

THE STRATEGIC USE OF HUMOR IN THE SPANISH INDIGNADOS/15M MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT The ubiquity of humor in social life contrasts, however, with the scant attention paid to it by social scientists. In the field of social movements, the significance attained by the study of emotions in the last decades has surprisingly not resulted in a growth in interest in humor. This paper aims to contribute to fill the gap in connection with humor and protest by studying the use of humor in the Spanish *indignados*/15M movement. To do this it focuses on various groups and activities located in Madrid, the epicenter of the protests in 2011. The analysis of the strategic use of humor in four different forms of communication (placards, performances, internal documents and Internet communications) will assess its subversive potential in, among other aspects, the communication of demands, the internal organization of the movement, the recruitment of potential activists and the construction of a collective identity. At the theoretical level, this paper draws attention to the benefits that arise from combining an expressive focus in the analysis of humor with another which sees this as an instrumental action of those involved. Results highlight how the Spanish *indignados* were to a large degree aware of a number of benefits associated with the use of humor that went beyond having fun and, therefore, organized several activities in order to obtain these benefits. At the empirical level, and without losing sight of the international perspective, this paper will allow for an examination of whether the strategic use of humor in the new movement is a new development or whether it rather forms part of a recent trend in the social movement sector in Spain. In this research I will make use of participant observation, analysis of various documents and websites as well as of interviews with key informants.

If the *indignados* are so angry why are they laughing so much? Anyone who visited the Puerta del Sol or any of the other public spaces occupied by the Spanish *indignados* movement might have asked this question. Indeed this seems to be one of the movement's paradoxes, the combination of indignation directed at "the politicians and the bankers" combined with very amusing actions and protests. The media have stressed the element of indignation and this is how the movement has become known internationally, the *indignados*. The label makes reference to the book *Indignez-vous!* by Stéphane Hessel, which some identify as a main source of inspiration for the Spanish protests. The activists, however, prefer to call themselves the 15M movement, in honor of the date that was the starting gun for the movement, May 15th, 2011. Indignation is, without a doubt, a central emotion in the Spanish movement. This paper will try to show the extent to which emotions associated with humor also are.

The gap in knowledge identified some time ago by Hiller (1983) in connection with humor and protest seems to still be largely unfilled. In general, the ubiquity of humor in social life (Martin 2007) contrasts with the scant attention paid to it by social scientists compared to psychologists, philosophers and linguists (Kuipers 2006; Reay 2007). In the field of social movements, the significance attained by the study of emotions in the past two decades (see Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001, 2004) has not resulted in a growth in interest in humor, as indeed it does seem to have done to some extent in more or less related fields such as social history (Hart 2007). Among the few works devoted to humor and protest are those that focus on the subversive potential of humor in

repressive and non-democratic political contexts (e.g., Pi-Sunyer 1977; Brandes 1977; Barker 2001; Kenney 2003; Romanienko 2007; Merziger 2007; Davies 2007; Lewis 2008; Sorensen 2008; Mersal 2011; Oushakine 2012). In any case, the relationship between humor and social protest still suffers from a lack of systematization. Recently there have been some good steps taken in the direction of filling this gap, the volume edited by Hart and Bos (2007) surely being the most important, but there still remains much to be done.

This paper explores the relationship between humor and protest through a study of the use of humor in the Spanish *indignados*/15M movement. To do this it focuses on various groups and activities located in Madrid, the epicenter of the protests in 2011. The guiding research question is: to what degree was humor a merely expressive component in the movement, or can we speak of humor as an instrumental action of those involved? In its answer to this question, the paper nuances the conventional psychological perspective (Apter 1991; Martin 2007) by highlighting how the Spanish *indignados* were to a large degree aware of a number of benefits associated with the use of humor that went beyond having fun and, therefore, organized several activities in order to obtain these benefits. Obviously, this does not mean that the expressive component has disappeared. The paper simply seeks to stress the instrumental component of the humor, which has generally been underestimated in the literature. Some recent work has focused on this, for example, in relation to the increasingly used movement strategy of culture jamming (Wettergren 2009) or creative performances such as those organized by the Raging Grannies,¹ who “grasped the potential of humor to persuade, knowing that it is a far more attractive technique than ranting” (Roy 2007: 159). In any case, the “ideal” character of the instrumental-expressive dimension (Weber 1978) should be noted. The empirical cases are usually located somewhere midway between these two “opposing the ideal types” (Fishman 2009). In this sense, the humor in the 15M movement is no exception.

The paper opens with a brief introduction which serves to relate humor to the study of protest and social movements. There follows a brief discussion of the Weberian distinction between expressive and instrumental action and its application to the area of humor, which will serve to set out the specific theoretical framework of this study. The various uses of humor in four different forms of communication are then analyzed: placards, performances, internal documents and Internet communications. The main findings are summarized in a final section of conclusions.

