NORMALIZING ACTIVISM AND MARGINALIZING RADICAL YOUTH IN SPAIN’S POST-15M SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Eduard Ballesté

Abstract: In this article I compare the different forms of participation of young anti-capitalists in two post-15M Spanish social movements in Lleida: White Tide and Platform of those Affected by Mortgages. The objective of the article is to analyze how biopolitical normalization processes work within social movements themselves. The article explains the normalization processes that adult activists exercise against young anti-capitalists, and the ways in which young people resist and seek to break with these processes in post-15M movements. All this allows us to understand how this normalization affects current social movements, establishing what is seen to be the ‘correct’ way to be an activist and creating processes of marginalization and censorship of those activists who occupy non-hegemonic social positions and who use other political forms.

Keywords: activism, biopower, direct action, good protester, normalization, post-15M, social movements, youth

In 2011, people of different ages, many of them young, who were disenchanted with the Spanish political model active since the transition to democracy (Fontana 2013) set in motion the 15M anti-austerity movement in an attempt to expand political policy (Candón Mena 2013). Protesting against the lack of political representation for the working and middle classes, the people involved in this movement camped en masse in the squares of most Spanish cities throughout May 2011. They wanted to find new solutions to the crisis beyond austerity and to recover the welfare state (Feixa and Nofre 2013; Fontana 2013; Stiglitz 2012).
It is in this context that the concept of the *indignados* (indignant people) emerged, a term that the protesters adopted to define themselves. They used intentionally peaceful forms of action to avoid being branded as violent either by the media or in public opinion. Likewise, their forms of organization were assembly-based, and they always sought to create discourses that could appeal to as many people as possible. City squares were occupied, and the protesters stayed there until they themselves decided to leave, which was an innovation in protest repertoires (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). In terms of participation, the innovations described made the 15M movement and its practices one of the most victorious, spectacular, and beneficial in the recent history of the country, which led to it becoming hegemonic in the activist field (Doménech 2014; Gerbaudo 2014; Gramsci [1935] 2011; Rodríguez 2016).

The occupation of the squares by the *indignados* lasted for just over a month. During the rest of 2011, the 15M movement continued to be active in the squares through specific actions, demonstrations, and assemblies. However, as the end of that year approached, many of the activists were already focused on creating new and more specific social movements to protest against cutbacks in different social sectors (health, education, social services, etc.), as well as against the effects of the economic crisis and the austerity policies (evictions, reduction of pensions, etc.) (Subirats 2015). From the end of 2011 to early 2012, these new social movements gained strength and prominence compared to the remaining groups and organizations from 15M—a change in protagonism that has been called ‘post-15M’ (Ballesté 2018; Mansilla 2015). These new movements initially appropriated the organizational dynamics and forms of political action of the 15M movement (Fominaya 2015; Pastor 2013).

At the political strategy level, the hegemony of the 15M forms of political activism was not achieved without discussions or tensions. According to Taibo (2013), two souls (the reformist position and rupturist position) co-exist in tension within the 15M movement, “one that is more citizenship-focused (the recently mobilized) and another that is anti-capitalist (alternative social movements rooted in grassroots democracy and self-management)” (Taibo, cited in García-Lamarca 2017: 38). On the one hand, the reformist position, as a hegemonic position, was formed by participants who sought to change the relationships between the market economy, governments, and people’s interests in order to counteract the negative effects of austerity and neoliberalism (Santos and Mendez 2017; Stiglitz 2012). On the other hand, the rupturist position, led by young anti-capitalist activists, among others, sought (sometimes as an utopian goal) to break with neoliberalism and find new forms of social, political, and economic organization, often based on ideas coming from anarchism or communism (Graeber 2011; Santos and Mendes 2017).

The dominance of the reformist soul in the 15M movement was transferred to the post-15M social movements with different consequences. The first
consequence was the loss of youth participation in these new post-15M social movements. The second was that more moderate ‘civic’ or reformist forms of political activism became socially accepted as the ‘good’ ones, as opposed to more radical forms of political activism, such as those carried out by young anti-capitalists. These more radical forms of action were in most cases censored and marginalized by a large number of the adult activists in the social movements who believed that the radical forms would result in greater criminalization in the media, an increase in police repression and legal persecution, and a loss of social support. Elsewhere I have described the rejection of young people’s radical practices by adult activists as creating an understanding of such practices as ‘bad forms’ of protest, as opposed to idealized and acceptable ‘good forms’ of protest (Ballesté 2018).

In short, because 15M was seen as a success at different political and social levels, its forms of activism were used by the post-15M social movements. This success was reflected in the high levels of social sympathy generated by 15M. For example, a June 2011 survey found that 79 percent of respondents thought that the movement was right and 64 percent supported it. In May 2012, the first percentage had only dropped to 69 percent (Metroscopia 2011; Mir García 2016). These non-radical forms of protest were closely related to a broader social understanding of what constitutes ‘good’ citizenship, that is, what is seen as the correct way in which subjects should act in society (Delgado 2016). The triumph of these non-radical forms delimited and marginalized other forms of political activism that had been used previously, especially those that included forms of direct action, including graffiti, occupying bank companies, and anti-capitalist discourses, among others.

