# Anthropologists Meet the 15M: The Rise of Engaged Ethnography

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***Abstract:*** In 2011 we were involved as activists in labour, 15M, and the housing and feminist movements. Part of our scientific production became intertwined with our militancy. In addition, drawing on our research and militant experiences in the cycle of struggle that started in 2011, we noticed that the process of questioning and delegitimisation was also affecting the ambit of the social sciences. Thus, we undertook a review of the scientific literature on the 15M in order to ascertain whether the epistemological perspectives and the methodological choices of these studies were related in some way to the crisis of representation that was affecting other social institutions. This is the objective of this article. First, it explains the strategy we followed in searching the literature on the 15M. Second, it introduces the findings of the literature review on this social movement, both in Spanish and in international academic journals. Third, it proposes a typology of engaged ethnographic research. Fourth, it provides a series of limitations and precautions that researchers should bear in mind when putting this research technique into practice. Fifth, it includes a final section synthesising the main conclusions of this article regarding the anthropological production of the 15M, the types of engaged ethnography, and the limitations of this technique.

**Keywords:** social movements, collective action, 15M, ethnography, engaged ethnography

***Résumé :*** En 2011, nous nous sommes engagés comme activistes dans le mouvement syndical, le mouvement du 15M, les luttes pour le logement et les luttes féministes. Une partie de notre production scientifique s'est entremêlée à notre activisme. Nous avons en outre constaté, à partir de nos enquêtes et de nos expériences militantes dans le cycle de luttes entamé en 2011, que le processus de questionnement et de délégitimation en cours affectait aussi le domaine des sciences sociales. Nous avons donc entrepris une revue de la littérature scientifique sur le 15M afin de vérifier si les perspectives épistémologiques et les choix méthodologiques de ces études étaient liés d'une certaine façon à la crise de la représentation qui touchait d'autres institutions sociales. Cet article est l'aboutissement de cette enquête. Nous expliquons tout d'abord notre stratégie de recherche bibliographique sur le 15M. Deuxièmement, nous exposons les résultats de notre revue de la littérature sur ce mouvement social publiée tant en espagnol que dans les revues académiques internationales. Troisièmement, nous proposons une typologie de l'ethnographie engagée. Quatrièmement, nous discutons des limites et des précautions que les chercheurs devraient prendre en compte lorsqu'ils appliquent cette méthode. Enfin, nous résumons nos principales conclusions concernant la production anthropologique sur le 15M, les différents types d'ethnographie engagée, et les limites de cette méthode.

**Mots-clés :** Mouvements sociaux, action collective, 15M, ethnographie, ethnographie engagée

The explosion of the 15M (15 May) movement onto the scene in Spain in 2011 was not only a collective response to a situation of economic crisis, but also an expression of a deep crisis of representation that affected political and economic institutions such as the banks, the state, political parties and even trade unions. Born from a set of protest camps and demonstrations denouncing the flaws of the Spanish democratic system, it spread throughout the country, creating a network of activists organised through direct democratic methods, thus succeeding in mobilising and gaining support from important sectors of Spanish society (Castells 2012). This movement propelled the questioning of many dimensions and structures of the society. The movement's militancy, in fact, brought to the debate opened by the 15M other topics and issues that had their own dynamics of implantation into the political agenda of many Spanish institutions, such as gender relations, labour, ethnic relations, housing and disability. In many Spanish cities, local activists launched working committees in order to address these specific issues.

In 2011, we were involved as activists in labour, 15M, housing and feminist movements. Part of our scientific production became intertwined with our militancy. In addition, drawing on our research and militant experiences in the cycle of struggle that started in 2011, we noted that the process of questioning and delegitimisation was also affecting the ambit of the social sciences.

The publication of research conducted by ethnographers who are at the same time activists, both in the 15M and in other current social movements, brings to the fore ethical dilemmas that have been characteristic of

applied anthropology and the debate about the economic, political and cultural conditions of scientific production.

