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THE CRITICAL STAGE. YOUNG VOICES ON CRUCIAL TOPICS



No. 3

Álvaro Rodríguez Resino

**15-M: From Indignation to Citizens' Action –
A New Agent for Social Change**

It is impossible, at the present moment, to analyse the 15-M movement in all its complexity, for the movement is still alive and changing, still reacting to the events of the current crisis of capitalism both in Spain and internationally.¹ In this paper, I will try to identify a series of key factors from which we can start to understand what is going on in Spain with regard to this social movement. This paper thus extends beyond the exclusively scholarly realm (analysing the movement, evaluating sources, making use of various critical methodologies) to include an evaluation from a personal and collective viewpoint that may be useful for future historical, sociological, anthropological, and psychological assessments or for any scholarly discipline that attempts to study the complex phenomenon of 15-M.

Toward these goals, I will split this article into various sections. In the first section, I will examine the conditions that, in my view, enabled the emergence of 15-M. In the second section, I will lay out some of the developing ideas behind this movement. Finally, in the third section, I will discuss possible future evolutions of this movement.

1. The Origins of 15-M: The Worldwide Crisis of Capitalism and the Emergence of New Protest Movements

It cannot be said that 15-M is a wholly unique and inexplicable movement. Although it is true that, for a great majority of Spanish society and even for many of the protagonists themselves, the extent of the collective energy released by this movement has come as a great surprise, there are specific reasons and events behind this phenomenon, which can be examined and compared. I will first examine the more overarching reasons before looking at specific events.

The reasons behind the emergence of 15-M can be found in the general crisis of the economic, political, institutional, and social systems as a result of the Spanish transition to democracy in the late 1970s. Although the extent of the crisis was not entirely obvious on 15 May 2011, when the protests began, the basic contours of the crisis could still be seen. By mid-2012, when this article was written, those contours had become very clear indeed.

1 The movement was dubbed 15-M after the date that signalled its birth (15 May 2011), and took the form of massive protests across Spain. The sudden apparition and growth of this movement has taken sociologists and political analysts by surprise. Any kind of closed analysis of this living ongoing movement would be fruitless, and I therefore cannot recommend a specific bibliography of it. In spite of this, a large number of papers have already been written about 15-M, and several research projects about this phenomenon are underway at many Spanish and European universities. This paper was written in August 2012, and portions of it may already be outdated by the time of publication due to rapidly changing current events.

The most severe and damaging effects of this crisis stem from the economic realm. Spain has had massive levels of unemployment for several years, and the country's recent economic policy has mired it even further in the crisis. The real estate bubble is of particular importance here, and this factor is inseparable from the overarching international economic bubble that popped in 2007, taking with it millions of jobs and leaving a crippled financial system. This crippled system no longer had the capacity to sustain economic growth, and therefore a grave economic crisis emerged.

Generally speaking, most experts share this analysis – at least those who predicted the crisis of the Spanish economy, such as Juan Torres López,² José Manuel Naredo Pérez,³ and Ricardo Vergés,⁴ among others. These experts, especially José Manuel Naredo Pérez,⁵ emphasised the fact that Spain's economic policies were designed to further the interests of a small financial and industrial class, a group of speculators who never intended to compete on the world market through innovations or build a competitive economy, but were rather betting on the quick and easy profits of the real estate bubble.

Research by Vicenç Navarro,⁶ among others, shows the substantial underdevelopment of the country's welfare policies despite the fact that Spain's is one of the wealthiest economies in Europe. This underdevelopment grew worse due to an economic crisis that has brought massive hardship on the lower-income segments of the population. This in turn further expanded the country's income gap, making Spain one of the EU's most unequal countries in terms of income. This crisis of both the welfare state and society at large was crucial in stirring up the feelings of indignation that gave rise to the mass protests. According to Vicenç Navarro,⁷ this underdevelopment is due to the democratic deficit in Spain, a country still controlled by economic and political oligarchies – successors of the *Franquismo*, the Franco dictatorship that lasted from 1936 to 1975. These oligarchies have effectively managed the country, regardless of which political party – whether the social-liberal *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) or the conservative *Partido Popular* (PP) has been in charge of the government. In this sense, Spain is a paradigmatic example of the democratic emptiness of European institutions, which have been more or less co-opted by the vast influence of financial capital in matters of policy.⁸

2 Cf. Juan Torres López: La crisis de las hipotecas basura. ¿Por qué se cayó todo y no se ha hundido nada?, Madrid 2010.

3 Cf. José Manuel Naredo Pérez: Raíces económicas del deterioro ecológico y social. Más allá de los dogmas, Madrid 2006.

4 Cf. Ricardo Vergés: Cómo sobrevivir a 20 años de política económica, in: Observatorio Inmobiliario y de la Construcción, No. 38, 2009, pp. 53-57.

