Berlin. Wie bitte?[1]

An Exploration of the Construction of Online Platforms for the Mutual Support of Young Spanish Immigrants in Berlin

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The economic crisis that erupted in 2008 and spread throughout much of the global economy severely affected many countries in Europe, notably Spain. Unemployment rates soared and youth unemployment rates peaked at over 50 percent. These figures, together with the austerity measures agreed on by the Spanish Government, influenced the adjustment of employment regulations and prompted a mass exodus. Thousands of young people began their march to other countries, especially in Northern Europe and Latin America, to seek employment and better working conditions. Germany became one of the desirable destinations and, within Germany, Berlin was established as a favorable place. Given the high growth in the numbers of Spanish immigrants moving to Berlin, many of them highly influenced and inspired by the demonstrations against austerity measures that had spread through Europe in 2011, the Spanish community decided to organize and create networks of solidarity and mutual support. They shared common principles: self-management and assembly-based decision-making. Groups that were organizing themselves outside of public institutions made the internet their field of operation; this allowed them to experiment and create innovative civic alternatives.

With this research, I tried to understand the origin and evolution of these groups: What are their roots? What motivated members to participate? How do they work and operate, and how to they embody social innovation? I also sought to understand the extent to which the use of digital tools affects their daily practices and sociability. How do these groups create bridges between the "digital culture" and the daily interactions that constitute the group work in the city of Berlin? In order to answer these queries, I found a central question that constituted a starting point, an issue that underpins all the enquiries listed

1 | My translation from German: "Berlin, sorry, what did you say?".

above: What are the needs and everyday experiences of Spanish immigrants living in Berlin? Then subsequently, what alternatives or possible solutions have been created with the use of the internet?

My main objective in this research therefore was to locate the needs of Spanish immigrants living in Berlin and to understand how the collective groups created strategies and mechanisms to find and confront those needs. Additionally, there were two further issues that I considered in order to explore the phenomenon of Spanish migration to Berlin in depth. Firstly, I intended to describe how these groups make use of new information technologies and how their members integrate them into their daily activities. Secondly, I tried to understand the philosophy underlying the practice and to comprehend to what extent the ideological position of social actors influences the search for solutions to these needs.

An Outline of the Field of Study

I will briefly outline the research context in order to answer some initial questions:

- What are the current studies around contemporary Spanish emigrants?
- What is the relationship between the country of departure and the economic crisis?
- What have been the main responses of the current Spanish Government, the political parties, the civic collectives and the media to Spanish migration?

In short, it is my aim to address the current phenomenon of Spanish migration, a topic that currently lacks institutional and academic study.

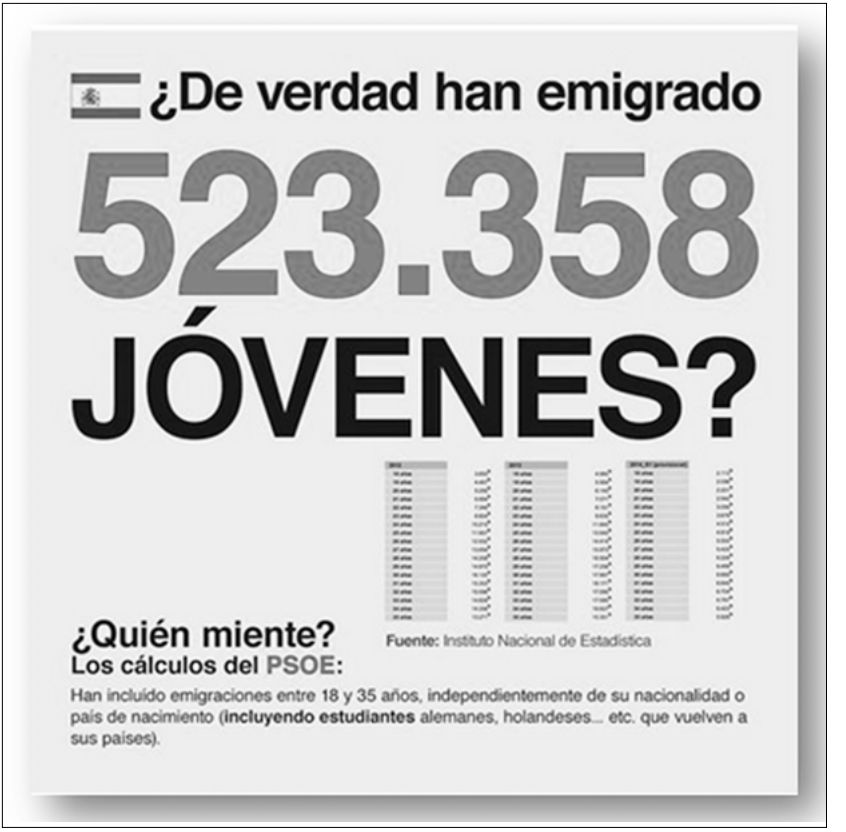
How Many Leave? Are the Numbers Important?

In politics, the manipulation of figures is a commonly used weapon. A political entity can map out a certain political, economic and social landscape to suit particular interests, as in the case of migration, illustrated by the numbers below. As an example, in May 2015, the Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy from the People´s Party[2] (PP) stated that his opponent in parliament, Pedro

2 | The People´s Party(PP) has governed in Spain since 2011. In the political spectrum they are defined as center-right.