With regard to the ethical dilemmas, in the state of the art of the discipline there is a certain consensus over the difficulty of being neutral when conducting ethnographic research, a practice that necessarily implies producing intersubjective relations (Velasco and Diaz de Rada 2009). The possibility of scientific neutrality in hegemonic anthropology was put into question by critical currents during the 1970s. Anthropological practice became seen as intrinsically connected with the defence of European colonialism and the interests of the US government in the context of the Cold War. The critique led to the elaboration of the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association and to a set of debates over the necessity of ethical reflection on conflicts of interest in carrying out anthropological research (Fluehr-Lobban 2013). In addition, several currents within anthropology have adopted a conscious position in support of the communities studied. Both in the classical works of Tax (1958) with the Fox Indians and in Holmberg's (1955) research at Cornell University and the Indigenous Institute of Peru, anthropologists became supporters and promoters of social and political changes via participatory interaction.

This entails a set of dilemmas about the "tolerable level" of interference by anthropologists and about the role that a researcher's values play in his or her immediate relationship with the community that is the "object of research." These works have often received criticism for using populist rhetoric and for exaggerating their practical achievements, although their impact in academia is irrefutable (Foley 1999). This proactive perspective has, nevertheless, been consolidated within the Participatory Action Research framework (Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy 1993) and, most prominently, in works focused on indigenism and communities of political activists.

With regard to the conditions of scientific production, Bourdieu's (2002) questioning of the separation between *scholarship* and *commitment* can be understood as a way of defending an engaged social science. Bourdieu, after the Seattle demonstration in 1999 that marked the birth of the global justice movement, called researchers to participate in public affairs in two directions: (a) producing informed criticisms of the systems of symbolic domination and (b) taking part in collective projects of political invention. However, this commitment, suggests Bourdieu (2002, 45), must obey "as much as possible the existing rules of the scientific terrain". Bourdieu was a clear defender of the autonomy of the *intellectual field*. This autonomy, in his view, was the precondition for the engagement of intellectuals in the political field, since it allowed social scientists to maintain a critical view of

power structures. From our point of view, Bourdieu's "call to arms" must be celebrated, but what he calls "the rules of the scientific terrain" are not fixed; instead, they are subject to symbolic struggles and negotiations that depend on economic, political, and cultural dynamics.

According to Ortner (2016), prevailing anthropological trends are closely related to the rise of neoliberal capitalism. She identifies several trends from the mid-1970s to the mid-2010s that correspond to a certain extent to how neoliberalism unfolds in certain national and local contexts. Thus, the re-emergence of the study of resistance in the twenty-first century appeared accompanied by new reflexive and engaged ethnographic approaches.

Recent research has pointed out the potentials of reflexive methodologies for the study of social movements and popular resistance to the economic crisis. Juris (2012), for example, has shown the potential of ethnographic research for identifying how the use of social media has contributed to transforming the logics of collective action in the Occupy movement. Kalantzis (2012) has combined visual inquiry with reflexive ethnography in order to explore how representations of Cretan-ness, which emphasise combativeness and resistance, contribute to building an ambivalent discourse on Greek national identity. Razsa and Kurnik (2012) have defended a type of collaborative ethnography that highlights the provisional nature of the accounts, enabling the observer to grasp the different textures of direct democratic practices against certain epistemological positions – such as that of Žižek (2007) – that are unable to capture their significance. Theodossopoulos (2016), in the same manner, has examined the contradictory character of humanitarianism in austerity-ridden Greece using cartooning as an ethnographic medium.

Along this line, this review article provides a state of the field for research on the Spanish 15M movement in order to reflect on how the context of crisis has affected anthropological approaches. It argues that the deepening of neoliberal policies has opened new breaches in Spanish institutions (including the Academy[1]), and that these tensions have acted as an opportunity for the rise of activist and reflexive methodologies that bring the economic, cultural and political contradictions of capitalism into the ambit of scientific production. In other words, this article highlights that neoliberalisation of the academy has fueled a significant epistemological and methodological shift in Spanish social sciences that has been expressed in the flourishing of engaged ethnographic research.