5 Cf. José Manuel Naredo Pérez: Economía española. Un camino equivocado, in: Sin Permiso, 09.01.2011; <http://www.sinpermiso.info/textos/index.php?id=3831> [21.01.2014]; and *ibid.*: Reino de España. Especulación y caciquismo, in: Sin Permiso, 13.09.2009; <http://www.sinpermiso.info/textos/index.php?id=2746> [21.01.2014].

6 Cf. Vicenç Navarro: El subdesarrollo social de España. Causas y consecuencias, Madrid 2006.

7 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 145-220.

8 Cf. Gerardo Pisarello: Un largo Termidor, Madrid 2011.

In any case, this social and economic crisis has come to undermine the democratic legitimacy of the party system in Spain; this system was born during the Spanish transition to democracy, when flawed policies allowed conservative groups to have an outsized level of influence with regard to their actual demographic representation.⁹ This situation led to economic policies that fed the bubble, and to cuts in social programmes after the bubble burst in 2007. It also fuelled a certain narrative about the crisis that was quickly adopted by government institutions, a narrative that claimed social cuts were inevitable. It was quite painful for the unemployed, for people evicted from their homes, and for workers who saw their rights and lifestyle slowly deteriorate, while the message from the country's supposedly representative institutions went in an entirely different direction by arguing that we could rapidly be rid of the crisis through those cuts. The fact that Spain sunk even deeper into the crisis revealed the clearly ideological nature of that narrative, and also just how serious the crisis had become.

All these factors helped pave the way for 15-M to burst onto the scene. Some months before, a group of activists started sharing their concerns about the economic situation, using Facebook as their tool and creating a restricted-access group named *Plataforma de Coordinación de Grupos Pro-Movilización Ciudadana* (Coordination Platform for Citizens' Pro-Mobilisation Groups). It was this loose grouping of people, who finally renamed themselves *Democracia Real YA!* (Real Democracy NOW!), that summoned citizens to a demonstration on 15 May 2011, the slogan of which was a clear statement of what they thought was happening: "No somos mercancía en manos de políticos y banqueros" (We are not goods in the hands of politicians or bankers).

Democracia Real YA! also had a manifesto with eight basic points:

1. the removal of politicians' privileges,
2. actively fighting against unemployment,
3. the right to have a home,
4. defense of quality public services,
5. control of the banks,
6. a more progressive and fair tax system,
7. defense of the citizens' rights and promotion of participatory democracy,
8. reduction of military expenses.

9 Cf. *Vicenç Navarro*: ¿Nos representan las Cortes?, in: Vnavarro, 04.08.2011; <http://www.vnavarro.org/?p=6044> [21.01.2014].

The *Plataforma de Coordinación de Grupos Pro-Movilización Ciudadana* was defined as being non-labour union and non-political, that is, it was not attached to any of the undermined authorities or forms of political representation in the Spanish democracy. On the contrary, it was introduced as a group of citizens who represented themselves.

The call to action was spread via social media, which led to groups joining in more than 80 cities and towns all over Spain. The 15-M demonstration was a huge success, although nobody expected one day of protests to trigger such a wave of popular indignation, creation, and protest. I will consider this point in more detail below.

