
YAY@FLAUTAS, Retirement - a golden age for activism



We meet at Café Armenia, a quite old-fashioned coffee place, situated in one of the streets bordering the popular Puerta del Sol in Madrid, where the 15-M revolution started. This is exactly the same place where the first bunch of Madrid- Yay@flautas met in May 2012 to organize their very first demonstration. Nowadays, they are about a hundred yayas and yayos (a Spanish term of endearment for grandparents, akin to 'grandma/grandpa') in the group and their actions are easily recognizable because of their indispensable reflective vests and their very noisy presence in banks, administrative buildings and street demonstrations. The average age of the group might be around the 70 years-old, thus they consider themselves "the parents and grandparents of the 15-M movement" and claim in a clear voice "the need for the elderly in the streets!".

There is not age for activism

On my way to the meeting I receive a phone call, it is already 7.30 pm. It's raining like hell in Madrid and Pili, my contact from YAY@FLAUTAS, informs me that she is going to be a bit late. But in the café another yaya, Pilar, is waiting. "Just look for a lady with purple hair" she tells me. I enter the place and recognize Pilar easily, when approaching the table she is already awaiting me with a big smile. Just seconds later, we are already immersed in a deep conversation about the current state of professional journalism, the amount of young people flying abroad in search of work, and how social media is changing our present - making new things possible, especially protests by the citizenry... She is quite used to interviews. "We even had a famous German TV station filming us for days for a documentary".

We also have some time for a brief introduction to the collective. She tells me how it was her colleague Pilar who got in contact with the original movement -born in Barcelona— after hearing them on a radio interview. Like Pili and Pilar, more and more (mainly) retired Madrilenians have decided to spend their free time with something that they consider useful for themselves and society. "It's not that we feel bored at home... We do it because we are creative people and because we think that the welfare state needs to be defended". "Elderly people are needed in the streets!". Pilar has finally joined us.

It is true that many of them were already revolutionary (each in their own way) in their day and they share experiences from when they were young, taking part in different political parties or movements. But it is not like that for every yay@. For them, "the diversity of the group is very important" and also "not to be identified as a collective associated with concrete political parties". They do "run away" from trade unions and share a generalized discontent with the political class, though. What they do agree on is the solution to the current situation: "to knock down everything and rebuild it from scratch", Pili points out.

I don't know how exactly they might see themselves as active players of the street-protest scene. Do you consider yourself activists? "Yes", Pili affirms without hesitating. "Maybe it's not traditional activism. We can be utopist but we know how far we can get". "We want to change the World, but we don't know how exactly we can do it, which is a bit frustrating. So just in case... we're do something!".

"We are old but not submissive!"

Nowadays, in contemporary Spain, most citizens are concerned that his/her society is falling apart. But on the other hand, this Damoclean Sword situation has triggered an amazing number of movements fostered by regular and anonymous people gathering together to defend what they think belongs to them as citizens; from the bottom up, growing horizontally. Reclaiming education, health, employment, transport, subsidies or, simply, demanding political transparency and honesty. "Something has to change with our help. And in fact, it is changing, a bit" adds Pilar.

So does the fact of your advanced age - compared to the youngsters that normally participate in demonstrations— help you to be more effective in your actions? "I think if we weren't 'old', they wouldn't pay attention to us". Does it also help in the 'confrontations' with the police -especially criticized for violent actions during demonstrations and evictions? "Well it is true that, for the time being, police tend to go a bit more carefully... As they don't know at all how to act with us".

Well, it's sure they aren't in the police's "How to proceed with demonstrators" manual. And obviously to bump into a bunch of septuagenarians, dressed in reflective yellow vests, armed to the teeth with pans and whistles, making a big mess inside a bank branch while demanding to talk with the manager and complaining about the money that was stolen from the bank's savings account holders through fraudulent share sales... It is not something everybody is used to seeing. Or at least, was, because nowadays the YAY@FLAUTAS can sometimes seem omnipresent.

"We are like pain in the ass"

In the case of YAY@FLAUTAS collective the surprise factor is essential for the success of the demonstration. Not even the attendants have the complete idea of what is going to happen. The action team is the one responsible for choosing the targets and informing every yay@ of the place and date. "We arrive there, like nothing special, as if we just were passing by -of course the reflective vest is hidden, but ready to act!", they explain. The pretext of each action is to occupy the space and hand in a document with concrete complaints to the person in charge of the institution, but "the best thing for us is when they don't want to receive us... That is when the ruckus begins! Ah!" You can see the excitement in their faces when explaining some anecdotes from past demonstrations. Self-

written songs and good humour are basic ingredients for their actions.

“We are non-violent but we make a big mess. The aim is to be loud and garner the greatest response to and visibility of the actions in the media”. And they certainly know how to catch attention in public spaces and manage to get empathy from the people that, without expecting it, get caught in the actions.

Although, not many ‘small’ collectives are able to achieve such success. Actually in the yayas’ opinion size does matter in order to be successful. “Small initiatives are positive but not enough. For the materialization of their targets they need to grow”. That is the reason why they are part of a network together with other platforms, where they share information, initiatives and new case-studies in need of action or demonstration calls.

Aside from their own actions, one of their main activities is to support other collectives, and so you will be able to find a group of yay@flautas at almost any demonstration of a ‘friend-collective’. But their creativity has no borders, and within a minute they have already listed at least a dozen things which are currently on the collective agenda: preparing a performance of Munch’s painting ‘The Scream’, the weekly stall they have in Tirso de Molina where they get some funds by selling T-Shirts and scarves they knit themselves or a radio program they have in mind, among others.

That last check of their on-going activities has reminded them they still have to plan the next weeks’ action a bit. This time, I am a privileged witness and have a sneak-preview of what it will be, but I’m definitely keeping the surprise. Time has flown and I leave them in the café concretising some details. As I walk away I realise these bombastic grandmas have a highly contagious vitality and revolutionary vibrations. I’m telling my mom where she can meet some new friends.

Note

* YAY@FLAUTA: The name comes from the contemptuous term used by a right-wing politician when referring to the youngsters demonstrating during the 15-M camp in the Madrilenian Puerta del Sol: “perroflauta” from “perro =dog and flauta= flute” -was aimed at addressing them as anti-establishment or people with no benefit that just wonder around the streets in the company of a dog.

In solidarity with these youngsters, the elderly people joining the demonstrations adopted this nickname that creates a portmanteau of this disparaging term and the endearing one of grandmother or grandparent when called by their grandchildren.

More info at: yayoflautasmadrid.org