First, the article explains the strategy we have followed in searching the literature on the 15M movement. Second, it introduces the findings of a literature review on this social movement, both in Spanish and in international

academic journals. Third, it proposes a typology of engaged ethnographic research. Fourth, it provides a series of limitations and precautions researchers should bear in mind when putting this research technique into practice. Fifth, it includes a final section synthesising the main conclusions of this article regarding the anthropological production of the 15M, the types of engaged ethnography, and the limitations of this technique.

## Search Strategy

To find publications on the 15M movement, we adopted a three-step strategy. First, we analysed the content of the 45 Spanish anthropology journals that are included in the RESH[2] index from 2011 to 2017. Second, we explored the content of the three main international journals on collective action: *Social Movement Studies*, *Mobilization*, and *Research in Social Movements*, *Conflict and Change*. Third, we undertook a focused search of national and international journals of social sciences. As a result of this strategy, we identified 32 articles that studied the 15M or topics closely connected with this movement. We focused on the research questions, methodological design and thematic specialisation of those articles.

## State of the Field of Research: The Rise of Engaged Ethnographies and Militant Narratives

A first conclusion from the review of the scientific studies on the 15M is that social movements are not one of the main research topics for Spanish social anthropologists, in contrast to lines of research such as cultural heritage, indigenous studies, tourism, migration, religion, development or folklore. The most influential Spanish anthropology journals, such as *AIBR* or *Revista de Antropología Social*, have not published any articles on the 15M. Nonetheless, we found four special issues of several anthropology journals that address different topics related to the 15M: the 2013 special issue of *Revista de Antropología Experimental* [Journal of Experimental Anthropology] on the 15M; the 2014 special issue of the *Revista Andaluza de Antropología* on social movements; the 2017 special issue of the *Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares* [Journal of Dialectology and Popular Traditions] on contemporary Spanish emigrants, which contains several articles related to the 15M and emigrants' activism; and the 2017 special issue of the journal *Quaderns-e de Institut Català d'Antropologia* [e-Journal of the Catalan Institute of Anthropology], focusing on the municipal initiatives launched in 2014 that came to power in some of the most important Spanish cities (such as Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, A Coruña and Cádiz) and that reflected some of the discourses and identities of the 15M.

A new generation of Spanish cultural anthropologists have studied the 15M, including Carlos Diz, Antón Fernández de Rota, José María Manjavacas, Diego Allen-Perkins, Borja Rivero, María Ruiz Trejo, Nieves Gutiérrez Rubalcava, Adolfo Estalella, Alberto Corsín and Jesús Marquez. In general terms, Spanish anthropologists paid attention to determinate dimensions of this social movement: its insertion within the wider protest cycle that began with the alter-globalisation movement; its relationship to the labour movement (see Figure 1); the practice of direct democracy and the rise
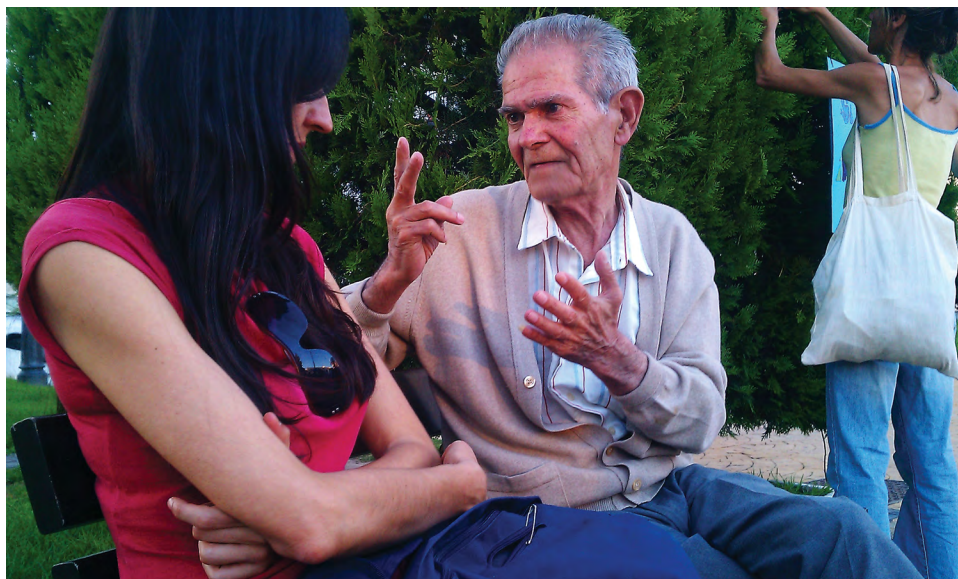