Sanchez of the Socialist Workers Party[3] (PSOE), had lied when he stated that 500,000 young Spanish people left the country during Rajoy´s term in office (2011-2015). Rajoy quoted the National Statistics Institute's figure of "exactly 24,658" (Castro 2015). The PP parliamentarians applauded, but the war of numbers did not remain inside parliament; the People's Party launched a *Tweet*[4] within a week of the elections, comparing the data on migration provided by both main parties, and accusing the Socialist Party of lying.

Image 1



Really, have 523,358 young people emigrated? Who lies? Estimates of the Socialist Party: They have included immigrants between 18 and 35 years of age, regardless of nationality or country of birth [including German and Dutch students ...who came back to their respective countries]. (My translation)

3 | The Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) is the main opposition to the PP, and is center-left.

4 | https://twitter.com/PPopular

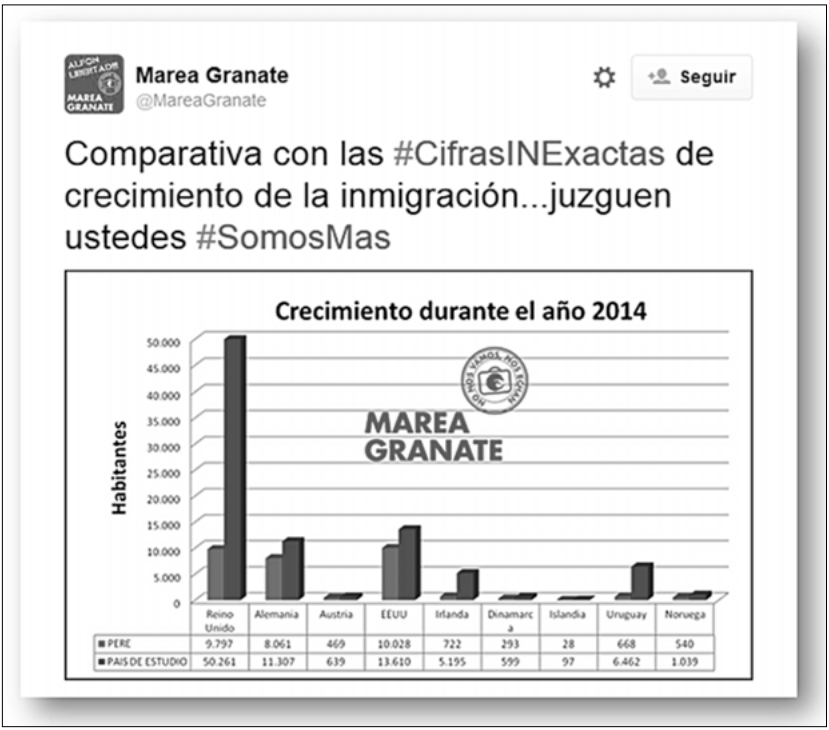
The journalist, Irene Castro, pointed out in a later analysis that from the beginning of the crisis, 1,200,000 people aged 18 to 35 left the country, and 550,000 of these did so during the mandate of Rajoy. Castro stated that her sources also belonged to the National Institute of Statistics and that the discrepancy in numbers stemmed from the way in which people were counted. Simultaneously, several newspapers debated the figures (Grasso 2013; García de Blas 2015), bloggers made their own estimations[5], and Spanish migrants discussed the shame of the Government statement on their *Facebook* and *Twitter* walls because they did not publicly accept that so many people were leaving the country.

Two months later, on June 25, 2015, *Marea Granate*[6] ("Garnet Tide")—a non-partisan public platform aiming to make visible the situation of Spanish migrants abroad—distributed a press release which included graphs and data published by other foreign statistical agencies. This information was widely disseminated across *Facebook*, *Twitter* and other social media. During the campaign they used the following hashtags: *#cifrasINExactas* ("inaccurate figures"), *#Somosmas* ("we are more"), and *#nonosvamosnosechan* ("we do not leave, they kick us out"). This press release accused the government of deliberately distorting the figures, using the National Institute of Statistics for their benefit and, in particular, "being proud of data that was completely falsified so as not to recognize the failure of their social and labor policies." (*Marea Granate* 2015. My translation)

5 | Blog created by a civic group for the visibility of the new Spanish migration called: Así nos Vamos ("So We Go"). http://asinosvamos.es/

6 | http://mareagranate.org/

Image 2



A comparison[7] of *#cifrasINExactas* figures for emigration growth. ...judge for yourselves *#Somosmas*

Why did the President of the Spanish government use the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, when even the institution itself recognized its limitations? What relationship, if any, could be identified between the statistics and the social aspects of the migration phenomenon? According to some authors (Alba et al. 2013; Ortega Rivera et al. 2014), the relationship lies in the use of terms such as *brain drain*, *migration*, *economic exile* and so on. These expressions are directly related to the economic crisis and the unemployment rate (23.8 percent overall, 51.4 percent under 25 years of age)[8] that, despite the famous austerity measures, has not improved.

7 | Vertical axis: The Register of Spaniards Resident Abroad (PERE: *Padrón de Españoles Residentes en el Extranjero*) data denoting total figures for emigration, set alongside the figures issued from statistical agencies for total number of Spanish immigrants in each country of destination, 2014.

