

Blurring the lines between civil society, volunteering and social movements. A reflection on redrawing boundaries inspired by the Spanish case

Abstract: Citizen participation is manifested through various concepts, such as activism, social movements, volunteering or civil society. The different ways of understanding popular engagement are often separated by delimitations that define them, particularly volunteering and civic action, as two highly differentiated forms of participation in the distinct academic disciplines: political science, volunteering studies, social movement studies or civil society theory. This article considers whether this basic theoretical differentiation can be problematised in the Spanish political context by exploring four paradigmatic cases of popular engagement, using qualitative case study methodology, specifically, a historic case from the 1990s and three more recent cases. It is hoped that the results of the study –which differentiates between organisational hybridity and fuzziness– will encourage reflection on the traditional boundaries between different forms of popular engagement.

Key Words: popular engagement, hybridity, civil society, volunteering, activism, democracy.

Participation outside representative or electoral channels is presented in complex and polysemous concepts linked to reflection on civil society, the third sector, volunteering, NGOs and social movements. These concepts are central to various disciplines, including sociology, political science, social movement studies, and political theory or political philosophy. These terms are sometimes used in combination with several spheres or they are identified exclusively with one part (e.g., when the “civil society” concept is limited to the exclusive domain of NGOs or social movements (Roitter, 2004; Olvera, 2002; Zimmer & Freise, 2008).

They are differentiated on other occasions according to the basic type of participation they promote. Hence one of the keys of conceptual delimitation is the fundamental differentiation frequently established between two basic forms of popular engagement: volunteering and civic action (Evers & von Essen, 2018). Evers and von Essen clearly introduce this matter into the present special issue. These authors point out how these two forms are clearly differentiated in political science fields, volunteering studies and in social movement studies, in such a way that each branch tends to focus on certain aspects of citizen participation. Indeed civic action is frequently highlighted and associated with the public, the political and the collective, and “linked to various kinds of political decision-making as well as political protest”, whereas volunteering is claimed “as the private, moral and individual” terrain (Evers & von Essen, 2018). So while civic action is associated directly with the “political” sphere

(and also frequently in a response or conflict relationship with institutions), volunteering is generally distanced from the world of politics, and tends to move towards what is widely perceived as being consensual (Evers & von Essen, 2018). In addition, at the organisational level volunteering is usually understood as a structured environment (with members, subscription fees and offices) and with a formal hierarchy not found in the context of civic action, which is considered to be informal, horizontal and spontaneous. These two spheres have frequently been differentiated in terms of the basic type of participation they promote and their structure.

The present article attempts to analyse whether the strict conceptual differentiation between popular forms of political engagement may be problematic in the specific case of Spain. As we will see in this article, the Spanish political context is marked by being a relatively young democracy (with a period of political transition between 1975 and 1978) in which citizen activism forcefully emerged in the form of what is known as the *indignados* movement, or 15M, in 2011, and whose political consequences are still very much in evidence today (Monterde et al., 2015). All this has turned Spain into an interesting laboratory for political experimentation in the civil society domain (Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Author et al., 2017). But are there any significant cases that could lead us to problematise on how concepts such as volunteering or civic action are “normally” used?

The present analysis stems from the notion that there are certain paradigmatic cases in Spain that allow us to reconsider and reflect on some conventional conceptual divisions which challenge the way popular engagement is commonly categorised into volunteering or civic action. Before exploring this question and introducing the main features of some paradigmatic cases of demonstrations and citizen participation in Spain, we present a brief review of the literature and a basic theoretical framework on the blurring of tendencies in popular engagement. The second section examines Spanish literature and popular engagement in order to provide a political-historical context for the cases studied. Section three presents four specific case studies of popular engagement, based on information gathered from various sources: documents produced by citizens’ initiatives, civil society actors’ websites, and academic research literature on the concepts of volunteering, civil society and social movements. Finally, section four summarises the most notable aspects and the possible hybridisation or blurring tendencies in some paradigmatic cases of Spanish political engagement.

Literature review on blurring tendencies

The series of problems that we introduce and attempt to deal with here in this special issue is related to the limitations surrounding taxonomies or in establishing standard ideals, as noted by Weber (1978). Concepts tend to involve establishing an ideal type or model that corresponds to some mental constructs that can shape something that already exists (but not in a pure form) in social reality, whose functional nature is explanatory and heuristic (Keane, 2003). Concepts adopt an ideal form that attempts to understand and explain the world in all its complexity by intellectually simplifying it and making it operational in both sociological and theoretical terms (Weber, 1987; Giddens, 2013).

Several areas of the human and social sciences have recently drawn attention to potential problems surrounding the use of certain strict conceptual taxonomies or categories in an environment of increasingly hybrid forms of participation and political organisations. This issue is reflected in the appearance of new concepts such as the network society (Castells, 2000; 2004), which attempt to capture the diffuse and rhizomatic relationships arising among plural civil society groups (Diani, 2015; Fennema & Tillie, 1999). In turn, other studies have explored the tendencies to blur the lines between specific organisations or institutions, particularly in the strict differentiation usually established between political parties and social movements, which have been challenged by some authors (Tormey, 2015; Chadwick, 2007; Burstein & Linton, 2002). Also in the subject we deal with here, some interesting studies and reflections have appeared in recent years indicating that the strict differentiation (or distancing) between formal NGOs and informal groups of activists is not as obvious as it is generally understood to be (Dekker, 2008). Some studies start by defending the importance of observing the trends that suggest collaboration, or even blurring, between domains like “activism” and “volunteering”. Significant research, like the special issue coordinated by Henriksen and Svedberg, has identified the “many overlaps and similarities between the two types of civic engagement” (2010: 95). In this issue, Janoski’s analysis stresses, from a multi-level model of civil society, the importance of both forms of popular engagement and their clear interdependences (Janoski, 2010). In a more recent study, Glasius and Ishkanian examine in detail the cases of Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan, based on the appearance of pro-democracy movements in 2011, and they also question the widespread consensus on the firm separation of the boundaries between NGOs and activism (Glasius & Ishkanian, 2015). According to

their study, such contexts provide clear proof of what they consider to be a much more complex relation, which they explain from their concept of “surreptitious symbiosis”. These authors conclude that, despite the tensions that exist between the two domains, “we find some universal trends in the ways in which highly institutionalised and highly spontaneous actors interact in order to resolve some of the dilemmas thrown up by the encounter with material and coercive logics” (2015: 2624).