What seems clear is that the movement did not come out of the blue. Its initial core consisted largely of members of other social movements, and not merely a random group of angry citizens. It was conceived within the parameters of the anti-globalisation movement, considered in its broadest sense, and included: calls for direct democracy; reports on the financial injustice of capitalism; and promotion of citizen empowerment outside the framework of political parties or labour unions, which were considered ineffectual with regard to their representative capability at the time (another reason why more direct forms of democracy were called for). This is Josep María Antentas' and Esther Vivas' interpretation of events,¹⁰ one that links 15-M to a second wave of anti-globalisation movements. There is no doubt, however, that it also goes beyond that, not only because of 15-M's social support, but also because of its determination to change things, which transcends simple awareness or denunciation and moves into the realm of civil disobedience. There is little doubt that the events in Iceland, Tunisia, and at Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, were of great importance as precedents of citizen-led revolutions, and some of the first members of 15-M encampments say as much. The previous struggles, carried out in small groups, were combined with the frustration of a great majority of the population and a strong initial mobilisation to produce the 15-M demonstrations, an unexpected social explosion.

2. The Explosion of 15-M: Breaking up the Neoliberal Social Hegemony and Creating Citizenship Alternatives to the Crisis

After the 15-M demonstration in Madrid, there were some street incidents between the police and a group of demonstrators. The riot police, famous in Spain for their use of violence, clamped down hard on the activists and resorted to brute force – images of this revealed the level of aggression directed at pedestrians, young people, and even adolescents. There were many random arrests, and a group of about 20 youngsters decided to stay and sleep in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid to demand the release of the prisoners. They were violently removed the following morning, but they were undeterred by this, and the event provoked an indignant reaction on

10 Cf. *Josep María Antentas/Esther Vivas: Planeta indignado. Ocupando el futuro*, Madrid 2012.

social media outlets. Soon, thousands of people were in the square, people who had decided to stay no matter what happened. And, in acts of solidarity, thousands of other people camped out in city and town squares all over Spain. It is important here to consider the emotional impact of all of this. In a series of videos, which I highly recommend watching,¹¹ some of the participants of these first moments of the movement speak of the strong emotional experience of gathering with thousands or tens of thousands of people in the squares to speak out against the current situation. They emphasise how the unshakable decision to hold their ground gave the movement a huge force. It was the beginning of 15-M, whose initial phase was that of the encampments.

Various factors need to be taken into account when considering the movement's initial organisation. First of all, this movement swallowed up the original *Democracia Real YA!* organisation, which was still very new and was quickly reduced to just another actor within the broader movement, important but not decisive. Secondly, every city and town square was organised in its own way, though social media was important for keeping in touch and coordinating all of them in an efficient manner. In the third place, assemblies were the chosen method of organisation, despite their inherent problems.¹² In the fourth place, 15-M was thought of as a non-violent movement, and embraced resistance by means of civil disobedience. Finally, since it was also thought of as an inclusive movement, it did not take part in the electoral game, even though a desire to change the country's course and direct opposition to neoliberal policies kept the various sub-groups united.

The massive attendance and spectacular nature of the protest caught the country's attention, and led to widespread support among the Spanish people, who saw a breath of fresh air in the movement.¹³ The political establishment, which had not expected such a reaction, was taken by surprise. Within the encampments, the work was divided up among commissions, which were in charge of the kitchen and also of discussions about the alternative political, social, and economic methods to be called for – something that created no small amount of controversy. Juan Carlos

11 Cf. 15M.cc YouTube video channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/proyecto15Mcc>.

12 Since many of the assemblies' members had never taken part in political or social movements, there was a certain lack of activism and political culture among some of them. Another problem was that some radical left parties and movements tried to use the 15-M movement for their own purposes, attempting to organise a kind of 'coup d'état' inside this democratic movement by imposing their own points of views and strategies. Both problems – the lack of activism culture among many new members, and the political pressure from outside the assemblies – at times created a kind of paralysis within the assemblies. The assemblies struggled with these issues for several weeks, but the problems were finally able to be resolved. The solution came in the form of new decision-making mechanisms that sought to combine the democratic nature of the movement with the need to avoid manipulation and unnecessary confrontations at the assemblies.

13 A poll conducted in June 2011 revealed that more than 80% of the Spanish population supported the 15-M movement; cf. "El 15M tiene el apoyo de más del 80% de los ciudadanos, sobre todo entre la izquierda, pero un 60% cree que no triunfará", in: Europa Press, 06.06.2011; <http://www.europapress.es/madrid/noticia-15m-tiene-apoyo-mas-80-ciudadanos-todo-izquierda-60-cree-no-triunfara-20110606172146.html> [21.01.2014].