8 | Data from the first quarter of 2015. http://www.datosmacro.com/paro-epa/espana

> The official discourse is abstracted from the economic context in which the departures happen [...] Some commentators have noted how the governmental language that presents the new emigration as a positive phenomenon is an exercise of concealment, in a broader context of a kind of "newspeak" which confronts the brutal reality of the economic crisis and its effects.[9] (Alba et al. 2013: 33)

At this period in time, the Spanish media started to confirm that indeed: "We are leaving Spain." In turn, the magnification of the migration phenomenon in the mass media could well have encouraged the increase in departures, thus causing what Ortega et. al. (2014: 42) calls, the "self-fulfilling prophecy," something which many of those I interviewed perceived years ago.

María, a 30-year-old social scientist from Alicante—says: "Well, I noticed right away, because there comes a time when most of your friends have gone. And you realize that you too are not the exception to the rule. Almost all who were in Madrid have left. All. Berlin was not the only destination, we scattered throughout Europe."

Where do they go? Destination Germany. No, sorry, rather Berlin

Why Germany? No, why Berlin? Our work is a project about a group of young people and their interaction with a particular city. Therefore, I think it important to consider briefly why they decided to migrate to Berlin. There are various attractions that this city offers, not only to young people from other countries, but also to young Germans. The relatively affordable rent, cultural attractions, and vibrant nightlife make Berlin a city that serves many purposes beyond the purely professional.

There are no specific studies on the current Spanish migration situation in Berlin today. There are, however some studies on the *Gastarbeiter*[10] that arrived during the 60s and 70s. In fact, one study conducted by Garcia Fernández (1965), anticipates Germany to be a country that young Spaniards will choose to emigrate to, although the language will pose a significant barrier (Ortega et al. 2014: 58). Fernández speaks of a "migratory psychosis," a kind of myth promoted by word of mouth through the media and the German authorities that actually helps to perpetuate this trend in migration. Navarrete (2014: 174) restates this theory and Alba Monteserín et al. (2013) agree.

9 | My translation.

10 | Immigrant workers invited to Germany in the 60s and 70s.

Who are We? The Precarious Youth

Unemployment rates do not seem to fully explain the rate of migration. Whilst the rate of unemployment in Spain is significant, there are deeper social-economical and structural reasons that also might explain why a person decides to leave a country. Santos Ortega (2006, 2013) and Antonio Muñoz (2014, 2015) are two Spanish scholars who have most recently written on the subject. Their stance is critical. They believe that, on the one hand, mass media plays a huge role in generating a certain level of social alarm, as already noted above. On the other hand, it promotes the idea of better working conditions for Spanish emigrants abroad, which also plays an important part in the decision making process. What is important and remarkable about their analysis is their finding that large labor companies—in collusion with universities and governments—educate, create and plan a hyper-flexible, highly qualified and mobile workforce, which is perfectly conditioned for job insecurity.

> The clearest effects of this narrative of labor activation is the attempt to legitimize the forced departure of the country (the so-called brain drain), making it appear as part of a cosmopolitanism that increases employability, a kind of investment in themselves the young people who leave in search of a job.[11] (Santos Ortega/Muñoz Rodríguez 2015: 659)

These authors argued that the narrative used to boost departures and thus reduce youth unemployment levels is camouflaged, so that it does not appear as an economic and social necessity but rather an "opportunity" that should not be missed, even something for which to be grateful. These authors emphasize the need to rethink the dynamics of today's labor market system because:

> These "young," that seemingly had everything, turned their pockets out on the table and showed they were not only empty, but also had structural holes: a labor market that penalizes them, a property market that ignores them and, ultimately, a social and political construction that naturalizes the link between youth and vital precariousness.[12] (Santos Ortega/Muñoz Rodríguez 2015: 658)

To conclude this chapter, I would like to state that, beyond the age considerations and the current configuration of statistics, seeking profiles to accurately outline the actual migration process could be illusory and outdated because the phenomenon develops and transmutes over time. The assumed and obsolete categories of age, and issues around job insecurity, mean that we are not

11 | My translation.

12 | My translation.

alert to a significant number of the migration population. In this essay I have considered those subjects that I think are useful, not necessarily with regard to understanding the migration phenomenon in its entirety, but those that I think will contribute to outlining a small but key area of immigration, in line with the objectives set out in the introduction.

The Online Platforms

The internet may, at times, seem like an incomprehensible, quasi-infinite universe composed of texts, images, videos, memes, likes, hashtags, etc.; it is like a hyperactive factory producing an ever-expanding culture, as well as complex behavioral dynamics. In view of this, it is necessary to draw on important anthropological concepts in an attempt to give some order to this nebulous universe.

Manuel Castells (2007; 2009; 2012), Boellstorff (2008; 2012), Hine (2000) and Daniel Miller (2011; 2012) have all contributed a great deal to this expansive and complex area of investigation. A series of concepts have helped to develop our approach to the internet as a field of study. These were also vital in the development of ethnography more generally. However, in recent years this field has undergone a renewal process (Postill 2008; Ardèvol 2014; Miller 2011), especially in matters such as digital culture and the virtual community. These new theoretical frameworks invite us to seek new strategies and analytical alternatives. In order to find approaches that go beyond the online/offline dichotomous perspective (Estalella 2011), I decided to dedicate this chapter to the specific platforms and theoretical approaches in which my field of exploration takes root. I want to show that this field of research goes beyond the online/offline dichotomy, demonstrating the hybridity of technological culture and space.