There are numerous reasons for the steady shift towards events and organisations with diverse and flexible logics, which include (among others) the spread of new digital tools and a certain level of crisis in the traditional logics of institutions such as political parties, NGOs, etc. (Castells, 2015; Chadwick, 2007; Mair, 2006). This shift has generated academic interest in symbiotic or blurring tendencies, and in the concept of hybridity (Hustinx & De Waele, 2015; Chadwick, 2007). The term hybridity offers a useful analytical lens through which to understand and explain new and complex forms or tendencies of political engagement (Goss & Heaney, 2010; Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005). In this vein, Sampson et al.’s study in the USA points to the consolidation of “blended social action” that blurs traditional boundaries, and which allows “hybrid events” to be developed out of collective actions that combine elements that are “neither wholly civic, nor wholly protest” in their demands and organisational forms (Sampson et al., 2005: 681). In turn, Chadwick uses the concept of “organizational hybridity” to explain new dynamics, advanced by Internet use, where political parties, interest groups and social movements “can and do borrow from each other’s typical organizational and mobilization repertoires” (2007, 284). One consequence of this shift towards experimenting, (re)adapting different repertoires and combining diverse institutional logics is that some organisations can be classified and defined more precisely by taking into account their fuzzy or hybrid nature.

Attending to the above literature review, and in order to examine illustrative cases of citizens’ popular engagement in Spain, we believe it is useful to differentiate between two types of organisations in line with their type of boundaries: 1) fuzzy or 2) hybrid.

Fuzzy refers to initiatives which, although commonly associated with civic action or volunteering, have diffuse boundaries that preclude their definition as a “pure” organisational form. Such organisations have certain traits or characteristics that do not match the ideal type of popular engagement used to identify them. In other words, while they closely resemble the archetypal voluntary organisation, they also have an obvious

trait that is generally associated with activism; or vice versa, activist initiatives that have a specific element “typical” of voluntary organisations.

On the other hand, hybrid organisations are those whose very nature and dynamics come close to a wholly mixed logic. In this case the concept of hybridisation is used to define organisations that simultaneously combine logics and repertoires that are normally considered to be different (and sometimes even incompatible). In other words, they are hybrids in that they combine elements from voluntary and civic action spheres at the same time.

There is obviously a very thin dividing line between the two organisational modalities (fuzzy and hybrid), and it is susceptible to the same problems that can affect all ideal types. However, making this distinction and examining some examples of organisations that closely align with this type of fuzzy or hybrid typology may add greater complexity and extend the range of possibilities for establishing (keeping or breaking with) other definitions of forms of popular engagement.

In the next section we introduce some aspects of the Spanish historical-political context and discuss theoretical studies on volunteering and civil society undertaken in this young southern European democracy. We apply this framework to contextualise novel aspects in certain forms of contemporary citizen participation later in the article.

The Spanish literature on popular engagement and the political-historical context

Some of the most notable theorists in Spanish civil society, volunteering and social movement research are Casado, Subirats, Pérez Díaz, Castells and Laraña, among others. Their works are particularly relevant because, during the 1980s and 1990s, they coincided with the “re-emergence” of a reflection that is consolidated in other contexts, and, uniquely, they are contemporary with the incipient steps of a new democracy in Spain. After a 36-year dictatorship (1939-1975) and a period of transition (1975-1978), the situation in Spain was one in which democracy was chronically absent, and which affected not only a weak State, but also an uprooted civil society (Subirats, 1999; García, 1997). Work by authors like Casado (1995; 2015) and Rodríguez-Cabrero (1997; 2003) are particularly relevant on the subject of Spanish volunteering, its evolution and characteristics. Scholars such as Subirats (1999), Pérez Díaz (1997) and García Marzá (2008) have approached the role and possibilities of the civil society concept from different viewpoints. On the question of social movements, authors like

Castells (1997) and Laraña (Pont, 1998; Laraña, 1999) have made outstanding contributions on aspects of participation such as demonstrations and protests.

The numerous studies undertaken in Spain on the consolidation of many forms of citizen participation demonstrate the importance of keeping historic context in mind. The dictatorship and subsequent progress towards democracy have influenced forms of political expression. It should not be forgotten that during the thirty-six years of Franco's authoritarian regime, social and community life was suppressed by the corporatist system. During the dictatorship labour was organised into vertical syndicates, certain associations came under state control, including sports clubs (regulated by the Delegación Nacional del Deporte, National Sports Delegation) and the only students' union (Sindicato Español Universitario, SEU), and the press was fiercely constrained (Casado, 2008). Only institutions like the Catholic Church enjoyed some independence, in recognition of its continued support for the totalitarian regime (Gunther & Montero, 2009). While this authoritarian system clearly curbed the spread of associationism and mobilisation, it was unable to stifle it completely. There were various initiatives that attempted to bring down or weaken the regime, or reclaim spaces of freedom. Some of the most notable were the guerrillas (also known as *maquis*) who did not recognise the legitimacy of the Franco regime and continued the armed struggle, especially in the years after the Second World War; the student protests of Madrid in 1956, which marked the beginning of active student opposition to the regime; and in 1962, the meeting in Munich of the majority of political parties opposed to Franco that began to coordinate their opposition both in Spain and abroad (Fernández Vargas, 1981; Preston, 2002). However, despite these significant cases Spanish historiography coincides in characterising Spanish society in the Franco era and the post-Franco transition period as politically demobilised and dismantled as a result of the iron-fisted dictatorship (Sastre-García, 1997; Rodríguez López, 2015).