Even so, starting in 2011 tensions and disagreements began to develop within different age groups of the post-15M movements regarding efforts to redefine or redraw the lines of accepted forms of actions. External actors (the state, police, media, laws, judges) also played a role in these struggles, influencing the movements themselves and the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of protest.

My objective in this article is develop the concepts of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ protesters as a way of analyzing the different types of activism in post-15M social movements. I do this by exploring how these concepts relate to the two dichotomous positions described above: reformist and rupturist. In other words, I analyze how the two souls defined by Taibo (2013) within 15M have generated two different images of activism in the post-15M movements. The consolidation of this differentiation between the good and the bad activists is not an exclusively internal question of social movements; it is also the product of interactions with other agents, such as journalists, police, and institutional politicians, among others. With these concepts I can observe and explain how normative understandings appear in 15M and post-15M movements that define what constitutes
good and bad forms of protest. This normalization affects social movements themselves because it acts as a form of control that marginalizes those positions and forms of activism that are not considered correct, civic, or effective.

To accomplish this, I compare the participation of young anti-capitalists in two different post-15M Spanish social movements: White Tide (Marea Blanca) and the Platform of those Affected by Mortgages (PAH, Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas). The two movements have operated throughout Spain and have been present in the main cities of the country. White Tide was born during 15M and was growing in importance when 2011 ended. Its fight has focused on reversing austerity policies in the field of public health. Between 2012 and 2016, the movement staged large demonstrations in various Spanish cities and carried out several campaigns against the privatization of healthcare. Although its strongest nuclei are in Madrid and Barcelona, in Lleida (the central city of this study) it is one of the recent social movements with the most power and supporters, achieving political objectives such as paralyzing the privatization of local hospitals (Ballesté 2018; San José et al. 2014).

PAH was born before 15M, through different groups such as V de Vivienda, but it was because of 15M that it grew exponentially and expanded into most Spanish cities. Its primary political objective is to tackle the economic abuses carried out by banks in the area of housing. The movement has four main struggles: stopping evictions, getting debts cancelled when mortgaged flats are given to the bank, finding empty homes for families who have lost their homes, and, finally, fighting against ‘energy poverty’ (when electricity, gas, or other costs cannot be paid). On a general level, it has been one of the most important social movements of the last decade and is still active in most cities. It has managed to stop thousands of evictions, achieve more favorable negotiations with banks, and promote legislative changes at the regional and state levels (Colau and Alemany 2013; García-Lamarca 2017).

By studying these two specific movements I will explore the different forms of youth participation in post-15M social movements. Although both have a clear relationship with 15M, they accept and integrate young people in very different ways. I will thus be able to situate the analytical variable of age to understand, first, how 15M impacted each age group in different ways and, second, how it generated the notion of political normalization centered on the image of the responsible adult citizen. As I will outline in the next section, this article uses the Foucauldian concept of ‘normalization’ in order to examine how differentiations between good and bad forms of political activism emerged within post-15M social movements. By doing so, this article revisits existing studies of social movements which argue that the new forms of activism emerging from 15M, such as horizontal decision making, influenced the construction of new common meanings on issues such as democracy (Fominaya 2015; Mir García 2014; Sampedro and Lobera 2014) and also generated new and more inclusive
forms of political participation (Toret 2013). In contrast, I expand on these studies by analyzing the normalization processes generated in the 15M and the post-15M social movements that have led youth activists who use forms of direct action and anti-capitalist discourses to be marginalized and censored.

On a broader scale, analyzing these normalization processes that occur internally in social movements and that generate differences between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ protesters allows us to understand the power relations that exist between activists based on their social positions (Gledhill 2012; Ortner 1995). All this gives us analytical tools to observe and analyze the current social movements (mainly those that emerged after the 2008 crisis) and explore how these movements have led certain practices and discourses to emerge as the correct ways of being an activist. Research on these social movements has usually tended to focus on the study of their horizontality practices and the democratic reconfigurations that they have exercised and developed (Castells 2012; Fominaya 2015; Toret 2013). However, they have rarely paid attention to the censorship processes between activists that can take place within social movements and that reproduce some problematic forms of marginalization already present in society.

The analysis followed an ethnographic process carried out over three years (2014–2017) in Lleida, a medium-sized Spanish city. Most of the studies related to 15M and other Spanish social movements have focused on large cities such as Madrid or Barcelona. This has meant a certain lack of information about the impact of these movements on the rest of the country’s residents. At the same time, a smaller urban and social context allows the researcher to become more involved and thus cover a larger part of the political and activist field of the city. Finally, this work applied a militant ethnography approach. This means that I was active in the studied social movements, taking part in campaigns, demonstrations, and assemblies. In addition, the conclusions obtained were shared with members of the social movements with the aim that the study results could be of use to them (Graeber 2009; Juris 2007; Russell 2015; Scheper-Hughes 1995). This approach made it possible to monitor intensely the activist participation of the young people studied and to observe the relationships and situations that are experienced within the social movements, and thus to understand the different positions that young people take within the social movements.