Since the internet is immense, we should narrow the arena, not in order to create permanent and immovable boundaries, but to present an overview of the field of exploration and get a sense of where the lines blur. To do this, I rely on a concept developed by Sarah Pink in her book, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009). I also rely on the concept of "ethnographic place" (Postill/Pink 2012), which deals with understanding how the ethnographer uses terms such as "routines," "mobilities" and "socialities," as opposed to the more traditional terms of "virtual community" and/or "network." The main aim of this approach is to understand "how social media ethnography produces 'ethnographic places' that traverse online/offline contexts and are collaborative, participatory, open and public" (Postill/Pink 2012:124). Digital technology is not limited to a computer screen or smartphone and the offline interaction is decisive when it comes to understanding what the screens reflect and mean

for each user. It is important for us to understand that "techno-social spaces" are hybrid spaces in which technology is embedded in the everyday life of its users (Dominguez-Figaredo 2012). Therefore, my "ethnographic place" is not only comprised of digital spaces such as websites, social networks—such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*—and mailing lists; it is also those areas where face-to-face interaction occurs, such as in assemblies, cafés and at street meetings. These civic platforms are delimited; that is to say they are not just a physical or digital space, but "a scattered constellation of practices-idea-people-objects sharing common principles"[13] (Corsín, cited by Dominguez-Figaredo 2012: 205).

From here onwards, I will refer to these *techno-social spaces* as "platforms" for two reasons. First, because they are civic platforms in the traditional sense—they are comprised of a group of people who share common social-political principles and goals. Second, because the social actors themselves have so referred to these spaces as platforms.

A Presentation of the Online Platforms: Our Ethnographic Place

I will now present the civic platforms founded by Spanish immigrants in Berlin, on which I have chosen to base my study. As stated before, there is a certain set of principles and related practices shared by those who interact with these platforms. Also of note is the point in time in which these platforms were created, namely the 2011 Spanish uprising. This is when the social movement, *15 de Mayo* ("15th of May") aka *Toma la Plaza* ("Take the Square"), or *#spanishrevolution*, began.

The 15M movement—or *Indignados* ("the Indignant")—that began in the Plaza de Sol[14] in Madrid in 2011, was a spontaneous social movement. It was the catalyst in creating many other citizen initiatives that are active today. This social movement attracted interest on many levels, in part because of the wide use of recent technological developments. It used various social media sites on the internet to organize groups issuing various social demands; this helped to realize the potential of the anti-austerity movement across Europe (Flesher Fominaya/Cox 2013). Another remarkable feature of this movement is that it based itself on the model of the *open assembly*. This means, theoretically, that anyone and everyone who wants can join it and partake in the "consensus" decision-making process (Castells 2012: 133-136; Corsin/Estalella 2013). Here I

13 | My translation.

14 | Puerta del Sol is one of the central squares of the city of Madrid—epicenter and heart of the city. The square and its name has become a symbol that can be compared to Syntagma Square in Athens or Taksim Square in Istanbul.

highlight three key authors and their work, partly because of the volume they have published in this field of work, but also to reinforce the importance of the internet in the development of this social movement: John Postill (2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2015), who was in Barcelona during the birth of the 15M Movement; Javier Toret (2013), who is a researcher at the internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3) and also led a thorough investigation into the 15M; and finally Manuel Castells (2012), who wrote a monograph devoted to the internet and, in particular, the social movements of 2011.

As context for this field of study I will trace a brief outline of events that occurred in Spain, 2011. On May 15, two civic platforms: *Juventud sin futuro* ("Youth Without Future") and *Democracia real ¡Ya!* ("Real Democracy, Now!"), called a protest meeting at the Puerta del Sol in Madrid. The main slogans at the demonstration were: "We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers"[15] and "Real Democracy, Now!"[16] Following the official end of the demonstration, a small but significant number of people decided to remain and camp in the square, similar to the way they had witnessed the Egyptians do in Tahrir Square. The Police responded by detaining some of the protestors. Following this decision, many took to the various social networking sites to appeal to the Spanish people to occupy squares in their resident cities. More than 50 Spanish cities responded to the call, leading to major unrest throughout Spain. After more than a month of occupation, the various assemblies established official ties with each another. This was achieved with the use of the internet. These assemblies decided to leave the permanent camps in order to continue working on the growth and solidification of the movement throughout the country and by the time the protestors had left the square, the movement had established various stable civic platforms in different parts of the country, with different concerns such as health, education and emigration.[17]

The hashtags: *#spanishrevolution* and *#tomalaplaza* went viral. In Spain, activists spread the call for mobilization to Spanish communities in other countries, encouraging them to demonstrate at the doors of Spanish Embassies. In Berlin, as in other cities, Spanish citizens heeded the call to mobilize and, following the example of what was being done in Madrid, Barcelona, and Seville, called for demonstrations at the Brandenburg Gate. *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Livestream* were used as a means of showing support for what was taking place on the streets of Spain. This also meant that the actions of the movement were highlighted abroad.

15 | My translation.

16 | My translation.

17 | These platforms are known as Mareas ("Tides") and each is represented by a color.