In light of the above, the present study on the dynamics of new citizen participation takes into account two key time points: 1) the Spanish transition, characterised as a process of negotiation between elites (from top to bottom) with participation becoming slowly but increasingly consolidated outside the electoral framework; and 2) the "hatching" of civil society with the *indignados* movement, or 15M, in May 2011.

The first time point is key because it sets the bases for representative democracy, and allows the gradual "re-emergence" of "civil society" to be framed (in both practical

and academic domains, and in research about plural forms of popular engagement). The second time point is notable as the representative driver of experimentation in the civil society sphere when it sought to influence the domain of electoral politics. Mentioning these two time points by no means implies that there have not been other significant moments of activism or participation between the two (worth remembering, for instance, are the anti-NATO protests in 1986, the mass demonstrations against the Iraq War in 2003, or the influential protests after the Atocha bombings in Madrid on 11 March 2004). Nonetheless, the transition and 15M are two key time points for framing and observing some current cases of citizen participation that give rise to complex and, up to a point, hybrid logics. We now look at how these two events are relevant.

As regards the first time point, the Spanish transition period, historians have extensively described its marked top-to-bottom nature (García, 1997; Rodríguez López, 2015), intensive decision-making activity, and options to participate limited to political parties and elections, the process remaining closed to other elements or participating actors (Morán, 1991; Subirats, 1999). Studies on civil society, volunteering or social movements all conclude that the institutionalist and State bias of the transition process, along with a weak civil society, led to the slow consolidation of non-electoral forms of participation. In the same line, various studies on volunteering find that at the beginning of the transition, this activity was met with scepticism and reserve by the political powers, trade unions, and public opinion in general (Mora Rosado, 1996; Casado, 1995). This negative stance gradually waned in the 1990s, coinciding with the consolidation of the voluntary sector in terms of regulation, numbers of participants and public acceptance and popularity. Research on the voluntary sector identifies the 1990s as the period in which it emerged and became established (Rodríguez Cabrero, 1997; Marbán Gallego & Rodríguez Cabrero, 2006). This gradual consolidation of forms of citizen action has also been examined by Subirats (1999) and Mota (1999) who, within the theoretical framework of civil society, have also explored the weak and slow progress of both associationism and participation linked to the civil sphere compared with other European countries. In the field of social movement research, Laraña's detailed study traces their evolution in Spain from the initial phase of submission to political parties, then through defiance or emancipation, notably triggered in 1984 with

the socialist government's U-turn on joining NATO¹, and was finally consolidated in the 1990s (Laraña, 1990).

The second significant point in time to frame the new forms of citizen participation (beyond the electoral process) in the Spanish political context is the irruption of what is known as 15M. This citizen protest movement appeared on 15 May 2011, and has spawned a rich and complex repertoire of political activism. In the context of economic crisis, unemployment and austerity measures, and given citizen disaffection with representative institutions and the proliferation of corruption cases, a new citizen movement emerged, generating significant innovations in Spain's recent history. One feature of this citizen movement is the way it manages to constantly innovate, which helps it remain active over a long period, as evidenced in the diverse forms of participation that have defined Spain's rich complex political-activist ecosystem (Tormey, 2015; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Simsa and Totter, 2017; Postill, 2017). A constant stream of new initiatives have appeared since 2011, first, mainly in the form of street protests and demonstrations, and later reflected in the political institutionalisation of numerous platforms and new political parties. Demonstrations, occupations in public squares, actions to stop evictions, self-management initiatives, bank boycotts, popular legislation initiatives, protests outside politicians' homes (*escraches*)² and new political parties are just some of these new forms of political expression. This movement has received much academic attention, particularly in the field of studies on social movements, which include works by Flesher Fominaya (2014), Benski et al. (2013), Tejerina and Perugorría (2012), Postill (2013), Gerbaudo (2012) and Hughes (2011).

Academic research on civil society, social movements and new volunteering initiatives in Spain's young democracy has become established in the last few decades, as testified by a large body of literature. Many of these studies have focused on specific aspects of participation, which include civil, volunteering or citizen protest actions of the same kind observed in other contexts. The question we now ask is what types of significant initiatives (from both the recent past and the present day) have traits that

¹ In 1984, the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Party) changed its position on Spain joining NATO from the "No NATO entry" slogan to favouring Spanish membership and campaigning for "YES" in the NATO referendum in 1986.

² *Escraches* are demonstrations outside politicians' homes and have their origins in Argentina in the 1990s. In the Spanish case those targeted were the politicians responsible for deciding whether to proceed with a popular legislative initiative. The Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) began using this strategy in March 2013 as a way of pressurising politicians to ensure their demands were heard and to form a collective negotiation process (Romanos, 2014).

hinder the strict division between the areas of “volunteering” and “civic action”. We therefore now examine four cases in which the common categorisation of popular engagement is challenged.

3. Four thought-provoking cases on the blurring of boundaries

3.1 Platform 0.7: a historic case in which NGOs opened up to activist protest

One historic case in Spain of NGOs opening up to the domain of activism is Platform 0.7. After the transition and the slow but steady consolidation of a range of civil society groups in the 1980s, Platform 0.7 emerged, formally constituted as a non-governmental association, whose members worked towards “eradicating poverty and misery”.³ Its diverse initiatives included decentralised actions of mutual support and cooperation to combat poverty at local and municipal levels, and support for countries in the developing world. The platform is grounded on the principles of cooperation and human rights, and one of its main aims is to raise public awareness of the fight against poverty (Salazar, 1996). The name of this movement, Platform 0.7 is taken from its goal to pressurise the government to allocate 0.7% of Spanish GDP to cooperation and development, at a time when its actual figure was only 0.24%. At first glance, it easily falls into the domain of volunteering, as the national press widely reported at the time.⁴ Nonetheless, both its actions and the way they evolved complicate this initial classification.