Theoretical Framework: Normalization and Social Control within Social Movements

For Foucault (1978), the idea of normalization plays a major role in social domination and control. Normalization comes about from the subjects themselves by generating internal surveillance and control processes that produce
differentiations between what is normal and what is non-normal. These differentiations are influenced by the positions that other social agents (e.g., institutional politicians or the media) occupy regarding specific social facts. Normalization is thus a tool of biopolitical control. I use the concept of normalization in this article in order to analyze the forms of social control that are exercised through the differentiation between good and bad forms of political activism.

In the field of social movements, normalization operates through the definitions that political activists make of the political forms, actions, and discourses that are allowed and effective. Thus, those activists who move away from the established normality and adopt what I call here the ‘non-normal forms of protest’, that is, the ‘bad’ forms, can face repressive or criminalizing measures from external agents (police, media, institutional politicians, etc.) or censorship from other participants of the social movements (biopolitical control).

Within the post-15M social movements and in the broader public, these supposedly non-normal forms of protest are usually related to political positions and actions that seek to break with the activist forms established as correct or accepted in order to create new ‘horizons of the possible’, as Santos and Mendes (2017) put it. According to these authors, liberal democracies generate certain barriers (‘abyssal lines’) that marginalize groups, ideas, and political conceptions that seek to expand the meanings and forms of these same democracies (‘horizons of the possible’). These non-normal forms are usually carried out by activists who occupy disadvantaged and marginal social positions where different forms of discrimination intersect, aggravating their marginal situation (Collins 2017; Crenshaw 1991). This is the case, for example, with young anti-capitalists, women, racialized people, migrants, and working classes who fight for social change. In summary, these forms of political activism are adopted by activists who are in positions that do not conform to those defined as the good citizen/citizenship (Delgado 2016) or the citizen-prototype (Sevilla-Buitrago 2010). The more radical forms of political activism, organization, and discourse of these activists who engage in the public space are far from the ideal of co-existence, well-being, and non-conflict desired by the dominant ideology (Fernández González 2014; Garnier 2006).

The concept of citizenship did not generate the broad frameworks of collective identity that participants of 15M expected; rather, this notion continues to generate a distinction between ‘the included’ and ‘the excluded’ (Gerbaudo 2017). This differentiation is especially clear between those who follow the reformist position, and are therefore included in the category of citizens, and those who seek more disruptive or conflictive positions, and are thereby excluded from the category (Ballesté 2018).

The protagonists of this work are known as young anti-capitalists, due to both their age and their disruptive political position. I label and group them in this way because, in the city studied, they usually act in a coordinated manner
and have similar repertoires of action despite the fact that many participate in different groups (anarchists, communists, ecologists, among others). Although each group has its own strategies and dynamics, in 2016 and 2017 all of them acted under a common group called Coordinadora Antifascista (Anti-fascist Assembly). This allowed them to be observed together; however, as can be seen in other works, they still have internal specificities (Ballesté 2018; Solís and Ballesté 2018). Within the social movements studied, these young people came to be seen as ‘non-normal’ by other activists because they did not follow the correct (and good) forms of activism. That is, they do not accept the established forms of political activism and seek to open new horizons of the possible (Criado 1998; Santos and Mendes 2017).

In this article I am not trying to make a generalization about all young people. Here I understand young anti-capitalists as a ‘generational unit’ (Mannheim [1928] 1952) that is integrated into hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes that affect the entire generation. These processes confront each unit in various ways depending on social class, gender, and ethnicity (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Roberts 2015). In relation to this, 15M is evaluated differently depending on the generation and the generational unit of which each activist is part. This helps us to understand the divergent positions that young people and adults have in post-15M social movements, and also the differentiated participation of each group.

Here I transfer the Foucauldian notions of ‘normal’ and ‘non-normal’ to the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activists, which makes it possible to understand how the political forms of direct action and the activists who use them become marginalized. This marginalization occurs through a regulatory and normalizing device that is inserted within the social movements themselves and that is also influenced by external agents such as the media or institutional politicians. Therefore, social movements are shaped both by their participants (Della Porta and Diani 2011) and by the context in which they develop (Pleyers 2011). This allows us to understand how each social movement evolves in different ways, as in the cases studied here.

**The Generational Struggles in Post-15M Social Movements**

As previously stated, the movements that were born directly out of 15M or gained prominence via 15M, adopted the same forms of action, organization, and discourse. Using assemblies as meeting and decision spaces, they focused on peaceful and performative actions and produced inclusive and moderate slogans, discourses, and political proposals (Candón Mena 2013; Fominaya 2015). Although these forms and discourses that were dominant in the 15M movement were transferred to the post-15M movements, there were certain
critical voices that sought to diversify forms of participation and manifestation. One of the most important voices was that of the young activists who were already politically active before participating in 15M anti-capitalist groups (Taibo 2013). As Carla, a 28-year-old primary school teacher, put it:

I believe that in 15M there was a generational barrier. It was very palpable and in fact caused some conflicts, right? Especially with the anarchist movement that was at that time very young … There were people from 18, 20 years old, to 25 and 30 maximum. Then there were other people who were already from 40 up … Their objectives were different. Or, at least, the way to achieve them … [Adults] preferred more institutional ways, with pacts, dialogue … and the others, young people, wanted more direct action. Like occupying buildings, banks, to do things in a way … forgetting about the legality … of the actions. And sometimes, I think it was quite difficult to reach a sort of stability in this regard.