We followed from the beginning what was going on in the Plaza de Sol because we were watching the interviews. People keep a close eye on the media in Spain. People living elsewhere ...looking online at their country of origin. Then following events, as if we too are almost in the same place with them; as if in Alicante, Barcelona or Seville. –María, social scientist, 30 years old, from Alicante. (My translation)

The 15M Movement was instrumental in the development of the current civic platforms at work in the Spanish community in Berlin, and this is evidenced by the fact that the members of the civic platforms recognize the part played by the demonstrations in Spain in forming their own support groups.

At the beginning, the Oficina Precaria (Office Precarious) was named "Berlin, Wie bitte?" (Berlin, sorry, what did you say?). La Oficina Precaria was founded as a product of the concerns and interests of 15M. After a while, we have decided to become Precarious Office using the pull that other "precarious offices" have in Europe. We discussed if we were still part of 15M as collective and in an assembly we decided to continue being part of 15M. – Rosa, historian and web content writer, 32 years old, Valencia. (My translation)

Well, the Grupo de Acción Sindical (Labor Action Group) is a working group of 15M Berlin. I went there because it seemed interesting too. Because I find the workers' struggle interesting, I was keen to gain experience there. I also thought it was a very good extension to 15M Berlin Assembly. – Rafa, Ph.D. candidate, 28 years old, Madrid. (My translation)

15M Berlin

15M Berlin is a non-partisan, horizontal, self-managed and feminist political group whose main goal is the political coordination of immigration from Spain in its fight against the effects of capitalism. Likewise, it's involved locally in other issues affecting the whole society such as the fight for housing rights and the reporting of labor exploitation.[18]

On their website, 15M Berlin outlines the main working groups of the organization.[19] They also publicize the topics from both past and forthcoming meetings, as well as the decisions taken at each meeting. They also publish the work that each member has to carry out together with the list of general

18 | https://www.facebook.com/Berlin15M/info?tab=page_info

19 | http://15mberlin.com/

organizational activities—ranging from demonstrations and lectures, to media campaigns.

This group is actively involved in local Berlin politics, which means they support events organized by other groups in the city alongside their work to generate policy initiatives that deal directly with Spain and the fight against austerity measures and job insecurity.

15M Berlin has a presence on the major social networks like *Facebook* and *Twitter.*[20] Through social networking websites they share events, spread media campaigns, and publish articles, videos, and pictures etc. that may be of interest to those following them. They also work to generate publicity for events and information created by other similar groups.

The 15M Berlin Assembly meets every two weeks in the Sama-Café (a collective based in the neighborhood of Friedrichshain). The meetings are announced via *Facebook,* with the creation of a *Facebook Event*. Here, they specify the main talking points of an imminent meeting and nominate the person who will moderate the discussion. 15M Berlin also uses a mailing list, which consistently sends out several messages daily.[21] Through this mailing list, many other issues are discussed, along with being the means to give notification of general organizational activities.

Oficina Precaria

The *Oficina Precaria* formerly "Berlin, wie bitte," is a working group of 15M Berlin. It is "a platform of support and information to accompany you in your experience as an immigrant. You can consult us about bureaucratic, legal, labor, Krankenkasse, general information about Berlin...We are here to help.[22]

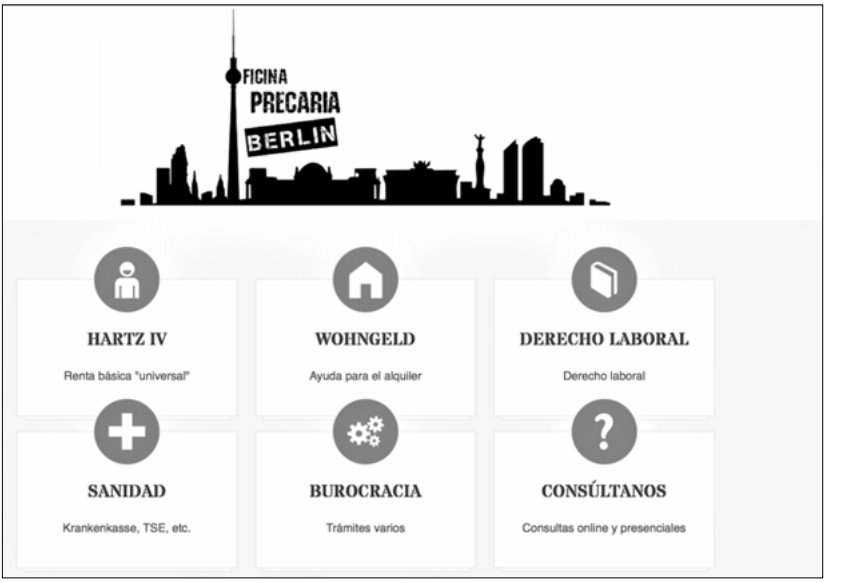
This division also emerged as a working group of 15M Berlin. It organizes consultations each week in Friedrichshain. They are the members of a collective who work to inform others about issues of particular concern to immigrants. They give advice on various issues; the website has six main sections: *Hartz IV* (social assistance), *Wohngeld* (housing benefit), *Krankenkasse* (social security), *Administration* (*registration*, debts, bank accounts, recognition of qualifications, etc.), *Personal Advice* and a specific section on *Labor Rights*.

20 | https://twitter.com/acampadaberlin

21 | I am subscribed and I usually receive around ten e-mails per day.