The platform started taking initiatives to put pressure on the authorities, mainly through hunger strikes. Its political repertoire soon expanded to include a protest camp opposite the Spanish Ministry of Economy to pressurise the government into increasing Spain’s development aid budget. These actions attracted extensive media coverage and had a strong impact on public opinion in an international context marked by the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Studies on Platform 0.7 have shown that this initiative enabled an agenda to be drawn up and promoted the work of NGOs, which gained visibility and recognition, and were able to generate widespread social consensus about inequality and the need to promote cooperation with development (Jerez, Sampedro & López-Rey, 2008). As Jerez, Sampedro and López-Rey note, the appearance of this platform

³ <http://www.plataforma07.org/quienessomos.html>

⁴ See, for example, El País’s archive on Platform 0.7 (in Spanish): http://elpais.com/tag/plataforma_07/a/2

conferred “NGOs with public visibility to the world” in 1994 by turning them into social actors with “a huge media value”. Rizzardini also pointed to NGOs’ increased visibility, indicating that according to “the study commissioned by CONGDE to Riddel Invest in 1988, only 53% of Spanish people had heard of NGOs, and 10% considered their help useful, while nowadays everyone talks about NGOs” (Rizzardini, 2002: 341).

Platform 0.7 represented the collaboration of widely different civil groups linked to NGOs in their common demands, and one that favoured these actors’ visibility and legitimacy. The language the mass media used to report their development was that of volunteering and NGOs. The work of Platform 0.7 was recognised in 1996 by the newspaper *El País* with headlines such as “NGOs up in arms over scant cooperation efforts in 1995”⁵ or “Spain’s development aid fails to arrive, despite Government and NGO pact”,⁶ while other national newspapers such as *El Mundo* regarded the initiative as the “NGOs’ Platform or Coordinator”.⁷

However, both their evolution and political repertoire make this a complex case to classify. As mentioned above, its political actions included meetings, hunger strikes, protest camps, occupations, work committees, etc. Relations with State institutions during the development of NGOs were based on pressure and tension, since the platform’s action was also intended to influence and change the political agenda of representative institutions. The 1994 repertoire shares certain elements with 15M in 2011, especially in terms of meetings, committees, protest camps and occupations.

It is also important to observe how, over time, Platform 0.7 developed towards the characterisation typically associated with “social movement”. Jerez, Sampedro and López-Rey consider 1998 to be a turning point when the Platform 0.7 initiative sparked a new “clearly participative, grassroots organisational profile” (2008: 297). One of the initiatives that came out of this platform, the *Red Ciudadana por la Abolición de la Deuda Externa* (Citizen Network to Abolish Overseas Debt; RCADE in Spanish), a horizontal, network-based coordination project with organisations promoted by Platform 0.7, has already been clearly defined with the social movement typology. Both Platform 0.7’s and RCADE’s own descriptions illustrate this shift in language use from

⁵ http://elpais.com/diario/1996/04/20/sociedad/829951213_850215.html

⁶ http://elpais.com/diario/1996/04/16/sociedad/829605625_850215.html

⁷ <http://www.elmundo.es/elecciones/feb24/noticias/not24-05.html>

references to “non-profit organisations”⁸ (Platform 0.7) to a network as a “social movement, a mobilisation of citizens that encourages people to actively participate”⁹ (RCADE).

In sum, Platform 0.7 and its evolution can be regarded as one of the first cases in which the traditional boundaries between popular engagement were blurred, as this organisation goes beyond the actions and objectives conventionally associated with volunteering or with civic action.

3.2 Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH): An association that is not easily classified as “civic”, “civil” or “political action”

In the previous point, we considered Platform 0.7 to be an example of what appears to be “volunteering” stepping outside the theoretical limits normally associated with this domain. We now turn to the *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, ARMH), which illustrates the type of initiative we consider difficult to classify as either “volunteering” or “civic action”¹⁰. ARMH was founded in 2000 to locate the bodies of victims of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the Franco dictatorship. Spain is currently one of the countries with the highest number of mass graves, and many relatives are still hoping to find members of their families, victims of the dictatorship.¹¹ This association, which was recognised in 2015 with the ALBA/Puffin Award for Human Rights Activism, came about as a civil society initiative committed to a task not undertaken by State institutions: gathering written and oral testimonies, and locating victims. The State’s position on this issue is explained by the 1977 Amnesty Law (Aguilar, 1996; Gálvez Biesca, 2006).

Formally, the ARMH organisation has a clear volunteering format: it is an NGO with members, volunteers and annual membership fees. The platform itself repeatedly uses the concepts of volunteers and volunteering to describe its members and the work

⁸ <http://www.plataforma07.org/quienessomos.html>

⁹ <http://www.rcade.org/rcade/index.htm>

¹⁰ <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/>

¹¹ It is estimated that Spain has the second largest number of mass graves in the world, only behind Cambodia. An estimated 114,226 people are still classified as “disappeared persons”. This information is updated and corroborated by ARHM. See: <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/s1-news/c1-ultimasnoticias/diamundial-de-los-desaparecidos/>

For some years now, as a result of citizen pressure, the Spanish Ministry of Justice has hosted a web page locating mass graves in Spain: http://mapadefosas.mjusticia.es/exovi_externo/CargarMapaFosas.htm

it does.¹² More specifically, ARMH has more than 5,000 associates and numerous volunteers from different fields (archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, documentary makers, etc.), as well as relatives and neighbours of victims, students, etc. International support has sometimes been forthcoming in excavations of mass graves. ARMH received some state subsidies prior to the election of the conservative Partido Popular in 2011. It also has outstanding collaboration agreements with organisations like the *Spanish Centro de Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* (Higher Council of Scientific Research, CSIC) and the *Sociedad de Ciencias Aranzadi* (Aranzadi Society of Sciences). Between 2000 and 2016, the NGO has carried out over 350 exhumations and located more than 8,500 people.