1. Humor, Protest, and Social Movements

Humor is an eminently social phenomenon, likely to arise in any type of interaction. Overall, humor “refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it” (Martin 2007: 5). Humor is therefore not only a cognitive process

¹ The Raging Grannies are a network of activist groups especially active in Canada and the United States –the first group emerged in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada in 1987- made up of older women, old enough to be considered grandmothers, dressed outlandishly following the stereotype of “older women” who write protest songs mainly on pacifist and environmental issues and sing them in entertaining public performances.

but also an emotional one. In fact, it can be understood as an emotion in itself (for a discussion on this issue, see e.g., Hart 2007). However, some psychologists prefer to distinguish humor from the emotion caused by its perception and which has come to be called humor appreciation (Weisfeld 1993), amusement (Shiota et al. 2004), exhilaration (Ruch 1993) and mirth (Martin 2007). At the same time this emotion, as in general all emotions, has an expressive component, in this case laughter and smiling, which makes it visible to others. The universality of these expressions denotes its innate character. Although each culture defines what matters are liable to be laughed at and when, we all laugh more or less in the same way and can recognize when others are laughing.

Laughter has not been absent from protest. The relationship between humor and social protest is rooted in history, as demonstrated by the work of social historians, historians of mentalities and of popular culture. Hart (2007) highlights four specific forms of this relationship in the past. For centuries, carnivals have symbolized a "world turned upside down" in which, for a limited and known period of time members of the lower classes could express hostility to the ruling oligarchy. The *charivari* were noisy manifestations of discontent by part of the community usually directed toward illegitimate marriages conducted between its members but sometimes, as noted by Tilly (1986), they could lead to political protests against the authorities (see also Thompson 1991: ch. 8). The jesters were the only ones who could publicly criticize the monarch, who showed his absolute power by giving them official protection. Published satire managed to survive censorship by appealing to the popular imagination and avoiding showing explicitly the object of its mockery.

These ritualized forms of expression of discontent predate the emergence of social movements. In their development, these movements have incorporated some of them, adapting to the new context, as in the case of carnival parades and mocking performances, while also innovating new subversive uses for humor. In general, it may be possible to note a trend in the area of social movements of humor becoming increasingly visible and important in the emergence and continuity of mobilization. In fact, humor has been particularly visible in recent cycles of protest, such as those by pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe (e.g., Bruner 2005), the global justice movement emerged at the turn of the millennium (e.g., Flesher Fominaya 2007) and current *indignados* movement both in its Western version (e.g., Grytting 2011) and its non-Western one (e.g., Mersal 2011).

The increasingly close relationship between humor and social protest may be related to the process of additional aestheticization of social movements observed by Tucker (2010). The development of an aesthetic realm of pleasure, play and creativity in which the expression of both alternative visions of society and particular experiences and identities is possible has had important implications for the dynamics of social movements throughout history. However, the transgressive dimension of aesthetic politics has probably become even more prominent in the context of recent challenges to the neoliberal understanding of globalization (Tucker 2010: 11-12). The global justice movement and the recent mobilization of the *indignados* would seem to support this observation. These movements are characterized not only by a specific discourse

but also by a groundbreaking and imaginative style in which fun and laughter seems to play an important role.²

Moreover, the growing presence of humor in social movements also seems to be related to the spread of new information and communication technologies. The impact of technological innovations in the basic organization of the movements has been the subject of an extensive and well-known debate (see, e.g., Reid and Chen 2007; Bennett, Givens and Breunig 2008; Rohlinger and Brown 2009; Tilly and Wood 2009). Without wishing to go into it, it seems reasonable to think that during different periods access to new media has also opened the door to new forms of relationship between humor and protest. For example, the popularization of printed media contributed to the spread of cartoons through engravings, prints, pamphlets and newspapers. Similarly, the Internet and social networks are now a platform with tremendous potential for the development of potentially subversive humorous forms of communication (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010).

2. Humor, An Instrumental or Expressive Action?

The question refers to the classic Weberian typology of social action which distinguishes between “instrumentally rational” (*zweckrational*) and “value-rational” (*wertrational*) actions (Weber 1978: 24-5). According to Weber, both forms of action are rational and deliberately planned (in contrast to non-rational social action in any of its forms, affectual or traditional). Instrumentally rational action is “determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as ‘conditions’ or ‘means’ for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends”. Value-rational action is “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently from its prospects of success”. The former is instrumentally rational in respect to the end, the means, and the secondary results –being all rationally taken into account and weighed– while the latter is instrumentally rational only in respect to the choice of means. In this sense, the meaning of the value-rational action “does not lie in the achievement of a result ulterior to it, but in carrying out the specific type of action for its own sake.”

Using the typology established by Weber, some early studies on social movements have drawn a distinction between instrumental and expressive movements (see, e.g., Gusfield 1963). Instrumental movements are directed toward a change in the environment (for example, the implementation of a policy) while for the expressive movements change would take place in the activists themselves, making participation into a goal in itself (see Klandermans 2004). Similarly, the instrumental-expressive dimension has been applied to the activities carried out by activists within social movements and the motivations that lead individuals to participate in them. However, when we speak of the instrumental-expressive dimension it should be clear that we refer to ideal types of social action since, as Weber himself recognized, “it would be very unusual to find concrete cases of action, especially of social action, which were oriented *only* in one or another of these ways” (1978: 26, emphasis in original). Thus, social movements unite

² In the case of the global justice movement, Shepard (2011) relates what he calls the “tragicomic turn” to the arrival of a new generation of activists (see also Boyd 2002).

instrumental and expressive elements within themselves (Jenkins 1983), and their relative weight varies in turn over time (Klandermans 2004). In addition, activities carried out within social movements are partly expressive and partly instrumental (see della Porta and Diani 2006) and the motivations that lead individuals to participate in them are a mixture of instrumental motives and expressive ones (Walgrave, Van Laer, Verhulst and Wouters, n.d.).