22 | https://www.facebook.com/oficinaprecariaberlin?fref=ts

Image 3



Icons on the main page of the *Oficina Precaria* website. (http://oficinaprecariaberlin.org/)

The *Oficina Precaria* website provides information on all the documents you might need on entry into Germany and all the bureaucratic procedures required in order to become resident. It outlines, for example, the necessary procedure for registration in a city in Germany. It explains exactly what type of documents that are needed, where to apply and what numbers to call when trying to make an appointment. The information is quite meticulous, even describing in detailed steps how to use the local council website for any particular need. Translations of relevant forms are available to download.

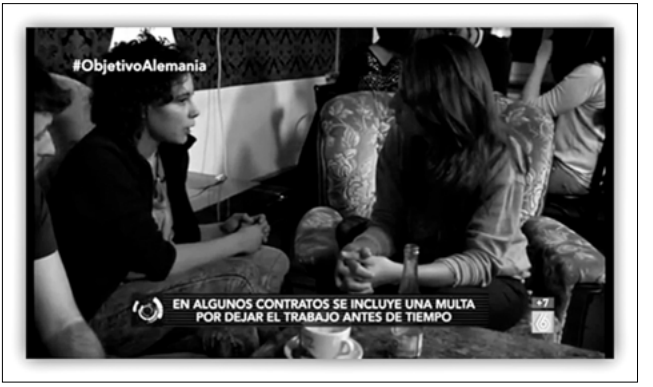
This platform exists in a broader network of replicas scattered throughout Europe. The network is called *Precariedad Everywhere* ("Everywhere precariousness"). Clicking on an area reveals a link to the location and opening times of the different offices in Europe.

Grupo de Acción Sindical (GAS)

The Labor Action Group is an internationalist movement. They help migrant workers of every country to improve their working conditions, along with their German co-workers and with the support of German unions. They fight against wage dumping, exploitation and discrimination. Stand up for your rights and those of the working class as a whole![23]

GAS is a labor union that operates independently of institutions in either Germany or Spain. It arose out of the high demand for labor support. "Oficina Precaria" realized that some of the demands of individual immigrant workers required a "collective solution" (Trabajar en Alemania, 2014). In Spain they were released to appear in a TV program, well-known for its political analysis (Pastor 2015).[24]

Image 4

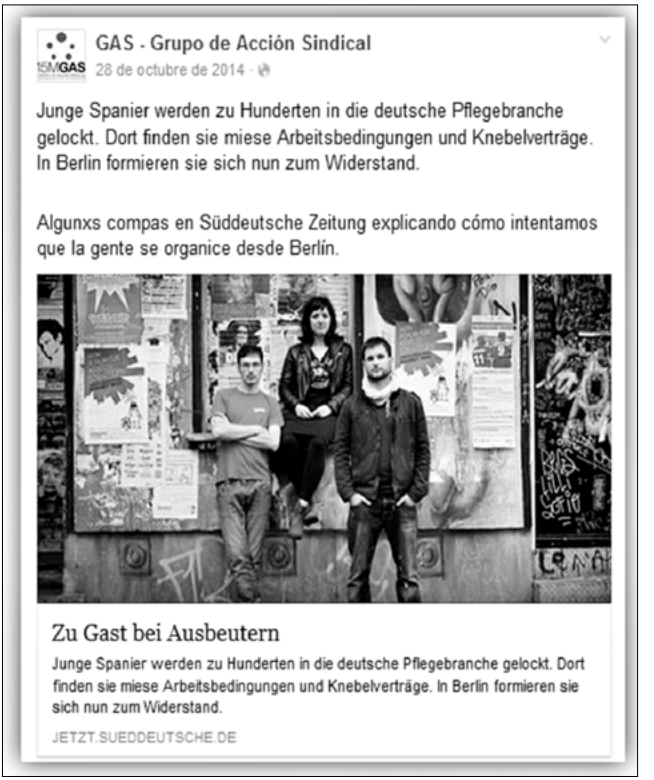


Screenshot of Spanish television program *El Objetivo*. Members of GAS and "Oficina Precaria" are interviewed by the journalist Ana Pastor.

23 | http://www.accionsindical.org/

24 | http://www.atresplayer.com/television/programas/el-objetivo/temporada-3/capitulo-24-objetivo-alemania_2015031400185.html

Image 5



In Germany, GAS became known for an article published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Stremmel 2014).[25] Young Spaniards are lured, by the hundreds, into the German Care sector. There they find lousy working conditions and restrictive contracts. In Berlin they are now coming together in resistance.[26]

I posed the question in an interview: What made GAS relatively well known in Germany and Spain?

I do not know, did many interviews. I cannot tell now, but 30 or 40 had or offered. We did not give supply. We called on all sides for us to give interviews. [...] We had to adapt ourselves because we had no time, so there are things that did not go in the end but many other. Süddeutsche Zeitung interview had much effect. From there it was a non-stop. -Mayte, Translator, 30 years old, Murcia. (My translation)

25 | http://jetzt.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/589582/zu-Gast-bei-Ausbeutern
26 | My translation.

GAS meets every two weeks at Café Commune in Kreuzberg. Immigrants who want to present their cases are invited to do so at these gatherings. Once the "conflict" is clear, the group discusses what can be done and how they can organize around a specific case to achieve a particular goal. Their current campaigns range from fighting for a group of nurses—who have an unfair contract and are currently being forced to pay a fine of 12,000 euros—to supporting the claims of truck drivers, and giving advice, in Berlin and Brandenburg.