Although this structure follows the classic “voluntary sector” format, the work it undertakes and its relations with “institutional” politics might challenge this initial classification. The organisation itself defines its objectives as follows: “we work to make our past dignified, to seek justice for those who deserved it, but were unable to find it, and to examine our democracy in-depth”.¹³ ARMH’s work is evidently of the type that helps victims’ families: psychological support for relatives, reconstruction of cases and, in general, support for this initiative. It estimates that since it was set up, “we have been able to help dozens of families to recover the remains of their loved ones, and hundreds have learned the destination of their family relations. This is something that has not, to date, been done for them by a democracy since Franco died”.¹⁴ Yet since the ARMH was founded, it also has had a political aspect in that it monitors and identifies the failings of State political institutions. For example in 2002 it brought proceedings before the High Commissioner for the UN for Human Rights in an attempt to make the Spanish government apply international legislation on matters of forced disappearances. As a result of this pressure, in 2003 Spain appeared in a UN report by a working group on forced disappearance. As the association points out, not only has it carried out exhumations and amassed research on hundreds of cases, it has also been able to “put matters of historical memory on the political agenda”.¹⁵ Moreover, the association has

¹² In the platform’s description of its activities, the concept of “volunteer” appears fourteen times whereas “activism” is mentioned just once in relation to the Alba award. See <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/que-es-la-asociacion-para-la-recuperacion-de-la-memoria-historica-armh-2000-2012/>

¹³ <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/que-es-la-asociacion-para-la-recuperacion-de-la-memoria-historica-armh-2000-2012/>

¹⁴ <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/que-es-la-asociacion-para-la-recuperacion-de-la-memoria-historica-armh-2000-2012/>

¹⁵ <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/que-es-la-asociacion-para-la-recuperacion-de-la-memoria-historica-armh-2000-2012/>

managed to penetrate both the media and political agendas with its demands and its accomplishments (Stucki & de Abiada, 2004). ARMH was influential in ensuring enactment of the Historical Memory Law in 2007.¹⁶ In its day, this law helped to propel the ARMH in its activities. The association's relations with institutional politics are therefore also relevant, since its objectives go beyond support for victims' relatives. Its relationship with the political system has been varied, depending on the government in power, but there is no doubt that this relationship is a constant factor in the ARMH, whose fight for human rights draws on both social and political relations. Thus, can we associate this NGO exclusively with volunteering, or with civic action? Or is it perhaps neither wholly civic nor wholly voluntary, since it seems closer to an organisation with fuzzy boundaries?

3.3 Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH): a platform with both heterogeneous activist traits and typical volunteering features

One of the most outstanding and innovative platforms to appear in recent years in terms of experimentation and political dynamics is the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages, PAH). The PAH came into existence before the 15M movement, although its growing importance is linked to the movement's emergence in 2011 (Colau & Alemany, 2012; Haro Barba & Sampedro, 2011).

This network platform, which today has chapters in more than 145 cities, was founded in 2009 as part of a broader social movement that had been campaigning since 2003 for access to decent housing, to support people with problems of access to housing, and to reform the Spanish law on mortgages (Aguilar & Fernández, 2010; Romanos, 2014).¹⁷ In the last few years, PAH has raised public awareness of abusive clauses in many bank mortgage agreements, and in general, of the problems linked to lack of access to housing for a population suffering the devastating effects of a deep

¹⁶ This law can be consulted at: [http://www.mjusticia.gob.es/cs/Satellite/Portal/1292338919019?blobheader=application%2Fpdf&blobheadername1=Content-Disposition&blobheadervalue1=attachment%3B+filename%3DLey_de_la_Memoria_Historica_\(Ley_52_2007_de_26_de_Diciembre\).PDF](http://www.mjusticia.gob.es/cs/Satellite/Portal/1292338919019?blobheader=application%2Fpdf&blobheadername1=Content-Disposition&blobheadervalue1=attachment%3B+filename%3DLey_de_la_Memoria_Historica_(Ley_52_2007_de_26_de_Diciembre).PDF)

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch research has revealed a lack of attention to Spanish housing problems. A recent report concludes that “neither the central government nor parliament has conducted any in-depth inquiry into banking practices with respect to mortgages, or into the role of intermediaries such as real estate agencies”. Human Rights Watch (2014) “Shattered Dreams”. Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/de/node/125666/section/8> (accessed 26 February 2017)

economic crisis.¹⁸ PAH has developed a varied repertoire of political actions that include, among others, assistance and support for people that cannot afford their mortgages due to financial problems, blockage of evictions,¹⁹ popular legislative initiatives to change the Spanish housing law²⁰ and direct actions such as *escraches* to pressurise political elites.²¹ PAH is a paradigmatic case for rethinking the blurring of boundaries between civic action and volunteering in four main directions: its organisational forms, its actions, its goals and its discourses.

Regarding its organisational structure, this group came out of and was closely related to social movements in its informal beginnings. In 2011 the association was formally registered as a non-profit organisation. Yet compared to the institutionalised nature of some other voluntary organisations, its structure is extremely informal. PAH has a markedly assembly-type structure (González-García, 2015), where dozens of networks and nodes all over Spain collaborate, although each one maintains its own autonomy.²²

The actions PAH collaborators undertake are very plural and hard to identify using only the classic division between volunteering and social movement activism. A PAH activist might collaborate through support activities (psychological support for people facing economic hardship, collecting food and blankets, fundraising or free legal counselling), in the platform's internal organisation (communication tasks or organising assemblies), intervening in acts of civil disobedience (blocking evictions, *escraches*, bank occupations, etc.), or in political actions presented through institutional channels (the popular legislative initiatives presented in 2013 to change the Spanish housing law

¹⁸ In March 2013 the European Court of Justice considered Spanish laws too tough, and in contravention of the European Council Directive 93/13/ECC of April 1993. Court of Justice of the European Union Press Release No 30/13 (14 March 2013) Retrieved from: <http://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2013-03/cp130030en.pdf> (accessed 7 December 2014)

¹⁹ At the time of writing (February 2017), more than 2,045 evictions have been blocked by PAH activists. See the PAH website, <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/>

²⁰ In February 2013, PAH successfully brought the debate on mortgages and foreclosures to the Spanish Parliament following a popular legislative initiative that obtained 1.4 million signatures from supporters.