Figure 1: Young and senior citizens participated in meetings and demonstrations. ©Mika de la Cruz Imaging Solutions LLC.

of informal leadership; body politics; the electoral turn; and, above all, the generation of political identities and subjectivities.

In contrast to the relative lack of interest demonstrated by anthropologists, political scientists, geographers and sociologists have published more extensively on the 15M. Spanish scholars such as Manuel Castells, Eduardo Romanos, Eva Anduiza and Ernesto Castañeda and international researchers such as Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Neil Hughes have studied an array of dimensions of this social protest, such as online mobilisation channels; its connection with previous autonomous social movements; its spatial practices; its mutual influence with other actors such as the feminist, disability, free-culture and housing movements; states' repressive strategies; its contributions to political culture; the revitalisation of media and communication practices; and its influence on movements from other latitudes such as the Occupy movement. Two special issues about the cycle of political contestation opened by the 15M in 2011 have been published, one from a social geography perspective in *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* in 2015 and the other in the *Revista Española de Sociología* [Spanish Journal of Sociology], also in 2015.

Studies of the 15M have employed a variety of qualitative techniques: online and offline document analysis, semistructured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, analysis of the media etc. However, a good proportion of the research has opted for some sort of engaged ethnography and militant research. The weight of anthropological and qualitative techniques may have some relation to an interest in the collective identities, subjectivities and frames of this movement. In fact, the 15M was born as a paradigmatic example of a "new social movement," a type of movement in which culture plays a central role, in contrast to the "materialist" emphasis on classical social movements (Roca and Díaz-Parra 2017). The discursive impact of the 15M movement, its visible values, the rise of a new culture of disobedience, of a new iconography associated with citizen participation and the disruptive use of social conventions, of new contrahegemonic aesthetics linked to outrage (Figures 2 and 3), and the making of new symbolic universes make cultural factors an essential dimension for understanding this movement (García López 2013, 92).

The introduction of ethnographic techniques has favoured addressing in a more precise manner the types and subjectivities that operate behind collective action (García López 2013, 98). Nonetheless,



Figure 2: Protest camp in Madrid, 2011. People sleeping in sleeping bags and a placard reading "Your loot, my crisis." ©Mika de la Cruz Imaging Solutions LLC.

Figure 3: Massive 15M meeting in Madrid, 2011. ©Mika de la Cruz Imaging Solutions LLC.

most scholars – both anthropologists and non-anthropologists – have used some sort of engaged ethnography or militant research; that is, they have studied specific dimensions of this social movement drawing on, among other data, their own experiences as activists (Shukaitis, Graeber and Biddle 2007). This can be explained by the fact that there is a clear lack of interest among public funders in the study of this social movement, and researchers who generally study other manifestations of social life have published some articles that draw on their militant experiences.

## Types of Engaged Ethnographic Research

Drawing on our review of the academic literature on the 15M movement, we have identified four types of engaged ethnography depending on the form in which activism influences research strategies and processes. The first type is what we call *activist-influenced research*. In this case, the researcher's militant background plays a key role in the design of the research, the formulation of questions and hypotheses, and access to certain scenarios and subjects; however, data collection takes place by means of conventional techniques such as participant observation, qualitative interviews, document analysis and focus groups. The study of Romanos and Sádaba (2015) is a good example of this type. Their research consists basically of a discourse analysis, although the

selection of the research topic and the scope of the research were clearly influenced by the authors' activist backgrounds.