In spite of the time that has passed since Weber came up with his typology and the adjustments that have been made to it since, the instrumental-expressive dimension of social action continues to be a source of interesting debates in the social sciences. For example Robert Fishman (2009; see also 2004, forth.) has recently indicated the benefits that arise from combining an instrumental focus in the analysis of social networks with another which sees these networks as goods in themselves:

Whereas some ties are most usefully understood through a prism that emphasizes their placement in extensive network structures (and the role of the ties in promoting social processes such as resource or information flows extending well beyond direct dyadic –that is two-way – connections), other ties are more usefully understood through a prism that emphasizes the intrinsic importance and meaning that participants place on their direct dyadic interactions (Fishman 2009: 76).

The predominant optic through which social ties and their impact have been studied has been the instrumental one which in some ways has led to an excessive degree of attention being paid to cases in which “the goals pursued by participants are internal to the interaction in question and not (as in the opposing case) external resources to which the participants hope to gain access by cultivating the tie” (ibid).

One goal of this paper is to draw attention in the opposite direction to that proposed by Fishman, in this case with regard to the uses of humor in social movements. Traditionally, humor has been understood as an activity whose primary purpose is the fun and entertainment caused by the activity itself. According to psychologist Michael Apter (1991), the playful mental status associated with humor is a paratelic mode, i.e., without a goal external to the action itself. This playful state of mind varies in duration, but is understood as a disruption of a more serious telic state in which the action is directed towards achieving a goal. However, other psychologists do recognize in humorous exchanges an "underlying goal", even if it is unconscious (Martin 2007). They highlight three such goals, which correspond in turn with the main theories on the origin of humor: defusing tension in situations that threaten wellbeing (relief theory), violations of a rationally learned and accepted pattern (incongruity theory) and strengthening the unity of the group by showing a degree of grandeur over the object that is mocked (superiority theory) (see Meyer 2000; Billing 2005). The extent to which the actions and protests of the Spanish *indignados* have succeeded in reaching these and other goals and the degree to which they have been based on a conscious and deliberate strategy will now be assessed.

3. The Various Uses of Humor in the 15M Movement

Linking frames through incongruent slogans

In the context of the 15M movement the use of individually handwritten placards provided a space for the use of the imagination and the display of humor. Some of the participants in the protests brought placards they had written at home while others designed them during the course of the demonstrations. In the case of some protests there were spaces specially set aside for this activity. According to a participant in the demonstration that took place in Barcelona on May 15th, 2011, “There were dozens of white placards on the ground. People were gathered around in a circle, looking on shyly. There were also marker pens on the ground. The idea was that each person would write their own slogan and then we’d all carry them down the street” (Muñoz 2011: 37). It is exactly the do-it-yourself character of the placards that marks a difference with a whole tradition of social activism in which a small group organizes and chooses the slogans for the rest.³ It is thus relatively easy to establish a connection between these expressions and the critique of the representative system made by the *indignados* (“no nos representan” [they don’t represent us] was perhaps the most commonly held heard slogan shouted at the demonstrations). However, with the passage of time some of these slogans have become standardized and lost their spontaneity. In Madrid it has been common to see some activists carrying rucksacks full of placards with these messages which they then distribute among the demonstrators.

Individually handwritten placards had messages which subverted already familiar texts. The texts included poems, advertising slogans, song and film titles, public statements, and the language of signs in public spaces.⁴ The use of this type of message in some way involved a cognitive rupture. This rupture has been mainly examined by the incongruity theory of humor creation, which holds that people laugh when they perceive something –in this case a text– which seems shocking, surprising, unexpected and strange in a way that is not threatening (see Morreall 1983; cf. Veale 2004). In the case which concerns us here, the demonstrators carried out a creative intervention which modified a previously existing text, transforming it into an incongruous text, except if it is understood in a frame different from the original (which might be poetry, publicity, music, political language or the language of daily life). In this case the alternative frame is that of protest. In this way two frames that are consistent in themselves but that normally do not relate to each other and may even be incompatible intervene in the interpretation of the message in a mental process that Koestler (1964) defined as “bisociation”, as a result of which we can appreciate the humorous incongruity (Martin 2007).

³ The DIY ethic became popular among certain British social movements in the 1990s, in particular among radical ecologists and the anti-road movement, though it is also true that it has some precedents in previous cultural forms and movements (postwar pacifism, punk culture, etc.) (see McKay 1996; Wall 1999).