²¹ There was some debate as to the legality of *escraches* because they take place outside politicians' homes. They are, however, considered (by the courts) as non-violent acts of civil disobedience where activists seek to raise awareness about lack of attention to certain human rights. A high-profile *escrache* was held in front of the house of the Government's Vice-President, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría (5 April 2013). Despite complaints from government politicians, Madrid's Court number 4 considered the *escrache* a 'legal mechanism of democratic participation' and an 'expression of citizens' pluralism' (author's translation). See the judgement at: <http://ep00.epimg.net/descargables/2013/05/10/cb072919fb0bac890565b82873b2f89e.pdf>

²² Although the original PAH node was formally registered as an association in 2011, the formal definition of nodes varies widely in that some are associations, others are registered as neighbours' associations, and others have not formally registered.

is one example, and perhaps the later formation of new political parties with people involved in PAH is even more remarkable).

The diversity of this platform's actions is explained by its interest in extending its influence in many directions (Author, 2015). On the one hand, its support actions confirm its relation as members of society. PAH's aim is to create links of support and solidarity in the sphere of social relations. On the other hand, PAH also sets out to influence political power structures by working to reform housing legislation, pursuing various avenues to this end. Moreover, its initiatives move in different areas depending on the level of conflict: while it seeks majority support through, for instance, popular legislative initiatives, it also comes into direct conflict with institutions through acts of civil disobedience, like *escraches*. At the same time, PAH uses direct action to stop evictions, and in doing so achieves notable levels of solidarity from across the social spectrum through highly conflictive actions involving the public administration, banks and those directly affected.

Finally, the language the platform uses in its channels of communication – website, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and so on– also reflects its wish to present a transversal, undefined identity that can bring people with different backgrounds together for a common cause and under a new collective identity (González, 2015; Monterde et al., 2015). PAH does not identify itself with concepts such as activism or social movement, nor does it see itself as an NGO. It prefers to use concepts like “affected”, “platform”, “citizens”, “network” and “association”.²³ Platforms with political aims and similar concerns such as “*V de Vivienda*” (campaign for the right to decent housing), did not grow into a broader social movement in 2006 largely, Aguilar and Fernández argue, because they used “a radical, intransigent framework and had no strategies that could help them establish broad social alliances” (2010: 681). By contrast, PAH's communication strategy uses a discourse that is able to go beyond traditional labels and increase its influence (Author, 2015). Two of the most important names behind this initiative, Ada Colau and Adria Alemany, regard blurring the boundaries between volunteers and activists to be a success, stating that “most established and experienced PAHs have managed to integrate different levels of engagement of families so that the dividing line between activists, supporters and people affected by mortgage debt

²³ <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/criterios-para-constituir-una-pah.pdf>

becomes increasingly tenuous or even non-existent” (Colau & Alemany, 2012: 98). This new kind of collective integration and political communication is directly related to the channels of dissemination consolidated in 15M, an aspect we discuss briefly later in this paper.

The question posed by initiatives such as PAH is quite clear: can they be associated exclusively with classic social protest, or should they be identified with volunteering? Exclusively identifying this association with social movements would ignore its crucial support work. Associating it only with volunteering would ignore all the platform’s demands and political struggle (at least if the basic differentiation between the two areas is maintained). Perhaps, then, this is a significant case in which classic theoretical boundaries are, to a certain extent, blurred to the point that they take on the characteristics of a hybrid initiative.

3.4 Marea blanca and new municipalist political parties: a generalised blurring of boundaries?

As mentioned above, the Spanish political context in the civil society domain has undergone a high level of political experimentation in recent years (Tormey, 2015). After the emergence of 15M, a varied and complex political repertoire was consolidated, including actions like demonstrations, occupations of public squares, actions to stop evictions, self-management initiatives, bank boycotts, *mareas* (citizen “waves” of protest), popular legislation initiatives, protests outside politicians’ homes (*escraches*) and new (activist) political parties. PAH is an example of an initiative associated mainly with activism, sharing key elements of what we call “volunteering”. The Spanish context is interesting because, apart from the cases in which the boundaries between “volunteering” and “activism” blur, this trend towards hybrid forms of organisations is also spreading among other clearly differentiated fields, such as participation through “civil society” or through political parties. This, for instance, particularly affects cases like the new municipalist parties known as “*en común*” (in common). There are also cases that promote initiatives or logics which move away from actors’ classic forms of organisation, trade unions for instance, seen in what are known as *mareas ciudadanas* (citizen waves). These cases help introduce the question of whether the blurring of some classic conceptual boundaries is actually spreading into more areas.

Citizen *mareas*, or public protests, are the initiatives that began in 2012 against public spending cuts and to defend essential public services. These *mareas* were identified by the colours associated with their fields of action: *marea blanca* (white for the health service), *marea verde* (green for education), *marea granate* (maroon for forced migration), etc. These initiatives are interesting because they are political projects which, linked to social protest, have dynamics that present both “horizontal” and “vertical” elements. For instance, they follow traditional, vertical trade union models, close to representative structures, in their dealings with the public administration. Yet they also incorporate the new culture and codes from 15M in the form of open assemblies and identities in which professionals, affected parties, parents, students and others can all engage (Monterde, 2013). These are institutionalised platforms that draw up manifestos and aspire to negotiate with representative structures but, at the same time, they are also openly inclusive and distributed places for self-organisation.