In their work, Romanos and Sádaba (2015) study the evolution of the reference frames of the 15M. They aim at explaining why so many activists of an autonomist movement such as the 15M, which contained strong opposition to the prevailing system of political representation, eventually participated in the formation of new political parties such as Podemos and a myriad of municipal initiatives. They conclude that this transition has been favoured by the production of new technophile frames that generated a political space defined by horizontal deliberation, decentralisation and distributed participation. They nevertheless avoid any technologically deterministic explanation of the electoral turn. Instead, they recognise that this turn responds to multiple historical, political and social factors, although they highlight the "elective affinities" between direct democratic forms and new communication technologies, especially those related to free software and open source (Romanos and Sádaba 2015, 18).

The study draws upon 12 qualitative interviews with key informants selected to represent the main organisations and positions around the anti-austerity movement: 15M, *Juventud Sin Futuro* (Youth without a Future), White Tide, Green Tide, *Ganemos* and *Podemos*.

Interviews were conducted in Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao between 2014 and 2015. The authors also analysed the apps, social media, and websites of such organisations.

They do not mention ethnography as a technique. In other studies, the authors conducted participant observation in several 15M events (Romanos and Sádaba 2016). There is no doubt that the authors' personal participation in autonomous movements played a role in their selection of research problems, methodologies and theory formation. Romanos, for example, conducted his PhD research on anarchist activism during Franco's dictatorship (Romanos 2011). Most of his academic production focuses on different dimensions and manifestations of social movements (in some cases including his own activist experience as a source). Sádaba, in addition, is involved in anti-copyright movements and has written in activist media such as the newspaper *El Salto*.

The second type is *complementary engaged ethnography*. In this model, most of the data for the study were collected by conventional techniques; nevertheless, researchers complemented this information with their personal participation in social movement events such as meetings, demonstrations and collective actions. This allows the triangulation of techniques and sources of information. The work of Arenas Conejo and Pié Balaguer (2014) is a good example of the use of engaged ethnography as complementary material. Their research on the disability commissions of the 15M drew mainly on an electronic survey and document analysis, but they also used materials from their own experiences as members of these commissions (235). Their approach addresses two emerging elements of political participation that tended to be ignored in classical explanations of collective action: first, the centrality of the notions of vulnerability and precariousness in mobilisations; and second, the use of the body as a political tool and a weapon for consensus. Thus, according to the authors, the 15M contributed to disseminating an updated version of the so-called social model of disability.

Effectively, the Spanish disability movement evolved from medical models to a social model during the 1990s. The rise of the 15M in 2011 was an opportunity to spread new forms of radical activism in the ambit of functional diversity due to the affinity between some of the 15M's demands and the principles of the social model. As 15M local groups extended throughout the country and organised, they set up work commissions on other topics such as housing, labour, communication, gender and functional diversity.

The study by Arenas Conejo and Pié Balaguer (2014) began with an open-ended questionnaire circulated via email to the commissions on functional diversity of

Madrid and Barcelona in the beginning of 2012. They also analysed the transcripts of the meetings of the 15M Madrid that were published online and the content of the website of the 15M in Barcelona. The bulk of the data they gathered and analysed came from these sources. Furthermore, the authors participated as activists in the commission on functional diversity of the 15M in Barcelona, and from that participation they were able to complement the data and develop theoretical explanations.

They argue that by participating in the 15M commissions, people with disabilities were able to align with the anti-austerity frame created by the 15M. In doing so, they were able to raise awareness and to disseminate the ideas of the social model and the human rights approach on disability. In particular, they studied how, starting from Standing's (2011) concept of *precariat* (which included people with disabilities, together with other categories), 15M activists produced a discourse that viewed vulnerability not as an exclusive condition of people with some sort of disability, but as something that affected almost everyone. Vulnerability became a constituent element of the new "us" constructed by this social movement.