⁴ Poems: e.g., “*Me gusta cuando votas porque estás como ausente*” [I like it when you vote because it is like you are not there], based on the first line of Poem 15 of *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*, [Twenty Poems of Love and One of Desperation] by Pablo Neruda; advertising slogans: e.g., “*Tu banco, y cada día el de más gente*”, a play on words based on the fact that “bank” and “park bench” are represented by the same word in Spanish, in this case the slogan was used in an advertisement for a business in the financial sector; film titles: e.g., “*Rebeldes sin casa*”, [Rebel Without a House], based on the similarity between the words for “house and “cause” in Spanish), song titles (e.g., “Lobby is in the air”); public statements: e.g., “*Espanoles, la política ha muerto*”, [People of Spain, politics have died], a reference to the phrase used by Prime Minister Carlos Arias Navarro on November 20th, 1975, “*Espanoles, Franco ha muerto*”, [People of Spain, Franco has died]; and the language of signs in public spaces: e.g., “*Disculpen las molestias... estamos cambiando el mundo!* [Sorry for the inconvenience... we are changing the world. Examples taken from Minchinela (2011).

The development of witty and humorous messages was not only an individual action and more or less spontaneous but also collective and even organized. The humor was visible in collective banners, such as that carried at the head of a march through the center of Madrid on Sunday June, 24th 2011 with the slogan, *No es una crisis, es que ya no te quiero* [It's not a crisis, it's that I don't love you anymore]. The march brought to an end a particularly emotional weekend in which six marches of activists arrived in Madrid from different parts of Spain after traveling hundreds of kilometers on foot (de la Rubia, 2011). In addition, some activists have organized workshops specifically for the development of collective creativity in the producing of individual or collective banners, in particular for large demonstrations, such as the Global Day of Action on October 15th, 2011 or to mark the first anniversary of the *indignados* movement on May 12th, 2012. These workshops were held in public squares or the social centers which have served as meeting places and provided various resources for the *indignados* movement (see Romanos 2013). Furthermore, as in the case of the earlier global justice movement, the *indignados* enjoyed the support of “creatives” (e.g., publicists and graphic designers) in the creation of humorous banners. These people, using techniques acquired in their professional activities, have altered the cultural codes of capitalism as a form of critique and subversion. This kind of activism will be dealt with in greater depth when the development of techniques of culture jamming on the Internet are examined.

The benefits of doing aerobics before an assembly

The protests also included ironic performances, organized by specific groups. In Madrid one of the most important of these groups was the *Grupo de Teatro 15 de Mayo*. This theatre group was created on May 18th, 2011 on the initiative of a young actress and eventually came to have some thirty members who regularly took part in assemblies. The participants barely knew about each other previously, unlike other groups that also carried out performances (though more dramatic ones) in the *indignados* movement, such as the physical theater group that organized the massive “silent scream” on the night of the May 20th, 2011. Some of the participants in the *Grupo de Teatro* had previous experience in the art of dramatization, and also in protest theater, for example in sessions in the forum theater in Madrid,⁵ The group and its activities suffered a significant decline after the summer of 2011.

There were two particularly noteworthy performances among those put on by the *Grupo de Teatro 15 de Mayo*: the “funeral of democracy” and the “aerobics assembly”. The first of these is already a standard among various social movements including the movement for global justice. The group performed it twice, on May 27th May and June 11th. It consisted of a funeral procession going around the protest led by activists dressed as priests and, behind them, a coffin with containing democracy and a group that mourned its death. The procession had several stops where ironic prayers were said in the name of the rights and freedoms lost. The “aerobics assembly” was also held twice, on the 12th and 19th of June. It took place before the general assembly at the Puerta del Sol, when the camp was still present and the assemblies were massive. A

⁵ Forum theater is a theater technique created by the Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal as part of what he calls his Theatre of the Oppressed. The technique calls for the active and direct intervention of the public.

group of activists dressed in tacky and grotesque gym clothes took over the assembly and after carrying out a series of exercises to practice the various gestures used in the assembly developed a ridiculous argument about, for example, how to reform one of their kitchens.

These performances served to cool tempers at moments of great stress caused by the intervention of the police or internal arguments. Such impacts have been analyzed from the perspective of the relief theory, which holds that people experience humor and laugh because they sense that stress is reduced in doing so (Lefcourt 2001; Lefcourt and Martin 1986). The first performance of the funeral of democracy in Madrid coincided with a day of heavy police repression of the *indignados* in Barcelona, an event which attracted the solidarity of those present in other squares where protests were being held. The second performance of it was held on the day of the swearing in of the Mayor of Madrid, an event which caused fierce clashes between activists and the police. The aerobics assembly, for its part, arose from the internal conflicts generated in the camp about the decision to abandon or maintain it. The performance mocked the problems associated with the assembly, e.g., the continual blockages in decision-making and the long debates about the internal structure of the movement and the taking of decisions at its heart. It also showed how a consensus could be arrived at that would include all proposals. As the participants themselves recognized, again the humor resided in incongruence:

The people laughed a lot because they continued to put on things that we did every day, what was our routine at the time, in another context which had nothing to do with it, and which was superficial. Aerobics is a form of exercise, body worship, whatever, but it has nothing to do with thought, it's the complete opposite. So it's very funny.