Monedero, a policy expert closely linked to 15-M, has aptly defined this situation as “una gran conversación” (a great conversation).¹⁴ This conversation brought the political debate back to the citizens without any media or institutional restrictions. Older social activists discovered that many young people were enthusiastic to join in the discussions and make social life a decisively political matter. And from this ‘great conversation’ – which identified problems and proposed solutions – new campaigns, actions, and groups emerged within 15-M. Furthermore, groups that predated 15-M, such as the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages),¹⁵ have emerged and used this movement to leverage stronger influence within Spanish society. From this perspective, 15-M is not so much an organised movement itself but rather a melting pot of organised movements, all of which drink from the same fountain and share the same philosophy of action: organisational horizontality; non-violence; direct democracy; and the rejection of traditional modes of action and social representation, such as political parties and labour unions, to create their own means of political participation as citizens. Their objectives may vary, but all of them have one thing in common: the desire to change the current state of affairs, which is a disastrous one for most of us, by fighting the political, economic, and social hegemony of financial capital, and thereby building a much fairer and healthier democracy.

It is important to understand that there are many different opinions within this ‘great conversation’. From 15-M’s very beginning, different factions with different interests concerning the depth of change and how radical that change should be had heated debates, sometimes to the point of shouting. This is something that still characterises the movement, and is in fact a part of its richness: far from damaging or destroying it, in my opinion such lively debates allow the movement to maintain its influence over political and social aspects of Spanish life.

From our current standpoint in 2012, one year after the movement’s inception, it is possible to discern three separate stages in 15-M’s development – two that are already in the past, plus the third stage, which is ongoing.

The first stage runs from 15 May to 15 October 2011, and is marked by the expansion of 15-M into Spain’s political and social life, and by the movement’s internationalisation. After 15 May 2011, the demonstrators were determined not to allow the 15-M protests and their impact to become a simple one-time occurrence. In urgent processes in all the various town squares, a calendar of mobilisations was agreed on, and then carried out. This calendar included several main groups of events. The first were the joint demonstrations on 19 June 2011 against the Euro Agreement – these demonstrations were an indication that 15-M had come to stay. The second were the so-called ‘marches of outrage’ in July, which started in various

14 Monedero, Juan Carlos: El 15-M. Una pregunta, no una respuesta, in: Comiendo Tierra, 06.11.2011; <http://www.comiendotierra.es/2011/11/06/el-15-m-una-pregunta-no-una-respuesta> [21.01.2014].

15 For more information, cf. <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.wordpress.com>.

parts of Spain and converged in Madrid. And the third was a process of internationalisation which was helped by the emergence of the Occupy movement, born in the USA and other parts of the world, and imitating the Arab Spring and 15-M. The first stage's final stop was the massive international demonstrations on 15 October 2011, which comprised hundreds of social movements from all across the globe: this signalled the consolidation of 15-M as the new political actor in Spain, one with the ability to mobilise millions of people in a democratic and horizontal way.

Without a doubt, the movement's expansion into local neighbourhoods in many cities – in which assemblies of neighbours were created (assemblies that remain active to this day) – was one key factor behind its effectiveness. A second key factor was the fundamental work from the movement's base that aimed at creating a popular programme of action and reaction that singled out neoliberalism and its social, political, and economic effects as the main originator of the crisis. A third key factor was the emergence of new movements, as well as the added impetus provided by pre-existing movements; these included: the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*; various campaigns against the privatisation of the savings banks; and campaigns launched by those affected by the banks' financial improprieties. Finally, 15-M was able to take advantage of the mass media to publish news stories that highlighted citizen action and various solutions proposed by citizens. The role of social media was undoubtedly crucial here, but a more in-depth analysis of that phenomenon is not within the scope of this paper.

The second stage of 15-M's development runs from 15 October 2011 to 12 May 2012 (12-M), with the conservative PP party's electoral victory and their gaining an absolute majority within the Spanish legislature, which led to increased cuts to social programmes and a deepening of the crisis. Once the encampments were abandoned, the social movements that supported 15-M worked from the base. Although it was no longer as visible in the mass media as before, 15-M continued to consolidate its work and its contact networks. It also provided motivation for action by other groups, above all labour unions, which called for a general strike against the government's labour reforms. Furthermore, 15-M served as an informal link between labour union members and other newly formed social movements. By this point, the citizenship was becoming more organised, and gaining experience and the ability to react in large numbers.