In Lleida, the two social movements studied have the same 15M origins, but over time they have taken on different dynamics (see table 1). White Tide, with a profile of more adult and middle-class participants, focuses its political action on recovering the previous welfare state (in healthcare matters). PAH, on the other hand, with a profile of participants from precarious families and to a certain extent younger members, moves between advancing a more moderate position, focused on welfare policy, and a more radical agenda, depending on the profile of the activists at that time. In both movements we find young anti-capitalists, who, although they want to, cannot participate in the same way in the two movements.

In some ways, after 15M, the political practices of these young anti-capitalists have been stigmatized as violent, radical, and nominal by adult activists. For some adults, these young people carry out actions that have come to be conceived as far from ‘normal’ (anti-capitalist messages, direct actions like graffiti or breaking glass windows, etc.). The transition from 15M to post-15M was accompanied by a loss of centrality of young people in the new social movements, which led to a progressive loss of young activists. Some of the reasons for this situation were the format of these movements and the social issues they were fighting for (health, education, housing, etc.). These issues often did not directly involve youth problems. However, at the same time, the loss of youth participation was also due to the adults involved in these movements rejecting the political proposals of the young people. Ares, a 36-year-old PAH activist, explains it like this: “There are no young people! In the movements I participate in, the young people who were part of 15M have been lost. They participate in other movements, their own.” As a consequence, this loss of youth participation has also meant the loss of critical views of the hegemonic forms of 15M (Ballesté 2018). That is, these politicized young people who had participated in 15M continued to be active but in their own spaces. When asked why he did
not agree with how the 15M and post-15M movements were organized, Julià, a 33-year-old university worker and a 15M participant, explained:

I am convinced that if you have to make a change, you cannot only stay in the public space and debate minimum proposals that, obviously, they will not accept. Instead, a more direct action would be much more effective, so to speak, from my point of view. I mean, not only occupy the public space but ... well, go a little further with actions ... like occupy institutions, occupy companies or factories and, if you can’t reach this point, at least do more actions ... you don’t know to what extent they’ll be effective, but you do know that they will be more forceful in a political sense ... Stay there ... And then, the usual, we also talked ... we talked about ... all the good vibes that were there ... It was like what good people do, right? That is, the good people had decided to go out and take over the street in a civilized way, right? Civilized in the sense of respecting laws and civic acts. And well ... If you want there to be a social change or even a political change, there must be a break with certain ... not customs, but with rules and such. You can’t go there and try to make a social change and not be able to make noise.

### TABLE 1: Composition of the movements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White Tide</th>
<th>PAH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
<td>Mostly middle-class health workers. Very little presence of young people (only exceptionally) or racialized people.</td>
<td>Mostly working-class people. Big presence of women and racialized people. Important presence, at different times, of young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Youth participation</strong></td>
<td>Sporadic participation. Marginalization of young people.</td>
<td>Intense participation. Young people reach spaces of power and decision in the movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actions</strong></td>
<td>Performative actions: signature collection campaigns, peaceful demonstrations, and negotiation with institutional politicians.</td>
<td>A mixture of performative actions and direct actions: occupation of banks, demonstrations with passive resistance, painting slogans and putting up posters at bank headquarters, highway blockades, and very little negotiation with institutional politicians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political position</strong></td>
<td>Similar to 15M. Searching for a breadth of participants, non-concrete ideological position, and commitment to dialogue and non-violent form of protest.</td>
<td>Different from 15M. Aiming for their actions to have a real impact on the lives of vulnerable people, as well as a general social, political, and economic impact. Marked by anti-capitalist political dialogue and a mix between peaceful actions and others with a certain degree of physical or symbolic violence with aspirations to achieve revolutionary changes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s fieldwork data
At first, young people participated very little in post-15M movements such as White Tide and PAH. It was not until 2016 that these young people, grouped in unitary anti-capitalist spaces, decided to take part again in these movements. Between February and March 2016, young people from both communist and anarchist groups began to participate regularly in the meetings and assemblies of White Tide and PAH. These dates coincide with the creation of the Anti-fascist Assembly as a unifying political platform for young anti-capitalists in the city. In addition to starting specific political campaigns, they also sought to once again be active in post-15M movements.

Jordi’s case serves to illustrate these phases. He is a 28-year-old communist activist who began to participate in PAH and White Tide when the two movements were created in June 2011, but he quickly left them because, as he explains, “what I saw was more than what I could bear, a few [of the representatives] controlled everything and they did not listen to other people.” However, as he continued to explain, in 2016 he participated again in the two movements and encouraged other young anti-capitalists to do so as well. He believes that “we must take the fight a step further if nothing is achieved … To return the struggles to more committed and incisive forms. It is a slow process but, in PAH, we find allies.” His aim was to change the dynamics of these groups and destigmatize practices conceived of as ‘non-normal’ by bringing them into the movements.