In addition, they paid attention to the body dimension of the 15M protests (Figure 4). Building upon the work of Sutton (2007) they argued that collective action is not based exclusively on "great ideas"; it also implies an intense body compromise. They describe a debate in one assembly in Barcelona in 2011 after the police injured an activist who was in a wheelchair. Some people argued that he should not be in the protests, and the person with disability vindicated his right to participate. This episode contributed to producing new forms of social articulation, of generating a new collective identity with a common body that empowered people who traditionally have been marginalised.

The third model of engaged ethnography is *engaged ethnography strictly speaking*. In this type of research, the main source of primary information is the experience of the researchers themselves. Here other techniques can be used to complement self-experience. An article by Barranquero and Meda (2015) proposes that the rise of media and communication experiences managed by social movements and nonprofit organisations has implied an increase in citizen participation related to the production and dissemination of information on socially relevant events (in the case analysed in their study, social mobilisation in Spain from 2011 to 2014). According to these authors, the 15M movement strengthened the communication structure and networks of the Third Sector, something that they define as an unprecedented rise of

Figure 4: Demonstration of the 15M in Madrid. Open hands were a signal of peaceful attitude toward the police. ©Mika de la Cruz Imaging Solutions LLC.

media and communication experiences managed by social movements and nonprofit organisations.

Their research is located within the field of communication sciences, although they employ a series of anthropological techniques when approaching their research objective. Their main analytical concepts are Third Sector, understanding movements and nongovernmental organisations as an independent sector, and as equivalent to the public and private sectors; the notion of social movements, and some related concepts such as transversal movement, hybrid movement, communicational movement or movement of movements; and some ideas that have been widely spread by the work of Sydney Tarrow (1994), such as political opportunity structure and the concept of a protest cycle, in order to define the mobilisation period that began in 2011 with the "Arab Spring," 15M, Occupy, Yosoy132, and others.

The authors studied the role of alternative media in 2011 mobilisations. For this they combined document analysis with ethnographic fieldwork. First, secondary and documentary sources (mainly websites) are abundant and essential in this work; they provide important contextual information about the mobilisation cycle of 2011 and about recent developments in alternative media. This section covers half of the results of the article. Second, the case study draws mainly on fieldwork observation as a "result of the professional and personal experience of the authors." They combine their personal activist experience with semistructured interviews by reporters and persons in charge of alternative media during the period being studied. The ethnographic notes provide rich and exhaustive information on the role of alternative media and their coordination in order to cover certain events from 2011 to 2014. These events are narrated from the position of the authors' key informants and are accompanied by the narrative of interviewed subjects.

In the article, the authors highlight the growth of alternative media and their ability to exercise "counter-power," competing with both public and private mainstream media and consequently abandoning their original marginal position in social media. However, given their strong criticism of conventional media, the absolute lack of critique of the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the dissemination of information,

something that has been suggested by different authors (see Dean 2009), is noteworthy. The authors do not question the horizontality favoured by ICT, nor the categorical division between public, private and alternative media, as if these spheres could be separated unproblematically. They also identify self-publication with alternative media, ignoring the role of multinational companies such as Facebook in this sense. In addition, given the recent evolution of this movement and these media (some of the analysed media have disappeared and other have a marginal position with regard to the size of their audience), it could be said that their conclusions are excessively optimistic and even acritical with respect to the transformative potential of alternative media. This raises the question: To what extent did the authors' engagement in the processes they were studying lead to this vulnerability?

We call the fourth type *militant narrative*. This is a type of participatory research in which subjects are invited to take part actively in the knowledge production process, for example, writing papers describing their experiences and providing their explanations on social reality. The autobiography of Nuria and Marta, two Spanish emigrants, published in a special issue of the journal *Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares* represents this type (Matencio and Vilela 2017).

