Review

Emotion, protest, democracy: Collective identities in contemporary Spain

Emmy Eklundh

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‘How can we conceive of political subjectivity which has its roots (and expressions) in affect?’ (p. 38). This question is central to Emmy Eklundh’s new book that explores the case of the Indignados and Podemos – an anti-establishment social movement that rose in Spain in 2011 in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and a left-wing party founded in 2014 that claims to be the movement’s ‘principal political expression’ (Iglesias 2015, p. 10). Eklundh describes both as ‘emotional political subjects’, whose identities are constituted by the ‘visceral ties’ that ‘are primarily to be found within the aesthetic, spatial, and silent manifestations of protest’ (p. 11). She argues that such emotional subjects should be fully recognized as proper political actors (pp. xiii, 13, 235–238). The book breaks radically with the rationalistic tradition in social movement theory that goes all the way back to the classical works of Max Weber and Gustave Le Bon. Given that the Indignados had no specific political program, ideology or elected leadership, the classical theory would dismiss them as ‘mad masses’ bound to be manipulated by populist politicians, such as those of Podemos (pp. 23–24).

According to Eklundh, the negative view of emotional political subjects rests on three ideas: (1) the idea of a sharp division between emotion and reason, as well as between affect and signification (pp. 8–10); (2) the idea of political subjects as either rational or emotional, and either vertical (centralized, hierarchical) or horizontal (networked, egalitarian) (pp. 11–12); and (3) the idea of institutionalized politics in which emotions are used mainly as manipulative instruments for voter mobilization by parties unified around rationally determined political agendas (p. 13).

Eklundh challenges all three ideas in the three parts of her book.

In Part I ‘Emotions’ she argues that the most adequate understanding of the Indignados and Podemos is to be sought in Ernesto Laclau’s theory of hegemony. Laclau defined hegemony as the ‘operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification’ (2005, p. 70). The hegemonic operation

constitutes the collective identity of the People in its opposition to the Elite – as these two figure in the populist political rhetoric. The identity of the People is built around the ‘populist demand’. To represent all the diverse demands of multiple individuals and groups that belong to the People, the populist demand must be expressed in terms that are universal. At the same time, to attribute the populist demand to someone, i.e. to differentiate the People from those who are not part of it, the demand must be expressed in terms that are particular. Given the heterogeneity of interests that the populist demand is supposed to represent, there are no rational means to render its universal character in particular terms. Therefore, the People unite around a demand that is formulated not by means of conceptual abstraction and generalization, but by means of an affective investment into particular words and expressions (e.g. the Russian revolutionary slogan ‘peace, land and bread’). The latter is able to represent the will of the People as a whole insofar as they turn into extensionally rich, but intensionally poor empty signifiers (Laclau 2005, pp. 96–97). Eklundh embraces this conception of popular identity because ‘it provides us with a clear framework in which affect is not disjointed from signification, but rather central to it’ (p. 92).

In Part II, ‘Protest’ Eklundh interprets the political identity of the Indignados in line with Laclau’s theory of hegemony, which she supplements with the notion of the visceral. The visceral is distinct both from emotion, traditionally understood as rationalized affect, and from affect, traditionally separated from signification (p. 112). Visceral ties are ‘empty signifiers which are not limited to words, but can also be practices or performances’ (p. 114). They are ‘a new form of hegemony’ that constitutes the unity and collective identity of such political subjects as the Indignados, whose centrality ‘does not have to be confined to traditional political leadership, to a party structure, or even to a common agenda. It can exist merely by reference to the empty signifier...’ (p. 114).

According to Eklundh, the Indignados maintained unity not through ideology but in performance. Chapter 4 describes several forms of ‘unity in the visceral’ that emerged when the practices of protest functioned as empty signifiers, such as ‘unity in the common space’ (e.g. on Puerta del Sol in Madrid, pp. 134–139), ‘unity in silence and noise’ (loud carnivalesque marches vs. the moments when the protesters stood waving their hands in total silence, pp. 139–140), ‘unity in artistic expression’ (collective singing, dancing, theatrical performances, pp. 141–144).