As will be seen below, this process of changing dynamics did not occur equally in White Tide and PAH. While in the first group, young people were quickly marginalized, in the second they found a space from which to expand their political proposals.

**Political Strategies in the Post-15M Era**

In order to understand the differences in youth participation between the two movements, it is necessary to analyze the format and forms of action that the movements employed. At the outset, the 15M movement and most of the post-15M social movements were moved by the ‘logic of numbers’ (Della Porta and Diani 2011). The aim of this logic is for the movement to gain as much support as possible even if this means reducing political forcefulness, actions, and discourses to gain popular support. This logic usually uses performative forms of action to get the most citizen support—that is, forms of action that have a high social impact (e.g., demonstrations, theater performances, musical protest) but that do not involve a confrontation or the use of any type of violence. According to this reasoning, success is closely linked to the ability to attract the attention of the mass media, which generates a large increase in the number of participants (Gurak and Logie 2003).
Della Porta and Diani (2011) propose two other logics: the ‘logic of damage’ and the ‘logic of testimony’. These two logics support actions that seek to obstruct the normal course of events through physical or material violence (Tarrow 1994) in order to achieve certain symbolic and instrumental ends (damage), or simply to serve as ‘testimony’ to a strong commitment. These logics normally follow forms of direct action (Graeber 2009). The mixture of these two logics (damage and testimony) are the forms of action that young anti-capitalists tend to apply.

Returning to the two social movements studied here, I found that they both adhere to one of these logics. White Tide acts in a performative way to gain as much support as possible, while PAH uses a mixture of performative action (due to the influences of 15M) and direct action to obtain responses to its political demands. This can be illustrated by reviewing the types of actions taken by each movement. White Tide normally called rallies and protests in central squares of the city or made public statements and political demands. PAH, by contrast, carried out direct actions such as occupying bank headquarters or empty buildings, pasting posters on banks at night, and obstructing evictions through the physical resistance of activists.

The differences between the two movements were shaped both by the influences of 15M and by its participants’ profiles. As explained earlier, White Tide is characterized by middle-class adult profiles (often health workers), and PAH has profiles of people from the working classes, migrants, and young anti-capitalists, among others. Due to the profiles and the economic and social situation of the majority of PAH participants, there is a greater urgency to take actions that have a direct and rapid impact. Simply put, if they do not bring about immediate changes, they may lose their homes. The different logics of these two movements not only help us understand their ways of acting, but also their position within the political field of the city. Thus, while movements that follow the logic of numbers may occupy more central positions in the field, those that follow the logic of damage are usually marginalized to its peripheries (Bourdieu 2000b; Solís and Ballesté 2018).

Ultimately, these differences made PAH a more attractive movement to young anti-capitalists. As Jordi explained, in PAH you can “find the real working class.” At the same time, when asked about why he feels more comfortable in PAH, he answered:

First, … housing is one of the most urgent needs, right? So, first to help those people who need this help so urgently. Then, because what I like about PAH … I wish it were not like this in the sense that … there were not poor people, right? But you see that they are very poor people and not … Fuck! How would …? It seems that perhaps White Tide, to give an example … apart from the fact that there are people from major unions, is like a more … with a [bourgeois] mentality … Although obviously working class, right? A person
who works in a hospital is a worker. But, of course, there are many people who are workers, but they have the mentality of petty bourgeois, right? … And that PAH, being more fucked up people, … it’s the working class in its pure essence. More fucked up, right? This is another … factor … There are many people in PAH who have managed to change their way of thinking a little bit from the violence … I think it’s easier to change the way of thinking of a person that is screwed up than a person who is better off.

In the case of White Tide, the logic of numbers also meant that youth anti-capitalist participation was seen as a threat that could lead to a reduction in sympathizers. This is revealed in a discussion that took place within a White Tide assembly between young anti-capitalists and Gemma, a 58-year-old participant of the movement, when they were deciding on the content of a public manifesto:

Mariona [20 years old] comments that the final manifesto should also express how White Tide is directly against capitalism. This sparks a brief discussion between Mariona and Gemma. Throughout the meeting Mariona and Ivan [21 years old] had insisted that, somehow, “messages” against capitalism should appear as the highest cause of the precarious situation. Nobody had paid much attention, but, just at this final moment, Gemma, looking a bit fed up with the situation, reacted by explaining that White Tide and most people do not understand the “anti-capitalist” issue. It is an issue, she explains, that could cause tension both within the movement and in the relationship between it and the citizens. Then Marc [55 years old] also joins the discussion, holding that there are many forms of capitalism and that there are capitalisms that can be better. Mariona and Ivan, outraged by these responses, but seeing that they fail to generate support, leave the discussion resigned and disillusioned. (Field Diary, 15 February 2016)

Thus, while at PAH the participants’ precarious situation meant that they needed actions that could achieve quick results, beyond popular support, White Tide’s objective was to expand the movement to as many people as possible. In order to do this, they needed to receive good reviews from the mass media and political discourses. This situation explains certain factors that led the young people to participate in one movement or the other. These factors include the presence or not of institutional politicians in the movement, the type of actions that were deemed acceptable, and the concern or not to appear on the news, among others (Della Porta and Diani 2011; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 2006).