The text describes the life story of a young person with a university degree who emigrates from Spain to London in the context of economic crisis. The narrative is framed within the movement of Spanish emigrants after the crisis who became politicised with the demonstrations of 2011 and adopted the name Maroon Tide. Spanish emigrant activists were especially involved in actions for their voting rights and other social rights (Roca and Martín-Díaz 2017).

It is a text written in the first person, and addresses a concrete period of the narrator's life experience: a temporal migration as a result of the lack of labour opportunities in Spain and the ultimate decision to return to Spain. It begins with a personal presentation of the migrant person and the form in which she is situated within the historical and generational context. It is followed by a description of her representations, fears and expectations about the migration process, which is treated as an odyssey of young people who experience a first contact with personal autonomy by means of migration. The article narrates the creation of a new home, the labour experience, and the process of networking and building friendship bonds. Finally, the author describes the decision to leave the United Kingdom and return to Spain.

As an academic contribution to the knowledge of social movements, this type of narrative constitutes rich ethnographic material that does not aim at making any theoretical contributions nor at conducting a theoretically informed analysis of life experience. The responsibility of analysing the data *appropriately* falls to the reader and, of course, to academics who can use these documents as a source of primary data. This type of contribution is more material and a source for scientific anthropological work than a scientific work in its critical sense.

## Some Fundamental Precautions with  Engaged Ethnography

Even if the potentialities of engaged and reflexive ethnography have been proved by the large number of works in the last years, thus making substantial contributions to academic debate, and even if this has been more prevalent in social movement studies in general, there are some serious limitations and precautions that we have to address concerning this sort of ethnography. Being simultaneously a researcher and an activist creates two main problems: the self-reflection on method and rigour demanded by any scientific work, and the ethical implications of this methodology.

Engaged ethnography implies a particular way of collecting data. As stated in the previous sections, experience as an activist could be used in very different ways. In any case, precautions regarding triangulation of the information and a systematic way of compiling data seem to be essential for professional work. First, triangulation with other data seems to be essential for ensuring the veracity of the information, as well as for the detection of multiple biases, omissions and exaggerations in the researcher. Second, of course, formal interviews have to follow the usual recommendations of form and content (Valles 2002). In addition, the activist has to immediately collect his personal experiences and impressions in a field notebook or some similar document. In contrast, we would depend on the memory of the academic as the only assurance of fidelity to the events, an act that is completely unacceptable for an academic work. The optimal sequence in this regard is a previously planned self-ethnography as one of the sources of data for a research project. However, many times it is the habit of the social researcher himself or herself that drives him or her to collect notes about the significant social situations in which he or she is involved.

It is obvious that all types of ethnographic research imply some sort of engagement with the studied community. However, activist ethnography tends to demand a higher level of engagement. There is the problem of "estrangement" as one of the key elements of professional ethnography (Velasco and Díaz de Rada 2009),

which is obviously outside the discussion of an activist writing about the protest movements in which they have been involved. The lack of estrangement is a problem of ethnography conducted in urban and Western contexts, but it becomes more evident in the case of engaged research.