These hybrid initiatives are innovative in the way they bring together traditional structures and new dynamics by adopting traditional trade union tactics, but they are more self-organised, inclusive, distributed and horizontal in terms of their actions. This structure has attracted participants from a wide range of backgrounds, including experts, service users, professionals, members of NGOs and activists from social movements. Its biggest success was achieved by the Madrid *marea blanca* which, in 2013 and 2014, uncovered corruption in an attempt to privatise numerous hospitals in the region, and brought the process to a halt. Demonstrations, reports, assemblies and negotiation with representatives form part of the *mareas*’ repertoire of strategies. Initiatives like *marea blanca* are interesting for the present study because they are classified as a “trade union” or “social movement”, and are seen as being highly problematic in a pure sense.

Like all the movements that came out of and are linked to 15M, an essential characteristic of the *mareas ciudadanas* is the way they formulate alternative discourses around the definition of their identity. 15M forged a broad collective identity in which the organisers gave up their own particular agendas and identities in favour of merging in a shared political project (Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Old manifestos and slogans were put to one side so as to bring diverse groups together. This was frequently seen in the 15M demonstrations of 2011, and in the subsequent projects linked to or coming out of the 2011 mobilisations. Both PAH and the disparate *mareas ciudadanas* seek open labels that can be easily appropriated through transversal appeals which are not

grounded on identity premises (Monterde et al., 2015; Candón Mena, 2013). This aspect also shaped the definition of the *mareas* as organisations that encourage blurred edges in their initiatives, and whose participants reject comparisons with traditional trade unions or social movements.²⁴

Another form of political expression that has appeared in Spain, and which is perhaps even more difficult to classify, is that some initiatives have jumped from the fields of “civil society” or “activism” to party politics. New political parties have erupted onto the Spanish electoral stage after years of “street politics”. Some of these new parties take up the claims of the 15M, but with the difference that they must now be defended in representative institutions. One of the most outstanding cases is the new party led by Ada Colau, PAH’s spokesperson for several years (2009–2014), which now controls Barcelona’s city council. The *Barcelona en Común* political project, founded in 2014, has also been the inspiration for the more than 37 “*en común*” initiatives (including *Ahora Madrid*, *Marea Atlántica*, *Málaga Ahora*, *Participa Sevilla*, *Zaragoza en Común*, *Valencia en Común* and *Castelló en Moviment*) and their political projects in which grassroots activists stand for election and have entered representative institutions in force (Font, 2017). The interesting point about these initiatives is that they are projects whose internal dynamics are self-defined as “anti-political” in that they reject the hierarchical structure and discourse of traditional political parties built on the neat division of labour among leaders, cadres and mass members.

As with the *mareas*, these initiatives also prioritise the importance of consolidating new frameworks or discourses when defining their projects. In *Barcelona en Común*’s 913-word founding manifesto, for example, the word “party” appears just once, and is used disparagingly when they state, “we want to avoid the old logic of parties”.²⁵ Instead, words like “citizens” (6 mentions) or “initiatives” (6 mentions) predominate. It is noteworthy that across the board, these “*en Comú*” electoral initiatives avoid any association with the political party format and reject the importance of political representatives. They present themselves as platforms, initiatives or candidatures (not parties) of citizens or the people (not political representatives).²⁶

²⁴ Websites like that of *Marea Granate*, (in Spanish) show how broad labels are used to describe their activities and characteristics: <http://mareagranate.org/manifiesto/>; “horizontal movement”, “citizen initiative”, and “collective” are some of the terms they use to define themselves.

²⁵ English translation at <https://guanyembarcelona.cat/lets-win-barcelona/>

²⁶ Evidence of this can be seen on the following websites:

Barcelona en Comú: <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/>

Ahora Madrid: <https://conoce.ahoramadrid.org/>

As well as aspects related to their internal organisation and new discourses, several studies have highlighted significant innovations in their political aims, noting that they are best understood as a way of extending pressure and political influence from civil society to representative institutions (Tormey, 2015; Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel & García, 2017; Author, 2015). They are, therefore, regarded as a broader effort by citizen initiatives to provide greater opportunities for participation, and close the distance between politicians and citizens, and between State and civil society (Subirats, 2015). Moreover, as Tormey's analysis concludes, they are structures that show a general shift away from long-standing forms of political organisation to fleeting, evanescent and immediate styles of political interaction (2015). The organisational potential offered by digital tools and new consolidated political activist cultures in Spain post-15M has led many activists to experiment with the party formula as one more sphere of action, complementing the pressure from civil society.

The obvious question that arises from this situation is: to what extent can these initiatives maintain (or promote) both logics at the same time, or is it possible to combine the two areas? (which we normally theorise about and understand as being highly differentiated). Precisely on this latter question, some cases, like the *mareas* or the street politics parties, give us some insight into how, up to a point, some of the distinctive defining characteristics of certain concepts become blurred, such as trade unions, political parties or movements.

4. Some conclusions on the theoretical discussion of popular engagement

The cases we present are just some examples in which the commonly accepted taxonomy can sometimes become a problem, or where not all the elements associated with the definitions of “activism” or “volunteering” are exactly or purely met. This paper obviously presents just a few paradigmatic cases, which are far from representative of the complex and plural political activist scenario in Spain. However, these cases help illustrate that the differentiation between, for example, “formal” (or institutionalised) and “informal” (or not institutionalised) actors is not always justified.

Por Cádiz Sí Se Puede: <https://porcadiz-sisepuede.info/>

Castellón en Moviment: <https://castelloenmoviment.org/>

Marea Atlántica: <http://mareatlantica.org/>

On the political party *Podemos*, various studies examine the use of conceptual frameworks in their communication strategy and the influence of authors such as Laclau and Mouffe. See, for example, Errejón (2014), Palao (2016), Author et al. (2017).

Likewise, there are some examples in which volunteering cannot be associated with what is merely private (or social relations), nor can social movement activism be associated with what is purely public and linked exclusively with the political conflict (or demand). It is certainly not our intention to claim that no actors fit the definition of what we normally associate with NGOs, or that others have traits conventionally known as social movements.