In a similar way to 15M Berlin, GAS also has a major online presence, utilizing the social network sites such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, to share all kinds of information on the labor situation in Germany and Spain, as well as other campaigns, with which they identify and support. As an example, they openly supported the "No" campaign in the Greek referendum.

The Construction of The Digital Commons

In this section, I will explain a number of the conceptual tools I applied while analyzing the qualitative data in search of a synthesis. These theoretical approaches have been very useful in that they have fostered a tighter focus on the aspects most interesting to me and most relevant for the research.

First, as noted above, we outlined a *hybrid techno-social space* where online and offline perspectives merge. People involved in these platforms not only interact in the Network, but also regularly participate in face-to-face events. We must therefore understand and address the practices and behavior of this group based on its hybrid characteristic and its ability to move from one space to another. We must also add an extra dimension to this group's hybrid character: its transnational nature (Schiller 2012). This could be understood as what Bernal (2006) has called "transnational third space." Why? Because besides being a hybrid space, the Network is also a "place in which geopolitical boundaries are blurred, which encourages experimentation and the creation of new socio-political practices." These spaces are liminal zones where creativity is significant. I consider this experimental and creative characteristic very interesting as a focus for data analysis. As a main focus, I am able to observe the social realities and perspectives of the social actors and understand how they are able to generate innovative behavioral dynamics. In this case, the social actors map their own needs; they conceptualize the problems they face every day, share and discuss experiments together with the results and new alternatives or possible solutions to their problems. All of these processes are carried out collectively, and they use strategies based on *asamblearismo* (Corsin/Estalella 2013), a term which is difficult to translate but involves the act of taking decisions by consensus and the means of self-organization in an attempt to

stay out of public and private institutions. The fact that the platforms operate outside of institutions is not accidental. Many of the people with whom I spoke feel ignored by public institutions. The sharing of daily experiences and the feelings of empathy that occur in this "third space" is something that neither the market nor the state provides.

What is meant by the alleged ineffectiveness of state institutions in this context? In order to offer a better understanding, I refer to another concept that I considered during my research. The exchange of information and knowledge circulating in this alternative transnational third-space is termed by some authors as *commons* (Ostrom 1990 cited in Lafuente/Corsín Jiménez 2010). This term outlines the ways in which a group of people decide to manage the resources necessary for survival in any given context. These resources are not treated as privately owned and so cannot be capitalized, and cannot "evoke the imagery of exclusion, but of cooperation" (Lafuente/Corsín 2010: 24). In this "alternative market" *commons* circulate in a space that is governed by the logic of collective organization and the principles of self-management. These last two attributes are essential for platform's members as, for them, "what runs is not something [cheap or expensive] or a value [fair or unfair], but the community" (Lafuente/Corsín 2010: 34).

In such a space, the circulation of resources and the various mechanisms for their distribution should be carried out without the limitations of pricing and/or valuing: "the economy that regulates these exchanges bases its success on the ability to meet needs. It is not oriented to individual benefit. Possession of something, whether an object, conjecture or formula implies exchange because he only owns what is shared" (Corsín 2010: 25).[27]

In this situation, the concept of *commons* is all a very useful one, based on the qualitative information gathered on the experiences of the participants of these civic platforms. Online platforms are not only spaces, in which *commons* are put into circulation; they are also where the production mechanisms are created and reinvented. In this *third space* all kinds of valid resources are in circulation: views, opinions, experiences, frustrations, fears, knowledge (Rocha et al. 2013).

The *common* I try to understand also has various particular features. The first is that it caters to the specific needs of a particular people belonging to a moment in history, namely those Spanish immigrants living in Berlin, Germany following the recession of 2008. The second peculiarity, is that it is a *digital common* (Fuster 2011; 2012) because it involves the "sharing and collaborative production of common resources [...] [and] open access in the digital environment" (2012: 229) and therefore its production and distribution in the Network has a determining value.

27 | My translation.

Conclusion

My primary objective was to understand the needs of Spanish immigrants living in Berlin. When mapping needs I did not do so based solely on personally chosen participants, but rather on solutions and alternatives to these needs these groups suggested and established. I did so because in this way I could establish a situation analysis that was more representative and comprehensive, since the very function of these groups was to conceptualize needs and offer possible solutions. The needs I observed went beyond bureaucratic, linguistic or monetary difficulties. I witnessed and heard of the frustration, guilt, and loneliness that many experienced. We often only see the basic necessities of a people; the psychological and/or emotional components are not always given the importance they deserve. In this regard, we see that needs are interrelated. Not having contacts to help you fill in a document because you do not know the language can result in loneliness. Having a "mini-job"[28] for which you are overqualified can generate frustration. If an employer hires you and pays you less than you deserve, this can give way to indignation. The groups I studied took into account these less visible emotional needs and, through campaign work, they opened up a debate and delved into what they believed to be the core problem.

Regarding the sense of belonging to a community, it is impossible to avoid the idea of community when discussing the online platforms and the people who interact on them. Whether you are a consummate activist or a sometime user, the participants involved are socialized and build on this feeling of belonging to a group. I observed a number of things that can perhaps bring to light the various elements of this particular community.