This stage ended on 12 May 2012 with more global mobilisation, which in Spain meant another massive day of protests in the streets. The surveys conducted at that time indicated broad support (up to 70%) for 15-M in Spanish society,¹⁶ and re-

16 On 19 May 2012, a poll conducted by the prominent Spanish newspaper *El País* revealed continued massive support for 15-M among the population, a full year after its founding; cf. *Josep Lobera*: El 15-M aumenta su apoyo ciudadano, in: *El País*, 20.05.2012; http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2012/05/19/actualidad/1337451774_232068.html [21.01.2014].

vealed just how important the movement had become. 15-M was now the archetype for social struggle, and many citizens were starting to place their hopes in the movement.

The PP government's rapid loss of legitimacy should also be pointed out. They have been unable to react effectively to the crisis, and in their first six months in power had failed to accomplish most of their agenda. It should be noted that the fact that the PP holds an absolute majority in the Spanish legislature has nothing to do with its actual level of social support. The PP succeeded only because the PSOE collapsed: Spain's electoral process promotes a two-party system wherein one party will automatically rise up if the other crumbles. The PP received a large majority of legislature seats with 44.62% of the vote. However, when taking the high level of abstention into account (28.31%), the actual share the PP received was only 31.58%.¹⁷ Furthermore, it managed to win an absolute majority with fewer votes than the PSOE had in the 2008 elections, which resulted in the PSOE receiving only a relative, much less significant majority.¹⁸ This demonstrates that in Spain, right now, there is no direct correlation between electoral results and the social support behind different political options, and that the electoral system is not representative of the popular will. The popular will, in fact, has started to coalesce around 15-M.

The third stage began on 12 May 2012 and is ongoing.¹⁹ It is primarily characterised by the Spanish financial bailout. The crumbling of the Spanish financial system together with the bailout have given rise to an uncertain era. Spanish institutions seem to be losing ever more prestige, with scandals rocking the royal family, the General Council of the Judiciary, and the legislature. In any case, the political, social, and economic crisis is intensifying and congealing; and politicians and state institutions, rather than offering effective solutions, are instead showing increasing signs of fatigue. 15-M, on the contrary, with the many different groups that constitute it, is doing great work denouncing and acting against those responsible for the crisis, with large citizen support, and with its emphasis on grass-roots politics.

A recent example of this work is the 15MpaRato campaign, which originated from a group within the movement. This campaign is instigating action against those responsible for the collapse of the new *Bankia* bank, which was led by the elder conservative minister and managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Rodrigo Rato.²⁰ The people in charge of the 15MpaRato campaign were hoping to

17 This value has been calculated as follows: If we add the number of votes for the PP in absolute figures (10,830,693) to the number of abstention in absolute figures (9,710,775), the result is a total of 34,301,332 potential votes (100%). If we relate the number of votes the PP received to this potential total value (100 divided by 34,301,332, multiplied by 10,830,693), the result is 31.58%. For further information, cf. *Gobierno de España/Ministerio del Interior*: Elecciones Generales 2011, 21.11.2011; http://elecciones.mir.es/resultadosgenerales2011/99CG/DCG999999TO_L1.htm [21.01.2014].

18 Cf. *Vicenç Navarro*: Causas y consecuencias del dominio conservador en el sistema electoral español, in: *Vnavarro*, 10.07.2008; <http://www.vnavarro.org/?p=484> [21.01.2014].

19 This article was written in August 2012.

20 For more information, cf. <http://15mparato.wordpress.com>.

raise 15,000 euros through an online fundraiser to help kick-start their efforts. In less than a day, they had collected more than 20,000 euros, and the fundraising website actually crashed due to the massive amount of traffic.²¹

This incredible success is one of many examples of the popular support that 15-M enjoys. Another example is the massive number of signatures collected to change the unfair mortgage law in Spain, carried out by the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*, a campaign that has been quite successful. But we could also mention the campaign against the privatisation of Madrid's water services,²² or the campaign to defend the seashores against real estate speculation.²³ 15-M is producing change and enjoying its first victories – victories that remain small in scope, but that are laying the foundation for future action.

