

Article

Beyond Narcissism: Towards an Analysis of the Public, Political and Collective Forms of Contemporary Spirituality

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Abstract: Holistic spirituality has often been characterized by academic literature as belonging to the private sphere, articulated through the market and anchored in the growth of narcissistic individualism. However, recent empirical evidence and theoretical developments suggest a more complex picture. Drawing on the analysis and comparison of two empirical cases—the organization of collective meditations in public spaces and the teaching of yoga in prisons by holistic volunteers—we explore the rise of social engagement initiatives, aiming to transform society through the promotion and use of holistic techniques. Our main conclusions revolve around four main issues (a) the move of holistic spirituality from the private to the public sphere and the increasing public resonance with (and acceptance of) the contemporary holistic milieu, (b) the emergence of an holistic imaginary of social change anchored in ethics of reciprocity and responsibility, (c) the role of the body as a central locus of resistance and social transformation and (d) the articulation of new forms of individualism that enable to make self-realization compatible with social and political commitment.

Keywords: religion; power; resistance; social theory; holistic spirituality

1. Introduction

Stereotypical portraits of holistic spirituality have usually depicted its followers as narcissistic individuals focused on nurturing their own spiritual selves through the consumption of spiritual practices and commodities. Most of the sociological literature has pictured holistic spirituality in similar terms, describing it as articulated through the market (Liptoviesky 1983; Roof 1993), anchored in the contemporary growth of individualism and subjectivism (Beck 2010; Lasch 1979; Taylor 2007) and confined to the private sphere (Luckmann 1967, 1990). Holistic spirituality has thus been mainly understood as reinforcing an ideology of passivity and possessing an ‘elective affinity’ (Weber 1922) with the spread and deepening of neoliberalism (Carrette and King 2004; Illouz 2008). However, in recent years, this conceptualization has been challenged in numerous respects and a more nuanced image of holistic spirituality has unfolded (Fedele and Knibbe 2012; Hedlund-de Witt 2011). New research projects have signalled the public dimension of holistic spirituality (Aupers and Houtman 2006), while others have shown the need to move beyond the understanding of holistic followers as passive agents of neoliberalism (Farias and Laljee 2008; Höllinger 2004) and to explore instead the political commitment and engagement of mind-body-spirit practitioners (Berghuijs et al. 2013; Chandler 2008; Oh and Sarkisian 2011).

Our article contributes new insights to these present debates, by focusing on the analysis of social transformation initiatives born out of groups inspired and shaped by holistic spirituality principles

and practices. The main aim is to explore the ways in which holistic spiritual actors engage in civic actions and how they explain and justify their activism. Drawing on an ethnographic study of two cases—the teaching of yoga in prisons and the organization of public meditations in streets and parks—we show that social actors are not only involved in these altruistic initiatives, but that a holistic worldview is at the core of their engagement since they use these holistic practices as means for social and political transformation.

The initial motivation for this article emerged amidst the fieldwork of two very different research projects. On the one hand, whilst conducting fieldwork on religion in prisons (Griera and Clot-Garrell 2015a, Griera 2017), we came across the popularization of yoga courses, taught by volunteers, in penitentiary centres in Catalonia (Griera and Clot-Garrell 2015b). On the other hand, whilst researching a project exploring expressions of religiosity in the public spaces of Barcelona, we became aware of the increasing diffusion of collective public meditations and mindfulness marches in the public spaces of other global cities, similarly aimed at promoting peace and social transformation (Griera et al. forthcoming).

Both cases attracted our interest since they seemed to contradict, or at least call into question, the classical representations in academic literature of the expression of holistic spirituality in three ways. Firstly, the main setting for the development of holistic spirituality practices was not the private but the public sphere—public institutions (prisons) and spaces (streets, squares and parks). Secondly, in the two cases the actors' main motivation was civic engagement for social justice rather than narcissistic self-fulfilment. Thirdly, both cases were not market-oriented but non-profit initiatives based on volunteerism. In the light of this evidence, we considered that the comparison of the two cases was able to facilitate more nuanced understandings of the characteristics and complexity of contemporary forms of holistic spirituality and its social implications for broader society.