With the aerobics assembly, the participants had the conscious intention of breaking the tension of the assembly in order to facilitate an emotional connection which would return to the movement its lost creativity:

Suddenly, everything rational relaxed... It's true that often when everything gets stuck in your head, in a kind of a ball, and it's much harder to deal with, it's much more stressful... At the level of the group, in the assemblies, when the people are under such pressure, that sort of energy is anything but creative, absolutely nothing good can come from that. Things do come from it but with a lot of tension... [When] you stay at the rational level you suddenly disconnect from your body and your emotions, it's as if they separate from each other and that's a mistake because they also have things to say. They are like levels which have to be together because they are part of you. So I think that humor finds an easy way to arrive at this connection.⁶

At the same time the members of the *Grupo de Teatro 15 de Mayo* were aware of the difficulties involved in the use of humor to provoke a reaction that would have effects outside the movement: "It has worked as distension, as a tool, but as a form of protest it has to be very acid to have [an impact]. We lacked that, in order to provoke a reaction that would lead to action.... it has to be very acid, very incisive, hurtful even." Thus, the use of humor ran the risk of just being an escape valve, which might inhibit the mobilization into action (Hart 2007; Zijderfeld 1983). Hence the group admitted the importance of not "sweetening" its actions, of trying to be more critical in their form

⁶ This quote and the previous one are taken from an interview with S.B. by E. Romanos in Madrid on April 26th, 2012, Madrid.

and content.⁷ However, to judge by the comment above, its performances rarely reached this point of “acidity”.

The participants also recognize other benefits associated with the putting on of humorous performances, for example, in attracting the attention of the media and reinforcing the identification of the spectators with the movement.⁸ According to Meyer (2000), one of the most important functions of humor in communication is the identification between the communicator and the audience, enhancing speaker credibility and building group cohesiveness (see also Malone 1980; Graham, Papa and Brooks 1992). In the 15M movement the identification function was consciously strengthened in performances in which the members of the group laughed at themselves through the exaggeration of a situation or a behavior to the point of ridiculousness, in this case the continual blockages in the taking of decisions and the endless discussions. Spectators recognized themselves in the situation or behavior portrayed, which strengthened their capacity for self-criticism (cfr. Stewart and Kreuz 2003).

Searching for another language in internal communication

Humor is also present in internal documents. One of the most notable cases of this were the documents produced by the World Extension Team (WET) of *Acampadasol* [the camp in Puerta del Sol]. This commission was set up in the first days of the camp with the objective of disseminating and coordinating the *indignados* movement at the international level.⁹ On August 17th, 2011, the commission launched the *Proyecto Acta* [Minutes Project], an initiative to draw up the minutes of the commission's meetings in a fun way, as if they were a story incorporating elements of what was going on around them. In general, the names of the participants in the assemblies were substituted for pseudonyms which, as well as preserving their identity, served to create characters in the story.¹⁰

⁷ *Grupo de Teatro 15 de Mayo* minutes, 29 June 2011. Available [http: <https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/171971/teatro-quince-de-mayo/>](https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/171971/teatro-quince-de-mayo/) (accessed 21 May 2012).

⁸ *Grupo de Teatro 15 de Mayo* minutes, 13 June 2011. Available [http: <https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/171971/teatro-quince-de-mayo/>](https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/171971/teatro-quince-de-mayo/) (accessed 21 May 2012).

⁹ The choice of the commission's name is not without humor itself. The acronym WET is a counterpoint to DRY, the acronym for *Democracia Real Ya* (Real Democracy Now), the digital platform created by the movement for the launch of the call for a demonstration on May 15th, 2011, which in time became a social movement organization of the *indignados* movement. With regard to this one member of WET commented, “It's true that we came up with WET with a little bit of malice. In the early weeks those in DRY were overly serious and also they made more of themselves than they should have” M.A., E-mail message to the author, April 23rd, 2012.

¹⁰ The pseudonyms made reference, for example, to the professions of the participants (e.g., Karl Marx, was the pseudonym of a participant who was a philosopher and Marxist, or the Bearded Physicist); parallel activities within the movement (e.g., The Walker, who had participated in the marches which arrived from Madrid, or State Man, from the State Extension Committee); roles acquired within the group (e.g., Welcome Man, who helped with the incorporation of new men into the group, and Minutes Man, who was in charge of actually writing the minutes on that day); or simply the clothes the person was wearing that day (e.g., Hoodie Girl). WET minutes, August 17th - December 14th, 2011. Available at [http: <https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/130782/sol-extension-estatal-e-internacional/>](https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/130782/sol-extension-estatal-e-internacional/) and [<http://actasmadrid.tomalaplaza.net/>](http://actasmadrid.tomalaplaza.net/).