As mentioned before, in 2016 young anti-capitalists tried to participate again in different post-15M social movements in the city, like the two studied here. In White Tide, a group of adults occupying a position of power within the movement rejected the new proposals of direct action made by the participating anti-capitalist youth. As can be seen in the field diary fragment, the proposals of the young anti-capitalists—solidarity toward anti-capitalist groups, the rejection of institutional politics, the increase in the forcefulness of the actions—endangered
the existing status quo and threatened to break the power of the leaders. Finally, the non-acceptance of youth proposals and their marginalization within the movement led to a progressive decrease in youth participation.

In PAH, the opposite process occurred. Although from 2011 to 2014 the movement had an adult spokesperson, who was the leader of the group and carried out socialized political practices close to reformism, in 2015 the movement rejected that leadership and reorganized the power in a more horizontal way. In this change of format, anti-capitalist youth saw an opportunity to participate more strongly and to modify the forms of action by increasing direct action. It was at this moment that the assemblies of the movement began to see progressively more and more participation from young anti-capitalists.

The history of these two different processes reveals a completely different evolution in each movement. Thus, White Tide continued with its reformist strategy—without getting involved in the struggles of anti-capitalist collectives or adding some of their forms of action—and always had a nucleus of adults who, linked to unions or political parties, acted as leaders. However, PAH underwent a radical change in its forms of action. Young people began to occupy spaces of power within the movement (both because of their political force and because there were increasingly more of them), which led to the application of more direct and disruptive forms of action.

These disruptive forms were clearly seen in PAH’s occupation of a bank in March 2016. This type of action normally meant that the bank was occupied for one or more days and usually ended via a negotiation process with bank officials. As Albert, a 37-year-old former leader of the PAH (until 2014), explained to me, after the first actions against banks in 2011 and 2012, “they [those responsible for the banking companies] preferred to negotiate than to be exposed to receiving actions and protests … and when they saw us arrive at the gates they already wanted to negotiate with us.” However, the day in question was quite the opposite. Of the nearly 30 activists who were inside and outside the bank, more than half were young anti-capitalists. At no time did the bank seek to negotiate, and the police were called to arrest them. A revealing detail is that there were twice as many police officers as there were protesters. The activists were roughly dragged out of the bank, and the next morning different local media criminalized the protesters’ action.

Normalization and Good Practices in Activism Spaces

In 2016, White Tide and PAH became places where young people believed they could change the stigmatization of direct action and break with the hegemonic vision of the political struggle. Such stigmatization of the political forms adopted by these young people may resemble what Criado (1998) calls the
‘normalization’ of youth in the adult-led passage to adulthood. Such a normalization keeps them within the limits of what is acceptable and, ultimately, facilitates the reproduction of accepted norms and the well-being of adults of the middle and upper classes. This process of adult-centered normalization of activist forms allows us to elaborate what I have termed the ‘good protester’ or ‘good political practices’. Normalization acts within the bodies of the same subjects, implying a form of domination by which the subjects themselves are passive objects of surveillance and internal control (biopower), creating a dividing line between the normal and non-normal (Foucault [1979] 2009, 2003). This process also has a direct impact on social movements.

My ethnographic research has shown how some forms of protest are accepted and others are censored, marginalized, or stigmatized. Through this research I have been able to verify that the unaccepted forms of action are usually related to discourses and actions that seek to end or replace the doxa, that is, those acts, discourses, or forms of organization that would break with established beliefs about the field of the possible (Bourdieu 2000a). Following Santos and Mendes (2017), breaking the framework of what is possible allows us to eliminate or reformulate the ‘abyssal lines’ that limit social actions, thus opening new horizons of what is possible.

If we look at the differences that occurred between White Tide and PAH in the years 2016 to 2017, we can see how normalization works and how it affected each group. In both cases, the activist forms carried out by young anti-capitalists were marginalized, although with different results. An example of this situation is the opinion of Gemma, introduced earlier in this article, who believes that young anti-capitalists “can do nothing to help PAH or White Tide.” She remembers a PAH action that took place in front of the doors of a bank office in November 2015 where some young anti-capitalists smashed the glass door. For her, in PAH “you can whistle at politicians, [put] up stickers and posters on banks, you can do whatever you want, but without breaking the door … PAH has done lots of crazy things, but not with violence. That is not acceptable.” As she continues to explain, not only the forms of action are censored, but also the growth in participation of young people and the political debates that they raise:

But, I think [young anti-capitalists] are making a mistake ... Yes, I’ve seen and I understand the move, right? They were in White Tide, participating ... helping as much as possible, but they are there ... with PAH also helping, participating and such ... And then you’re seeing, well, now the talk is done, now the young people [come] from wherever ... I think every movement has to be ... like a hermit crab inside its shell. You shouldn’t get involved in other movements. They can’t come to me ... to talk about capitalism ... Because [at 58] I already have my conception of life, I mean, you can talk to me about what you want, but my conception of life ... what capitalism is ... that’s not going to ... change at this point. So, I don’t like ... the changes that I’ve been seeing lately, I don’t like them.
Bourdieu's (2000a, 2000b) theorizations about the relationship between fields and the social space allow us to understand which agents (the media, citizens, politicians, activists, among others) influence this normalization that establishes what is correct and what is not in activism (Solís and Ballesté 2018). The social space is where citizens assimilate what is good and what is not—an assimilation that, in the end, acts as a kind of biopolitics (Foucault 1978), making people internalize which behaviors are acceptable and which are objectionable (Solís and Ballesté 2018). As a consequence, those activists who do not follow the good forms of activism occupy a peripheral and marginalized position in the political field.

Following this, we can see how the process of increasing the participation of young anti-capitalists in PAH brought about a relocation of the movement in the field, shifting it from a more or less central position to a peripheral position due to the change in the actions proposed by these young people. The use of direct action in PAH led to a knock-on effect—an increase in police intervention in protest actions and, as a consequence, the accumulation of fines and collective trials for various members of the movement (between 2016 and 2017 there were up to two collective trials). It also triggered articles about criminal behavior in the local media, where it was reported that PAH, taken over by young people, was now anti-systemic, violent, and radical.

On the participation of young people in PAH, 25-year-old Agustí and Carla (introduced earlier) explained their vision of PAH and the political possibilities that require it to “be tougher in its actions.” When asked why they participate more in PAH than White Tide, they responded as follows:

Agustí: Likewise, it can be seen that the anarchist sector has a vision of PAH much more … well, less institutional than some … In other words, the opinion of this group, which later ends up influencing where they participate, is that it has to have more aggressive actions, not so much respect for the law and such.

Carla: I think so. I think that basic ideological conflicts are generated because the foundations are very different … For example, I see this a lot because in our view … from the libertarian movement or more anarchist movement there are times it takes a lot to accept that they are institutionalizing what you are fighting for, and they make agreements with political parties, they try to do things or be [more open] … Because maybe we would do things differently. For example, with PAH, I also feel very close to the idea that the Chispas [anarchists of the Chispa squatted house] have “less talk and more lighting the match.”

Instead, in White Tide it was the movement itself that marginalized these young people by excluding their proposals, denying some actions that they promoted, or simply not attending their acts. This allowed for a continuation of the logic of numbers, which led the media, institutional politicians, and agents of the state
to view the movement in a positive way, allowing it to continue in a central space of the field.

In summary, in comparing the two movements under discussion, several factors enabled the marginalization of youth participants in White Tide. These included mainly the influence that middle-class adult participants had within the movement itself and the accumulation of power they had within the political field, such as their relationship with the media and with political institutions. In contrast, the profiles of those participating in PAH (young people, working classes, and racialized people) enabled the entry of young anti-capitalists since the power of the existing participants in the field was very limited, and they were usually excluded or marginalized due to their social position.

This reproduction of normative values in political activism does not simply remain in the political field and social space; it also results in social stigmatization of the groups that carry out these unwanted practices. Thus, in our case young anti-capitalists became part of the most peripheral spaces of the political field because they sought to express themselves politically through parameters that were ‘not accepted’. This meant that when these young people appeared in an action or protest, it generated a normalization process in the attitude of the other more adult demonstrators toward them. In short, this normalization took place within the social movements themselves.

**Conclusion**

There is a normalization device that prevails within the practice of protest in which the constituent agents of the political field and social space (institutional politicians, governments, media, police, judicial devices, citizens) interact to different degrees. With this, I have established through my ethnographic research a clear division between the ‘good political practices’ of political activists (usually carried out by middle-class adults who propose a reform of the current political, economic, and social situation) and the censored practices or those that exceed the acceptable framework (usually carried out by young anti-capitalists and others who do not occupy positions of power). From 15M itself, the functioning of this normalization can be observed through the hegemonizing of its political practices, which were considered a success within the political field and society in general. For this reason, they were replicated in the majority of movements after 15M.

The conception of ‘normal’ values (of the people, of civil society, of the ‘civic’) is, to a large extent, the basis of social transmission of the practices and procedures that society follows. These behaviors related to the idea of the ‘good citizen’—determined by specific discourses, actions, and ways of relating—establish the expected ways to act in different social situations. Social
movements, as organisms inserted within the social space, do not live outside the effects produced by social normalization through citizen values.

Following different authors (e.g., Rodríguez 2016; Taibo 2011), the 15M movement can be branded as a citizen movement. In this sense, what is expected of ‘citizen behavior’ in social movements or political groups is related, in a general way, to some basic premises: first, actions are always non-violent; second, wide spaces of understanding are generated that include as many people as possible; and, third, there is a reformist function (e.g., to achieve specific improvements) that in no case supports a rupture with the prevailing model (Delgado 2016). These premises, which were present in 15M, are questioned by young anti-capitalists in the post-15M movements. To understand the political consequences of 15M for anti-capitalist youth, it is necessary to highlight this process of marginalization through normalization that led to them becoming undesirable subjects and groups within the framework of the behavior expected from the ‘good political citizen’.