A shared nationality was not fundamental to this community; it is true that the vast majority of those participating on the platforms were Spanish, but there were many people with whom I spoke who identified as independent militants—mainly from Cataluña and the Basque Country—as well as other independent movements. Some activists and users were of German and/or Latin descent, or other EU countries, that had previously lived in Spain and had also decided to emigrate to Germany because of the crisis. The issue of language was, however, a shared aspect of the community.

I observed a variety of ideological perspectives whilst carrying out my research and, while I would not want to reduce down all the perspectives to one main ideology, it is true that many perspectives were of the political left. There were also, however, people who did not claim to be of any political persuasion

28 | Mini-job contracts are jobs with a maximum of 50 days per year and gaining a maximum of 450 euros. This kind of contract has been modified in 2015. Now 8,50 euros per hour must be charged for time worked and social insurance is required.

and who were highly involved. Notably, as stressed before, two basic principles defined the character of the collective: self-management and an assembly-based political system. Both principles belong to, and are influenced by, leftist social movements. These principles materialize in the practices that seem logical and practical at organizational level; they do not seem routed in political or ideological dogma.

I believe that the main bonding element of the group is empathy. It is this element that apparently provides the strength and structure to the community. Nationality, language and ideology shape the profile of the collective but, in my opinion, in these spaces, what unites the participants is the sharing of needs and related difficulties experienced. The desire to find common resolution—with the basis of shared empathy—is really what generates a sense of unity and community.

The use of the internet as a fundamental tool has been critical in my research. In this research I have had to reject the offline/online dichotomy and emphasize the hybrid nature of this community. The question I asked in the introduction was how the various platforms I looked at used the internet to alleviate the needs of immigrants in Berlin; I have since carried out thorough analysis in order to describe this process. The internet is not only a tool through which useful information is circulated, it is a space in itself in which users are constantly interacting with each other, sharing information stories and opinions. As explained above, one of the values of the internet is not only the sharing and managing of information, but also the fact that it provides the tools for knowledge production. The example of how to write press releases collectively is a good example. Use of the internet complements the principles of self-management and an assembly-based political system. It facilitates these principles at an operational level—because it is used to carry out collective work—but also at a political level—because members can "own" means and methods of knowledge production and dissemination. This is what gives autonomy to operate effectively outside public institutions.

Locating and understanding the needs of immigrants, creating a community through empathy, and using and developing digital tools in order to generate and disseminate useful information for immigrants, has ensured the creation of effective mechanisms of support. This creation and reinvention of a "digital commons," had meant that many more immigrants have been able to share common problems and seek collective solutions in a dynamic and creative way. The collaborative production of common resources, accessible to all via digital means, has not only helped immigrants in their practical daily lives but also in their emotional daily lives: feelings of frustration, loneliness, guilt and individuality have all been mitigated and channeled through the community. From simple things—like the translation of documents—to the more complex, such as the exchange of emotions, experiences, opinions etc.,

the digital commons has helped to alleviate the daily pressures of immigrant life.

In short, the main resource of the community is knowledge. Knowledge is jointly produced and released via the Web, where it is built upon. As knowledge is collectively created, it has no owner; it is not private property, nor does it belong to the state. It is in itself a collective good, circulating and representing the whole community (Lafuente/Corsín 2010: 34).

However, there are a series of questions that I cannot, or have failed to, address in this study. We must ask whether the action taken on these platforms affects those who do not partake in them. That is to say: does this online community have relevance to the whole community of Spanish immigrants in Berlin, including those who do not share identical political perspectives, or who do not use the internet in a similar way?

Regarding the resolution of needs, it is clear, at a practical level, they are covered. For example, if advice is needed regarding an employment contract then there is immediately access to relevant information to be found through "Oficina Precaria." However, it reveals the question whether the discourse and narrative generated by these groups is having broader impact beyond the computer screen. That is to say, how does what happens in this community impact on wider political discourse? For example, how does it have an impact on the job market and education system of today? Does it merely empower members or is it a reflection of what we might become? The essential question is: can these platforms change daily life in a lasting way? I wonder if participation within this community makes members feel that they can take control of their future can create real social change.

The above-mentioned point has not only to do with the individual practice of social actors but also in relation to the effect that their own practices can have on the decision-making process in public and/or private institutions. Can the work of these groups influence the policies of government agencies at different levels, whether in the political or economic sphere? I believe my research will be helpful for future questions in this area of study for two main reasons:

First, the qualitative analysis of the digital space, from the perspective of its hybrid character, represents a new trend in digital ethnography. My work involved a consistent attempt at maintaining a balance between exploring the offline and online world, making sense of the hybridity of these two worlds and exploring new methodologies and theories in participant-observation in a digital space.

Second, this research is highly socially relevant. Not only does it explore the digital space, it explores self-organized initiatives within this space. It could prove useful for further studies that, as a consequence, have impact on decision-making, especially when considering integration policies and new waves of immigration. This could contribute not only to decision-making at

an institutional level, but also to new immigrant groups that might base their organization on new media technologies.

Finally, and most importantly, I think it helps to steer the gaze and consider a generation in which new technologies, combined with new social proposals forged in times of crisis, form a new political and social landscape. Likely it is not a complete picture, but simply an attempt to understand the current situation of thousands of young migrants—not only Spanish, and not only in Berlin—from a global perspective that transcends, and provokes us to rethink, the current situation of labor markets and citizen's alternatives to our current political-economic system.

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