With *Proyecto Acta*, the members of the group consciously sought to use “another language” which would in some way contribute to lowering the costs of activism related to fatigue:

What we want is to be read. What gets read? The stories we are told, stories are read, minutes aren't... It has something to do with the atmosphere created in the committee. Making humor part of your tone, removing the ceremoniousness, the heaviness [from things]... was what made it a committee in which we had fun and where we wanted to be... Getting together wasn't an obligation.¹¹

For four months the initiative allowed other members of the group and other participants in the movement to read the minutes with greater interest. Various experiments in social psychology and communication studies have shown how humor favors the reception of messages, attracting the interest of the audience into the act of communication. Humor often results in a more positive response and, indeed in some way gives credibility to the image of the communicator, thus facilitating future messages being received in a more positive way (Gruner 1970; Markiewicz 1974; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield 1996). The messages exchanged on the WET's mailing list show the positive reception of the initiative. Those on the list speak of the “great emotion” they felt on reading the minutes, describing them as an “extraordinary lyrical exercise”, like a “best-seller [that] captivates right till the end” and the “best of the post-camp 15M movement”.¹² Moreover, the use of humor in the writing of the minutes helped members of the group involve themselves in one of the most boring tasks connected to the minutes, that of writing them. The use of this “another language” contributed to making a game of what at the start would have been seen as a form of work. Thus, the entertainment associated with the game proved useful for group development and the maintaining of organizing efforts (see Shepard 2011).

Proyecto Acta also helped to lower tensions in the commission by providing an opportunity to communicate possible critiques and anger in a less conflictive way. Humor is a form of communication that is particularly useful in situations “in which a more serious and direct mode runs the risk of being too confrontational, potentially embarrassing, or otherwise risky” (Martin 2007: 17; see also Kane, Suls and Tedeschi 1977). It is not only about lowering tensions, such as in the cases mentioned above on the occasion of ironic performances, but also of communicating a criticism without the level of tension rising as a result. In the WET commission one of the sources of tension was, for example, a lack of punctuality, a situation referred to in one of the minutes:

We opened the assembly at 20:52. The scientists of the commission were at the university until 19:00 in order to arrive at Puerta del Sol punctually at 20:00. This delay of an hour led to a fall in production which put us a bit further away from discovering Higgs boson, supersymmetric particles and new discoveries in string theory and black holes with all the benefits for humanity that this would involved. Ergo... this can't continue to happen.¹³

Finally, *Proyecto Acta* served to reinforce the internal cohesion of the commission through jokes that made use of codes shared among its members. These codes were sometimes used to ridicule the actions or position of rival external actors (for example,

¹¹ E.Romanos's telephone interview with C. (8 April 2012).

¹² E-mail messages, September 3rd and 6th, December 1st and 2nd, 2011, WET mailing list.

¹³ WET minutes, 16 November 2011. Available [http: <https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/130782/sol-extension-estatal-e-internacional/>](http://n-1.cc/pg/groups/130782/sol-extension-estatal-e-internacional/) (accessed 7 March 2012).

the police) and surely more importantly, groups within the movement with which members of WET had disagreements. Noteworthy among these was the “Long-term policy” commission whose revolutionary inclinations were mocked as being typical of *illuminati*. The jokes included, for example, avoiding the expression “long-term” in the minutes.¹⁴ In this regard it is interesting to note that these jokes were among the most commented on and best received on the WET mailing list.¹⁵ According to Billing (2005), ridicule is the primary use of humor, though it has not been one of the most studied (unlike benign humor) (see also Obadare 2009). The superiority theory of humor creation holds that “people laugh outwardly or inwardly at others because they feel some sort of triumph over them or feel superior in some way to them” (Meyer 2000: 314; see also Gruner 1997; Zillmann 1983). By clarifying the identity of those who are different and hostile, and clarifying what makes them different and hostile (often the subject of mockery), group members in turn strengthen their collective identity and promote internal relations. Obviously, the cost of this form of humor is the distancing of those not related to the group. This is one of the most visible contradictory interpersonal functions of humor: it improves social cohesion but excludes individuals from outside the group. Not only that, but to some degree it also makes difficult the incorporation of new members who may not share the codes created within the group.

The minutes were not the only documents written by the WET commission open to the use of humor. On December 19th, 2011, the members of the commission published a statement on the Internet in which they declared themselves to be on strike. The document is not funny in itself but the action of going on strike was. As the activists themselves recognized in this case they made deliberate use of incongruence to make an impact by way of humor, “Calling it a strike created a short-circuit that we were looking for... I don’t know whether it is humor or absurdity, the idea of a commission of a camp, with no name and no leader, calling a strike”.¹⁶ The objective was to draw attention to a fundamental problem which the commission members were aware of at that moment, “There is practically no dialogue, no collective construction, no spaces to come together and debate, shake things up and standup to those at the top”.¹⁷ According to the activists, the movement had arrived at this situation of decline due to an excessively narrow understanding of assemblyism, which they proposed to abandon in order to make things work on the basis of trust rather than bureaucracy. In this case the activists used humor to “clarify” their message (Meyer 2000). By calling it a “strike”, the activists encapsulated their views into a catch-all heading, resulting in the clarification of their position. However, as in the case of the minutes, the initiative did not escape strong criticism from a significant sector of the movement.

Creatives and community managers of the world, unite!