3. The Future of 15-M: A Constituent Movement?

One thing at least is certain: this crisis and the 15-M movement that arose from it are just the beginning. The discrediting of Spain's institutions, the social rejection of politicians as a whole, and the need for a way out that does not adopt the same policies that keep sinking the entire eurozone into ever-deeper mud has indeed paved the way for possible right-wing solutions. However, it has also increased 15-M's ability to act, and transformed it into a constituent movement that can, through social activism, set new rules for the game of governance. The example of Iceland, and to a lesser extent those of Tunisia and Latin America, are reference points for an increasing number of activists who suggest a constituent-led path out of the current crisis by means of both a new constitution and new European policies aimed at making the EU more democratic and less subservient to financial capital.²⁴ In fact, several groups have proposed solutions of this kind, though we have not yet reached the difficult moment in which these proposals have garnered enough support to fully enter the 'great conversation' of 15-M and give rise to concrete action. Nevertheless, I believe this is the solution we need, or at least it seems to be. Whatever the case, the next few months will be critical in determining whether 15-M adopts this more radical path or merely calls for a solution within the current institutional framework. News emerges periodically concerning this central debate, and we will have to pay attention in the coming months.

21 For more information about this campaign, cf. <http://15mparato.wordpress.com>.

22 Cf. <http://www.plataformacontralaprivatizaciondelcyii.org>.

23 Cf. <http://www.ecologistasenaccion.org/article23703.html>.

24 For more information about these movements, cf. <http://coordinadora25s.wordpress.com> and <http://constituyentes.org>.

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About the Author

Dr. Álvaro Rodríguez Resino, born in 1977, is spokesperson for the Spanish grass-roots movement *Democracia Real YA!* (Real Democracy NOW!). He studied history and archaeology, and received his doctorate in 2008. Rodríguez Resino worked as a cultural manager, as a lecturer of history at the Vigo University in Spain, and as an editor of technical and academic books, before serving as director of various cultural heritage projects.

About the Editors

Prof. Dr. Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha, born in 1951, is director of the ZAK | Centre for Cultural and General Studies at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) in Germany, and professor of sociology and cultural studies. Her research focuses on cultural change and globalisation, internationalisation, integration, as well as theory and practice of public science. She is coordinator of the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation, member of the Culture Committee of the German UNESCO Commission, and chairwoman of the Academic Council for Culture and Foreign Policy (WIKa) at the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa). In addition, she is spokeswoman of the KIT competence area 'Technology, Culture, and Society', editor of three scientific book series, and scientific convenor of the Karlsruhe Dialogues, an annual international symposium dedicated to current cultural issues.

Janina Hecht, born in 1983, studied literature, German linguistics, and comparative religious studies in Stuttgart and Tübingen. She spent an internship semester in Tunisia, and is currently conducting research on religious seekers and converts in modern literature. Her research focuses on theories of transculturality; literature and globalisation; as well as modern-day religions. She is a scientific assistant at the ZAK and also works as a freelance editor.

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THE CRITICAL STAGE. YOUNG VOICES ON CRUCIAL TOPICS

Ever since the outbreak of the revolutionary movements that in Europe have come to be known as the “Arab Spring”, diverse forms of protest seem to be on the increase worldwide. At their core, these protests are driven by citizens’ calls for more social participation, more democracy, and – above all – more transparency in individual states. Young people in particular are at the forefront of these protests, as has been exemplified by the Occupy movements in New York, Frankfurt, and elsewhere. A further defining feature is that most of the protesters belong to a well-educated middle class – a middle class that refuses to accept the prevailing social imbalances and the resulting lack of opportunities, most notably with regard to employment.

The international series “The Critical Stage. Young Voices on Crucial Topics” deals with these developments and poses questions such as: Can this growing level of resistance be defined as a homogeneous global phenomenon? Or are these protest movements more regional in nature, and determined by the respective state systems within which they are located? What specific demands can be identified, and how could these demands be incorporated into political decision-making processes? Does the underlying reasoning extend beyond the political sphere to other areas as well?

Designed as an ongoing online publication, “The Critical Stage” aims to bring together the various standpoints of protest movements from around the world. The series gives a voice to representatives from a wide variety of individual movements. Young journalists, film directors, artists, researchers, and members of diverse protest groups share their views on the inequities in many of the world’s political systems, and on the various modes of resistance that are being formed in response to these conditions.