The data presented and discussed in this article derives from these two projects. A qualitative methodology, combining different methods of data collection, was adopted in both projects. From 2013–2015, we undertook ethnographic research in three Catalan prisons combining participant observation of yoga courses, surveys of participants, in-depth interviews with inmates, yoga volunteers and prison staff, along with the collection of documentary material. From 2015–2018, we undertook participant observations in public holistic initiatives in Barcelona, in-depth interviews with the organizers, ethnographic interviews with participants, along with the collection of material through social networks. We have applied an “iterative strategy” (Bryman 2008) during data collection and analysis. The results presented and discussed in this paper are based on a systematic comparison of source materials from these two projects. This comparative analysis aims to detect patterns of similarity in the ways in which actors, inspired by holistic spirituality principles and practices, not only participate in initiatives for social transformation but also promote them.

The article is organized in three sections. The first contextualizes the rise of holistic spirituality in the Catalan context and synthesizes state of the art in scholarship addressing the relationships between holistic spiritualities and forms of social engagement. The next section introduces the two case studies by examination of their main characteristics, the actors and the rationales behind the social transformation initiatives promoted by holistic spirituality groups. The third section discusses the results by identifying the patterns of similarity between the two cases and identifying the three aspects that articulate the ways in which holistic spiritual actors engage with civic actions and promote projects aimed at social and political transformation. Finally, the fourth section concludes with analysis of the social, public and political dimensions of some current holistic spiritualities.

2. Holistic Spirituality in Context: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

During the last twenty years, the rise of holistic spirituality has been documented in Barcelona and Catalonia (Griera 2002; Prat Carós 2012). The dynamics of secularization and pluralization have not only reshaped the traditional religious map—historically synonymous with a dominant Catholic culture—by enhancing the growth and visibility of religious minorities but also facilitated the proliferation of new spiritual repertoires and products transcending the different faith traditions present in the territory

(Griera 2014). Holistic spiritualities, understood as those forms of body practice “that have as their goal the attainment of wholeness and wellbeing of ‘body, mind, and spirit’” (Sointu and Linda 2008, p. 259) in their distinct, subjectivized and embodied forms, have become popularized and normalized among the population, as relevant studies in Europe and elsewhere have demonstrated (Ammerman 2010; Bender et al. 2013; Dawson 2007; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Knoblauch 2008).

While diverse spiritual products and practices have been mainly explored as manifestations of privatized forms and marketized articulations of the spiritual, the entanglements between, on the one hand, expressions of holistic spirituality and secular-public spaces and the relationship between forms of political commitment and social engagement, on the other, have remained underexplored. Nonetheless, some investigations have started to address these issues.

Recent studies have begun to highlight that the emergence of the holistic milieu in public contexts often assumes a collective and usually altruistic form, particularly in public institutions (Becci 2018; Griera 2017; Griera and Clot-Garrell 2015b). Additionally, some research has also started to explore holistic spirituality’s presence in open-air urban environments (Hegner and Margry 2016) and its relationship with political and social movements (Viotti and Funes 2015; Zwissler 2018). This silent proliferation of holistic spiritualities in public spaces is not only relevant due to its invisibility, which calls into question traditional articulations of the secular, the public and the religious (Fedele and Knibbe forthcoming), but also for the unique ways that its presence problematizes traditional assumptions in the field.

Beyond this public dimension, new empirical research, using quantitative and comparative methods, has also started to explore the relationship between holistic spiritualities, political ethics and social engagement, adding further complexity in the field—for example, Bellah et al. (1985) raise important questions concerning the ethical effects of holistic spirituality practitioners. Farias and Lalljee (2008) have examined the extent to which New Age ideas reinforce secular individualistic values. They showed that, while there were similarities between the individualism of New Agers and nonreligious people, the former defined themselves using a set of abstract holistic self-concepts that limited competitive goals and emphasized values of universalism. Similarly, Höllinger (2004) has shown that, in Austria, the young people classified as “New Agers” (10%) by two representative Austrian surveys—the International Student Study 2001 and Austrian Youth Value Study 2000—reported a larger involvement in political and social activism than other students.

Other recent studies have more specifically addressed the social and political engagement of holistic followers, which is of particular relevance to our study. The work of Berghuijs et al. (2013), for instance, has underlined that, although the social involvement of holistic participants was lower than that of affiliated religious people, it is similar to that of secular groups and is marked by support for particular causes, such as environmental protection, peace or animal rights. In the same vein, Chandler (2008) has pointed that despite holistic spirituality is related to postmaterialist values, this does not mean that they are less socially and politically involved but only that they express their participation through different channels. In this regard, he states “autonomy and self-expression are not synonyms for negative freedom. By the same measure, the autonomous and self-expressive nature of contemporary ‘New Age’ does not make it de facto a selfish religion, even if it is a religion of the self (Chandler 2008, p. 252). Finally, the study of Oh and Sarkisian (2011) is also relevant because they examined the specific social involvement of people in the holistic milieu and demonstrated that they are not less socially engaged than the rest of the population. They have illustrated, moreover, that the level of engagement in voluntary associations and political groups strongly depends on their preferred type of holistic practice and the strength of their self-reported spirituality. In their study sample, they discovered that spirituality was more related to social involvement among practitioners of yoga and Art of Living than it was for practitioners of Dahn Yoga.