Humor can be a particularly useful tool for communication on social networks. For example, Holton and Lewis (2011) have recently showed how the use of humor is

¹⁴ WET minutes, 30 November 2011. Available [http: <http://actasmadrid.tomalaplaza.net/>](http://actasmadrid.tomalaplaza.net/) (accessed 7 March 2012).

¹⁵ E-mail messages, September 6th, 2011, WET mailing list.

¹⁶ E.Romanos’s telephone interview with C. (8 April 2012).

¹⁷ “Extensión Internacional de Sol se declara en huelga – ¿Somos el 99%?”, 19 December 2011. Available [http: <http://madrid.tomalaplaza.net/2011/12/19/>](http://madrid.tomalaplaza.net/2011/12/19/) (accessed 22 May 2012).

positively related to a journalist's level of activity on Twitter, suggesting that journalists who become more accustomed to this social networking site are more apt to adopt its milieu of informality, conversation and humor. To the best of my knowledge, the relationship between humor and the Internet has only been studied with reference to the techniques of "culture jamming". This refers to a symbolic strategy by way of which anti-corporate activists make use of diverse artistic techniques (e.g., appropriation, collage, ironic inversion, juxtaposition) to change the original discourse of corporate advertising by altering corporate symbols (logos, slogans, etc.) visually and thus giving them a new meaning (see Wettergren 2009; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). Among the most common of these tactics are billboard pirating, physical and virtual graffiti and website alteration (Juris 2008).

Culture jamming did not begin with the Internet; the term itself was not coined until 1984 by the San Francisco audio-collage band, Negativland. However, many observers see its precursors as punk music, the Yippies, the Situationist International and the Dada movement. Neither is culture jamming, not even today, a totally Internet-based technique, as it has offline versions. However, as Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010), have pointed out, culture jamming has grown exponentially with the development of information and communication technologies. Thus Adbusters, which is one of the most popular groups of culture jammers, define themselves as "a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to *advance the new social activist movement of the information age*" (Adbusters Media Foundation, n.d.; emphasis mine). The expansion of culture jamming has brought humor with it to social protest. Humor is a central element in culture jamming (Wettergren 2009), and the Internet has facilitated its use in this particular symbolic strategy. Culture-jammers embrace humor while they "credit the Internet for making the creation of ad parodies immeasurably easier and providing a platform to take their campaigns and artistic productions to a much wider and international audience" (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010: 1159; see also Klein 2002; Meikle 2002; Woodside 2001).

The Spanish *indignados* have made use of humor in the techniques of culture jamming, many of these of these applied to communication on the Internet. To do this they have relied on collaboration with so-called "creatives" and "radical community managers". The first group includes all those designers, illustrators and other professionals or experts in advertising and the visual arts who have put their expertise at the service of the movement.¹⁸ For their part, the radical community managers have applied their skills in promoting online content to disseminate the messages and images of the creatives while contributing other techniques brought in from culture jamming such as, for example, the creation of false Twitter accounts which supplanted the identities of certain people and ridiculed the behavior of the police and the authorities. This can be seen as a form of the "identity correction" technique popularized by activists such The Yes Men, who "impersonate corporate and government spokespeople so as to expose

¹⁸ "The fact that emotional appeals have been utilized to sell products and services may have generated certain alienation at the global level and a saturation of the message itself. Let's use this this as an advantage, our product is common sense, asking for sensible things, things which even make us ashamed to have to ask for them, to say that the situation is not sustainable, that it's the people in the square, communication, the agora, the bloc party". Pad of the inter-creatives list 15M, n.d. Available <http://piratepad.net/15mintercreativos/> (accessed July 3rd 2012). Some of their creations can be found here <http://vocesconfutura.tumblr.com/> (accessed July 3rd 2012). With regard to the participation of creatives in the social movements see for example, Doerr and Mattoni (forth.), Mattoni (2012).

their 'true' character and thereby spread anti-capitalist messages" (Firat and Kuryel 2010: 10).

As in the case of other subversive forms of humor, the use of the technique of "identity correction" takes on a sharper edge at moments of high tension. This occurred, for example with *@acampadapolicia* [*@policecamp*] created on August 2nd, after the police cleared the Puerta del Sol of demonstrators, closed off access to the square and used violence against those trying to get in. Some activists started to tweet "as if the police were encamped in the center of the square, with their problems, their celebrations, their demands and necessities". This account received a rapid and positive response. Among the objectives of the account recognized by one of its creators was to counteract the rigidity suffered by the movement: "When the work groups began to form, all those committees, when we started to debate the minimum consensus, whether to stay [in the plaza] or not... things all got very serious." The conscious search for greater resonance was another of the motivations that led this "radical community manager" to participate in the creation of the account:

It's useful for disseminating a lot of information, in a different way, with humor... Laughter produces "I likes" and comments and produces *exponentiality*. The laughter multiplies and you can communicate the same thing with a humorous message as with a serious one but you reach more people.¹⁹

In short, the new technologies seem to strengthen the social functions of humor already mentioned in the context of off-line activities such as the ridiculing of opponents and the non-confrontational dissemination of criticisms, both externally and internally within the movement. As one activist who was particularly active on Twitter pointed, the Internet has also proved to be a specially useful instrument for reducing tension at the heart of the movement, not only at the collective level, but also at the individual level as well: "There were a series of moments which moved me greatly or which angered me and when it came to tweeting them I tried to make a joke that was more or less on the mark but which also helped me process these emotions".²⁰

