that people from different social classes and different groups are joining together."

Cesar agreed, "Everyone's hoping this will not disappear because it is the spark of change."

Juan added, "I am really proud of all of us."

My language skills limited my access to Spanish speakers, but I did talk with David Marty, a lawyer by training, a teacher by necessity and a writer by choice. He sees the movement spreading all across Europe.

"We need a new approach, he says, singing the praises of May 15<sup>th</sup> bottom-up, participatory approach.

What I found significant is that he was not a man of the Left. Both his father and grandfather were policemen. His dad won his spurs as a member of the French CRS unity fighting protesters during May-June 1968 when Paris was a battleground.

Now, his son writes for Z Magazine and contributes ideas for what changes the protest movement should seek.

Like many in M-15, he is a staunch critic of neo-liberalism, policies that both major parties embrace

As we sat in the Square as its distinctive clock tower, struck six, I listened to more speculation laced with hope. No one can predict this movement's future with any certainty, but its active core seems to agree that it has already done more than they ever imagined.

Writes Ouziel, "Spain is finally re-embracing its radical past, its popular movements, its anarcho-syndicalist traditions and its republican dreams. Crushed by Generalissimo Francisco Franco 70 years ago, it seemed that Spanish popular culture would never recover from the void left by a right-wing dictatorship, which exterminated anyone with a dissenting voice; but the 15th of May is the reminder to those in power that Spanish direct democracy is still alive and has finally awakened."

That is the hope at least, that I saw in the Plaza of the Sun.

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