Although 15M was a movement that directly impacted the younger generation, it also impacted other generations. It was not just a youth movement. But in some ways it meant the appearance of the adult as a guarantor of the ‘good protester’. This adult normalization, which appeared clearly in the movements studied here, opens up a space of struggle and reconquest within the movements themselves. In doing so, it reveals the processes of (re)appropriation of the movements by anti-capitalist youth in the face of the continuity of the protest forms proposed by adults. However, these processes of (re)appropriation are not equal in each movement, but rather depend on the accumulation of power of the participants within the political field as well as their profile in intersectional categories (Crenshaw 1991).

As we have seen before, the articulation of the desired normative forms and discourses in politics is linked to the doxa, that is, to what is established as correct and possible. The differences that young anti-capitalists find in White Tide and PAH to carry out their actions are based on the accumulation of power that the movements’ participants have within them. In the case of White Tide, the identities of the adult participants hinder a change of discourse and action; such changes are seen as dangerous since they could break the existing status quo with other agents in the political field and in the social space. On the other hand, PAH profiles, located in a more marginalized and precarious part of the social space, open the door to breaking with what is established as good through youth participation. It could be concluded that alliances are mainly developed between those people ( politicized youth, working classes, migrants, among others) who are not included in ‘the normal’. Although they allow PAH to change, these alliances place the movement in a peripheral space of the political field.

This work provides a new perspective on the study of current social movements and youth participation by introducing an analysis of the processes of
marginalization of disruptive political practices that can occur within social movements. This study allows us to observe the role that young anti-capitalists have played in post-15M social movements and the conflicts they have had with adult activists. The actions young people carry out as they ‘look for a place’ in these movements help us to understand how the concept of normalization works within the field of activism. It also gives us insights into how young anti-capitalists have tried to fight or reverse the normalization of activism since the end of 15M. Thus, this study proposes a new look at current Spanish social movements to understand the inclusion and exclusion processes that can take place within them, centered on the idea of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ protester. The disruptions, conflicts, and normalization processes that have been examined in this article make it possible to problematize the commitment to horizontality of the Spanish social movements of the last decade. If 15M was a movement with a clear youth protagonism, adult activists in some post-15M social movements have sought to marginalize the participation of young anti-capitalist activists. In short, this article provides analytical categories that allow us to understand how biopolitical control and normalization affect the current social movements internally, generating processes of differentiation between activists based on their social positions.

Acknowledgments

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC), under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 742705.

Eduard Ballesté has a PhD in Social Anthropology (University of Lleida, Department of Geography and Sociology, 2017) and a degree in Geography and Territory Planning (University of Lleida, 2010). He has been a Visiting Researcher at the Universidad Austral de Chile (2017) and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow working on the ERC Advanced Grant TRANSGANG project. His fields of interest include social and political movements, international cooperation, social inequality and segregation, globalization, political anthropology, youth groups, activism, and politics. He recently published a book, Del procés a la revolta (2020), and co-edited a collection, ¿Qué fue de la Primavera Indignada? (2019). E-mail: eduard.balleste@upf.edu
Notes

1. The term ‘15M’ refers to the date 15 May 2011 when a massive demonstration took place in several Spanish cities. In Madrid, one of the epicenters of the movement, some protesters decided to camp in the central Plaza del Sol. That morning the police violently evicted them from the square, which caused thousands of people to camp out the next day in most Spanish cities.

2. Carla actively took part in 15M and has participated in political struggles since then. At the time of this study, she was involved with different movements linked closely to the libertarian and anarchist collectives. Interview conducted on 7 February 2017.

3. At the time of this study, Ares worked in an administrative department of the public university. After 15M, she participated very actively in PAH and to some degree in White Tide, among other movements. Interview conducted on 24 February 2016.

4. At the time of this study, Julià, a geographer and anthropologist in equal parts, was working in the university. He had previously participated in anti-capitalist movements in Barcelona. In Lleida, 15M was one of the first spaces for political participation. Interview conducted on 6 June 2016.

5. At the time of this study, Jordi was a revolutionary singer and poet. As a member of the communist collective Resisteix, he participated actively in 15M and later in various platforms such as PAH and White Tide, among others. He is currently condemned for advocating terrorism and insulting the king and as of this writing is awaiting entry into prison. Interview conducted on 9 May 2016.

6. At the time of this study, Gemma was a nursing assistant. She participated in the 15M and then became involved in different social movements. Later, she was very involved in White Tide and also in PAH. Interview conducted on 25 February 2016.

7. At the time of this study, Albert was a municipal political representative of a traditional left-wing party. Previously, he had been a leader of PAH and an active 15M participant. Interview conducted on 23 December 2014.

8. At the time of this study, Agustí was a graphic illustrator. He has participated in student movements and in different expressions of the pro-independence left. He was deeply involved in 15M. Later, he also participated in different post-15M movements and, like Carla, has had a strong relationship with libertarian and anarchist groups.

References


