

# From Servitude to Dignity? A Community in Transition

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I was in Galicia, Spain's most northwestern region, beginning research for my doctorate in Anthropology when, in late 2002, an oil tanker sank some seventy-five kilometres off the Galician coast with just over 77,000 tons of fuel oil in its tanks. The event sparked intense public debate about belonging and social justice in Galicia. Focusing on a social movement that began following the environmental catastrophe, I wanted to document how Galicians exercised their group autonomy. I wanted to learn why ruminations of a change in the Galician community was eagerly debated in forums organized by activists in Galicia. Activists argued, for example, that the popular embrace of their social movement signalled a change in the regional Galician community. My analysis is informed by bodies of literature that question the conceptual separation between "state" and people, and is situated within the social science literature that analyzes political engagement as an ongoing, historical process.

Until recently, concepts such as community and group autonomy were defined in the context of the territorial state. Scholarly research has shown that forces of globalization such as the growing salience of transnational corporations and other actors like refugees, immigrants, and global justice activists' daily crossings of state boundaries challenge the territorial sovereignty of the state. Despite these loosely qualified "global" pressures, activists in the social movement that was the subject of my research continued to perceive the Spanish state as an important social actor, but one that disregards its responsibilities. What can this example of a community in struggle against the Spanish state tell us about how collective interests are pursued and how community is defined under forces of globalization?

Citizens in Galicia protested and were angry with the regional and Spanish governments' management of the environmental catastrophe. An historical Galician-based social movement developed and gained in popularity, flourishing for well over a year. It was largely antagonistic toward the Spanish state with less public attention focusing on the role that the owners and operators of the oil tanker played in the environmental crisis. Since the ecological disaster is a product of globalizing processes and given the fact that this was not the first oil tanker to sink in this area, I wondered why this time a social movement was popularly supported, and why citizens had largely and forcefully blamed government representatives for the disaster. To address this curiosity, I soon turned to an analysis of the language of the activists' struggle and their actions. As I learned, activists talked about themselves as being part of a distinct community that has long been mistreated by the political class and by people in authority such as state representatives.

Galicians active in the social movement argued that the environmental degradation occurred as a result of an out-dated but still operating culture of power that they interpreted as rewarding state and state-like actors such as international financial institutions, all the while silencing and rendering invisible the hardship of marginal populations, such as Galicians who identified themselves as subservient to the Spanish state, the European Union, and the global economy. With the widespread support of their movement, however, subservience was seen as giving way to an embraced dignity. This transformation was narrated as a shift in the collective identity of the regional community, "from

servitude to dignity." I analyze the Galician social movement as part of an enduring struggle for retribution in the context of an ever-increasing availability of a wide array of texts and images from which to draw on for examples of successful stories of social and environmental justice.

I conclude that in the context of Galicia, exercising group autonomy disrupts the narrative that sustains the idea of the Galician community as servile. For activists in the social movement, acting servile in relation to state authorities erodes group autonomy. Standing up for the right to work in Galicia, the right to participate in decisions that affect the political and economic condition of Galicia, and holding governments accountable for the environmental disaster is, to the contrary, exercising an autonomy that is relational to the idea of a centralizing state. From the perspective of activists in the social movement, Galicians' decision to protest governments' management of the critical event signalled a change in community.

Instead of asking whether regional sentiment has increased as a result of the challenges to the notion of the sovereign state, I considered how activists expressed relationships between familiar categories of belonging. Categories of ethnic, linguistic, and geographic difference infused activists' notion of belonging to a regional community. When I asked activists to account for their governments' management of the environmental disaster, they resorted to the long-standing framework of these categories of belonging that are always heavily charged with histories of vulnerabilities and asymmetrical power relations. A complex process of historical continuity and change shaped activists' framework of interpretation and qualified their actions against "the state."