4. Conclusions

The Spanish *indignados* employed humor in their protests to achieve a series of objectives that went beyond their having fun. To do this they wrote messages on individual and collective placards, organized ironic performances, tried to change the style of communication inside the movement's committees and used techniques of identity correction on the Internet. Among other objectives these initiatives sought to: i) identify problems within and outside the movement and draw the attention of its participants –actual and potential– to them; ii) cool tempers at moments of great stress; iii) cause onlookers to identify with the demands of the movement; iv) lower the costs of activism related to fatigue; v) communicate possible internal anger and criticism in a less dramatic and conflictual way; vi) reinforce internal cohesion; and vii) ridicule opponents. The use of humor had, therefore, a series of specific objectives which went beyond simply having a good time. In general the results of the initiatives have been

¹⁹ Stéphane M. Gueso's interview with Zulo. Available <http://www.15m.cc/2011/12/conversaciones-15mcc-zulo.html> (accessed 15 February 2012).

²⁰ E. Romanos' interview with S.M.G., 17 October 2011, Madrid (available in Romanos 2012).

situated within the orbit of the movement, although sometimes humor has had an impact outside the participants in it. It is thus significant the attention paid to the use of humor in the mainstream media (e.g., Quesada 2011; Vázquez 2011; Klappenbach 2011), unlike what occurred in the case of comparable movements such as the Arab Spring (Mersal 2011). Was the use of humor the result of a conscious, collective and deliberate strategy? It would seem that it was. This is demonstrated by the organizing of workshops to promote imaginative and ironic messages on placards, the groups responsible for organizing the performances explicitly seeking an emotional connection to the public, the development of specific initiatives within the committees, and the application of skills and technical expertise related to advertising and distribution of content on the Internet.

Humor has remained present in the actions of the Spanish *indignados* in spite of the relative decline over time suffered by the movement in terms of participation and social support, which is in some sense an indicator of its importance and centrality for the movement. This paper has focused on certain initiatives carried out in Madrid in the early months of the movement. Later ones include the Facebook page *Humor Indignado 99%*, with almost a quarter of a million “likes” (July, 2012) from “those at the bottom laughing at those at the top”, and the launch of the magazine *Mongolia*, “a satirical magazine with no message whatsoever” whose publishers say on their website that they pursue “with ink, robbers frauds and liars and other fauna who put their own interests and those of the International Monetary Fund before those of the global world”. Its circulation has reached 40,000 copies (García de Blas 2012). Furthermore, at the end of March 2012, culture jammers from various countries met in Barcelona for some “international days of creative activism”, organized by the Enmedio group with the title *Cómo Acabar con el Mal* [How to Put an End to Evil]. The meeting was held with an eye to mobilizations called to mark the first anniversary of the 15M movement.²¹ The activities of the event were directed towards the “99%” of the population and among its objectives were the invention of creative methods of social intervention, form working groups which would carry out specific, short term interventions and equip themselves with creative tools for street and Internet action; all of this to be done with “humor and irony”, in the words of one of the organizers (cited in Simón 2012).

To what degree is humor something new or to what degree does it represent an evolution in the social movement sector in Spain, specifically in Madrid? In her research on the anti-globalization movement in the early 2000s in Madrid, Flesher Fominaya (2007) showed how humor was a key tool by means of which activists integrated new and marginal group members and at the same time conceptualized direct actions whose intended audience was the general public. Humor also facilitated the creation of a new political identity, distinct from that of the institutional left. However, the same research by Flesher Fominaya also stated that the recognition of humor’s potential for subversion in political activism was a relatively new concept in Spanish movement circles in 2007. The various uses to which humor was put by the *indignados* movement that have been gathered together in this paper make it clear that this is not the case anymore. Though not all activists were favorably disposed to the use of humor, its widespread use within the movement –not only in Madrid, but elsewhere- has

²¹Among the participants were John Jordan from Great Britain -one of the founders of Reclaim the Streets!-, the German A.F.R.I.K.A Gruppe, The Illuminator from the USA, the Yomango international group, as well as various Spanish groups.

contributed to the creation of a distinctive style that sets it apart from other movements and forms of collective action, also within the left.

Certain psychologists have indicated how humor helps to present a safe statement of some ambivalence about the self, revealing internal tensions and worries experienced by the person (see Murgatroyd 1991). Many Spanish *indignados* have no problem in acknowledging that they are participating in a movement that is provisional and in a permanent state of construction. In fact, their commitment to deliberative decision-making is based precisely on quality communication which it is hoped will be able to transform individual preferences in pursuit of the common good. The recognition of insecurities and ambivalences through humor may be yet another element which differentiates the current movement from previous more “serious” ones. Although consideration of this point falls beyond the scope of this paper, it may not be excessive to think that perception of a supposed rupture with “typical” protests of the past may have facilitated the participation of people with no history or no recent history of activism in the new movement.

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