What we attempt to do through this analysis is to think over the fact that there are cases which operate in blurred or hybrid grey areas, which cannot be easily classified into existing conceptual categories. These cases have an outstanding meaning when evaluating, measuring or reflecting on popular engagement in political contexts like the Spanish one. Concepts applied to empirical studies on several occasions allow us to appreciate the relevance of this conceptual debate on the notion of popular engagement. For example, let us imagine that we want to measure the “level” of a population’s commitment or participation, and we have information on the number of people formally registered in various civil society organisations. No doubt this would provide us with some useful and necessary information. Yet, at the same time, it would not be enough to understand the levels of participation and experimentation in the Spanish political context, as it would leave out people who participate in such influential initiatives like those promoted by PAH or the *mareas*, for which there is no registration.

The existence and consolidation of novel emerging forms of participation lead us to consider the need to contemplate blurred or fuzzy areas compared with traditionally differentiated participation types. In the cases examined here, Platform 0.7 and the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) emerge as examples with a degree of fuzziness, since some of their characteristics do not align with a pure form of popular engagement, either volunteering or civic action. Platform 0.7 is a historical case that ushered in the language of NGOs and gave them visibility in the newly established democracy; however, its conflictive relationship with the State and its evolution are more similar to those of a social movement. In turn, the formal structure of the ARMH bears some resemblance to our notion of a voluntary organisation, but its demands and mobilisations can be more closely associated with typical elements of activism. Both these organisations can be classified as fuzzy because of their defining characteristics (see table 1 below).

Definition and self-definition	Volunteering	Activism
Platform 0.7 Focus on defending and promoting cooperation and human rights. It brought attention to NGOs in the Spanish post-transition context.	<i>Formal</i> Initial language and structure similar to that of NGOs	<i>Informal</i> Evolution towards clearly participative forms of mobilisation and with a grassroots organisational profile.
	<i>Private and social relations</i> -	<i>Political conflict and demands</i> Draws on a wide repertoire (hunger strikes, protest camp, occupations, work committees) based on conflictive relationships with the authorities, aimed to promote support for development.
Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) The platform itself repeatedly uses the concepts of volunteers and volunteering to describe its members and the work it does	<i>Formal</i> With formal members, volunteers and annual membership fees	<i>Informal</i> -
	<i>Private and social relations</i> Psychological support for relatives and support to reconstruct the cases of disappearance.	<i>Political conflict and demands</i> Political demonstrations, protests and actions to change political decision-making on memory policies.

Table 1. Fuzzy typology

In addition to the fuzzy forms of popular engagement, other cases such as the PAH follow what we term hybrid logics. These initiatives simultaneously combine elements associated with both activism and volunteering in their structures, forms of participation and demands (see table 2). They also reflect on the nature of their organisations, explicitly rejecting any identification with a single or traditional form of popular engagement. In these cases hybridisation is not only defined by the structures and practices of the organisation, but also as something its members deliberately introduce and encourage, turning it into a defining element of their actions.

Definition/ Self-definition	Volunteering	Activism
PAH PAH does not identify as either a social movement, or as an NGO, preferring to use concepts like “affected”, “platform”, “citizens”, “network” and “association”.	<i>Formal</i> In 2011 the association was formally registered as a non-profit organisation. It has headquarters and holds regular meetings.	<i>Informal</i> It has an informal and markedly assembly-type structure, in which dozens of networks and nodes all over Spain collaborate. Each node retains its own autonomy. Horizontal links between members predominate.
	<i>Private and social relations</i> PAH’s aim is to create links of support and solidarity in the sphere of social relations; provides psychological and material support to citizens affected by austerity and housing problems.	<i>Political conflict and demands</i> It has a complex relationship with the political power structures. On one hand it uses institutional channels to present initiatives for legal reform such as popular legislative initiatives. On the other hand, it also comes into direct conflict with institutions through acts of civil

		disobedience such as <i>escraches</i>
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Table 2. Hybrid typology

This characterisation of organisational hybridity between volunteering and civic activism also affects, as we have seen, other new forms of political expression where the distinction between “political party” and “civil society actor”, or between “trade union” and “social movement” is questioned; the case of the new “*en común*” political parties or the *mareas* are good examples (Tormey, 2015). Examining such cases allows us to appreciate the complexity that classifying forms of popular engagement entails and the tendencies towards hybrid organizations.

In Spain, this has occurred with the progressive consolidation of democracy, which has gained more importance with the appearance of new political initiatives after 2011. We have seen how, especially in the wake of 15M, the actors involved shun many of the labels they are often tagged with. Conceptual pairs such as activist/volunteer or social movements/volunteering are not widely adopted in such significant initiatives as PAH or the *mareas*, which tend to use broad, diffuse concepts like platforms or citizen collectives (precisely in an attempt to attract those who are normally separated into different concepts of “activist” or “volunteer”).

This text helps consider theoretical and conceptual discussion, which determines the first steps to rethink and reshape the meaning and forms of popular engagement in Spain. This study aims to highlight the need for future research to carefully consider the blurring of classic conceptual boundaries in the understanding of popular engagement in Spain, a context marked by a notable hybridisation of initiatives and dynamics of citizen participation, particularly in recent years. Our exploration of relevant cases shows that only by considering this fuzziness or hybridisation can we hope to understand this complex context and measure it in future quantitative studies.

Future studies could use quantitative methodologies to complement this kind of analysis by examining the weight of different forms of citizen participation. It would also be interesting to measure and examine classic forms of participation compared to newer ones. Another useful research line would be to explore not only the organisational dimension of these initiatives, as in this study, but also the individual dimension. This approach could be taken in empirical studies to explore whether or not fuzzy or hybrid organisations foster new dynamics of cooperation both internally and at an inter-organisational level. For the time being, we conclude by stressing that a

political context like the Spanish one allows us to appreciate the presence of outstanding overlapping tendencies and convergences between areas which are sometimes presented as clearly separate ones, like “volunteering” or “activism”.

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