Political movement and organisation research has been a wide field for work and experimentation; in the last decades, the contradictory position of academics vis-à-vis activists has become a not-so-extraordinary situation. However, this type of research does not relieve the scholar from the ethical implications and imperatives of observant participation about informed consent, beneficence, nonmalfeasance and justice (see American Anthropological Association 2009). Again, the optimum sequence is previously planned research in which activists accompanying the experience of the social scientist are informed about the type of work in which they will be collaborating, as well as about the double role of the researcher as activist and academic. The aforementioned is absolutely necessary in formal interviews with main informants. In our experience, as this double role has become more and more common, activists are usually aware of the conditions of academics. This raises the risk of making invisible or naturalising the researcher's presence, which is obviously beneficial for the collection of information, but could lead to ethical conflicts and tensions with some of the other activists. In our experience, this risk is compensated by the beneficial and fair relations that are usually established between activist researchers and those who are just activists. This relation would probably be more equalitarian in this milieu and more informed than in any other type of ethnography because the objectives and expectations of researchers and activists are spontaneously shared (at least, as far as the objectives and expectations are shared in the organisation, meeting or public action in which the researchers are participating). In works on the 15M, one of the main objectives of the researchers has been to make some kind of contribution to the struggle against neoliberalism and austerity in which researchers and the subjects of study are engaged, usually for long periods of time. In sum, it can be said that this type of activist ethnography is, most of the time, spontaneously "beneficial" in ethical terms. But, in the meantime, as the revised bibliography demonstrates, the legitimate objective of being beneficial can imply a loss of critical perspective. In the case of engaged ethnography, this manifests in a lack of self-critique. From the viewpoint of contemporary anthropological currents, one cannot demand objectivity in these works, yet one can demand a critical engagement with the ethnographers' own conceptions. An excess of benevolence can lead the ethnographer to overestimate the political and social relevance of their research subject and ignore its limitations, something that can be found in many publications on the 15M.

## Concluding Remarks

This review article provides a description of the state of research on the Spanish 15M movement. Analysis of the literature on this movement reveals that, until recently, social movements have not been a central topic for Spanish social anthropologists. A group of anthropologists – mostly from younger generations – has studied different manifestations of the 15M, mainly in special issues of Spanish anthropology journals. As Arribas Lozano (2014) has stated, the main contribution of anthropology and ethnography to the study of social movements is the ability to chart emerging social phenomena by focusing on social processes, locating research in the heart of relational networks, listening to the discourses, knowing practices, and studying the content of the plots for meanings that are constructed collectively.

Most of the existing literature on the 15M has been published by sociologists, political scientists, and, to a lesser extent, geographers rather than anthropologists. Analysis of this bibliography shows a rise in the use of engaged ethnography by social scientists who were at the same time activists. This tendency demonstrates that methodological decisions can be deeply influenced by the social context in which researchers conduct their research (in this case, a crisis of political representation and the burst of social movements as a response to neoliberal policies). The article argues that since the neoliberal response to the crisis in Spain has challenged academic autonomy, this has had as a side effect the rise of reflexive methodologies that attempt to contest and renegotiate certain rules of the scientific field (in particular, the positivist conception of academic neutrality). These approaches, however, are not exempt from contradictions and limitations.

The article has identified four different types of engaged ethnography, depending on the role of personal experience in the production of scientific knowledge: *activist-influenced research*, in which activist experience influences certain research decisions but data are collected completely by conventional techniques; *complementary engaged ethnography*, where engaged ethnography is used as a complement to triangulate and complement data gathered mainly by conventional research techniques; *engaged ethnography strictly speaking*, in which most of the data derive from the

personal experience of the activist/researcher; and *militant narratives*, where activists who are not professional researchers are invited to participate in publications and produce knowledge by writing about their experiences and explanations.

The article, finally, warns about the limitations and risks of engaged ethnographic research. In particular, it suggests the need for rigour and warns about the ethical implications of this methodology. The article recommends the triangulation of information and a systematic collection of information to avoid the risks of a lack of scientific rigour. In relation to the ethical aspects, the article suggests that engaged ethnography can be spontaneously "beneficial" in ethical terms, since it promotes more informed, collaborative and horizontal relationships between researchers and activists.

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## Notes

1  It must be noted, for example, that the number of temporary professors at Spanish universities decreased 24 percent in the academic year 2013/2014 from the previous academic year (Parellada 2014). These cuts were applied from 2011 to 2015. The precarious nature of young researchers' employment appeared to be combined with the neoliberal management of universities that was fostered a few years earlier with the implementation of the *European Space of Higher Education*, profoundly transforming the economic, political and cultural circumstances of intellectual production (Gómez and Jódar 2013).

2  The RESH index measures the impact of the main Spanish academic journals of social sciences and humanities. Available at http://epuc.cchs.csic.es/resh/.

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