Notably, the Indignados combined performative protest activity with more traditional political meetings where people delivered speeches, shared their particular concerns, and debated policy proposals. However, in Eklundh’s words, ‘the goal with the protest has been to make people feel something, to make them experience a sense of community and not only a cognitive agreement with the causes presented’ (p. 144).

The deliberative practices of the movement were not meant to subordinate the practices that appealed to affect and emotion and vice versa. Thus, the visceral ties

do not stand in opposition to rationality, but, to use Eklundh's own expression, they 'operate in the tension' (p. 116) between rationality and emotion. Likewise, for the Indignados, affect and emotion were not means of constructing an identity that allegedly remains latent in the horizontal ties, until the movement focuses on a concrete political agenda and acquires a vertical dimension. The Indignados case shows that unity and social cohesion are already present in and expressed through the visceral, so, 'visceral modes and repertoires of protest are not *means to an end*' (p. 147, emphasis in original). Thus, the conception of visceral ties 'operates in the tension' between horizontality and verticality, breaking the rigid demarcation between the two. As a result, it 'opens up a space for political subjectivity which lingers in affect and emotions, and does not necessarily transform into stable political demands' (p. 148).

Chapter 5 describes the online version of visceral ties – the virtual ties, which Eklundh reveals by listing the words most frequently used in the comments on the Indignados' social media accounts. The analysis shows a permanent prevalence of the word 'people', which at different times was accompanied by words 'democracy', 'parties', 'money', 'movement'. In Eklundh's interpretation, these changing words functioned as floating signifiers that 'accentuated the fluid and transient nature of hegemony' (p. 162).

In Part III, 'Democracy' the author argues that visceral ties can be found in Podemos. They are present in the party's highly affectively laden discourses and in the investment in the public figure of its leader Pablo Iglesias (pp. 198–203). At the party assemblies, a considerable effort is made to create the feeling of participation of everyone present, for example, by showing the delegates' policy proposals on big screens. These 'performances of participation' are sometimes criticized as a mere spectacle, but, in Eklundh's view, they are 'a perfect example of a visceral practice; hegemony is created through the performative function of a signifier... in this case participation' (p. 203). In addition, the party's massive online activity demonstrates the presence of virtual ties in the obvious prevalence of the words 'podemos' and 'Pablo' (pp. 223–230).

Eklundh emphasizes that in the case of Podemos the use of empty signifiers is intentional. It creates visceral ties to maintain the party's position as the self-proclaimed vanguard of the popular movement started by the Indignados (pp. 208, 213, 218). Nevertheless, Eklundh refrains from claiming that the party is manipulative towards its grass roots supporters. In her view, 'there is a wish [within the party] to recognize the importance of the movement', meaning that 'there is a strong tension here within Podemos, which has not been resolved' (p. 212).

In Conclusion, Eklundh explains that the overall goal of her critique is to 'help us further understand the political implications of the hegemony of rationality, and the exclusionary practices which inevitably follow in its wake', and by doing so, to 'foster a process of renewal, where the mad masses can return to power' (p. 243).

As it operates in the tension between understanding and accepting emotional political subjects, the book offers many valuable ideas to those who wish to engage in the struggle for recognition on their behalf. At the same time, these ideas – especially the conception of visceral ties – significantly further our understanding of how the emotional political subjects are formed.

As a result, I think, Eklundh's book faces us with a further task. We need to understand what kind of politics emotional subjects are able to pursue. To put it bluntly, the most pertinent and largely unaddressed question in the book is, how can emotional political subjects be good at anything other than protest and disruption? In particular, what would emotional political subjects do with the visceral ruptures that tend to emerge between them and their opponents? For instance, until a political party like Podemos establishes a reasonable relationship with its own base, the party's capacity for negotiation and compromise with other political actors is severely diminished. That is because, on the emotional level, every concession to opponents – especially to the establishment – is perceived as a betrayal of the People. However, given the ideological diversity in contemporary liberal democracies, the ability to negotiate and make compromises is crucial for being part of the institutionalized political process. Therefore, while recognizing emotional subjects as powerful political actors that can disrupt pluralistic democracies, we may still remain skeptical of these subjects' ability to deliver positive policy changes.

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