Our research benefits from these previous studies but also introduces one important shift. We focus specifically on the analysis of social transformation projects that are inspired and articulated by holistic spiritual principles and practices. In our research, we do not analyse the degree of social involvement

of holistic followers in general but rather focus our attention on those followers that are reportedly committed to transforming the world through the use and spread of holistic practices. To foster a more complex understanding, we compare two different cases.

3. Scenes and Actions: Holistic Spirituality in the Prison and on the Street

This contextualization has prepared the ground for the specific characterization of the two social transformation initiatives promoted by the holistic spirituality groups under analysis: yoga practice in prisons and public meditations in the street. For each case, we analyse the profiles of the actors involved, their motivations and repertoires of action, along with the outcomes they expect from their social and political engagement, in order to facilitate their comparison.

3.1. Holistic Spirituality in Prison

Nowadays, almost all penitentiary institutions in Catalonia offer yoga classes for inmates, in addition to other spiritual practices such as meditation or reiki. This provision is not exclusive to Catalan prisons but represents a general trend identifiable in several countries ranging from Switzerland, to the United States, Mexico and India (Rucker 2005; Rabi Blolndel 2011, 2012; Bilderbeck et al. 2013). For three years, we have been following the organization of these courses, accompanying the teachers in their classes—and even shadowing the yoga teachers during training—in order to deepen our ethnographic understanding. Initially, the research was focused on exploring the impact of yoga in the inmates' lives and also the institutional opportunities—and constraints—associated with the organization of such an activity in the context of the prison (Griera 2017; Griera and Clot-Garrell 2015b). However, as the project was advancing, we started to become more interested in the characteristics and role of the yoga teachers themselves, and several questions emerged: why do these yoga teachers relinquish the comfort of the yoga studio to devote their free time and resources to teach yoga to inmates? How do they frame this social engagement and what do they expect to obtain from it? How does the image of the 'narcissistic New Ager' fit into this scene? Why is easier for penitentiary institutions to recruit volunteers to teach yoga than to teach theatre, philosophy or art?

In Catalonia, one of the main promoters of yoga in prison has been the non-profit organization *WorldPrem*. Although *WorldPrem* is not the only organization promoting yoga and holistic therapies in prisons, it holds a special agreement with the Justice Department of the Catalan Government and has coordinated yoga courses in prisons for several years. Under the auspices of *WorldPrem*, about thirty yoga teachers voluntarily delivered regular and free yoga courses in 2016. *WorldPrem* was founded in 2010 as the non-profit arm of a well-known international kundalini yoga organization in order to share the benefits of yoga with the socially excluded, including those with disabilities, sex workers, drug users and the incarcerated. The aim of the organization is defined by its founders as the promotion of social change through individual transformation. One of the members explained: "[...] *Prem* is love. In Sanskrit, there are two words to define love: *Prem*, a love more unconditional, more global, the other is more affective. Then, *World* is world, unconditional love."

WorldPrem, in common with the increasing number of individual yoga volunteers and other associations than organize yoga courses in prison, do not receive funding for this activity. Yoga volunteers need to cover all their expenses. For prison staff, yoga is an activity that straddles sport, leisure, therapy and rehabilitation. Yoga is, thus, framed as a secular activity offered to all inmates, irrespective of their faith. In the prisons in which our fieldwork was conducted, we observed yoga to be very popular and there to be, in most of the institutions, a—usually long—waiting list of prospective participants. Most of the yoga courses follow the same format: typically, a weekly session lasting one and a half hours practiced by a group of up to 25 inmates. However, in some cases, intensive courses—such as the 'yoga quarantine,' during which three hours per day of yoga is practiced over 40 days by a reduced group of inmates—are organized. We did our fieldwork in two different penitentiary settings: one male remand prison and one high security prison with both female and male penitentiary units. Contrary to general societal trends, within prisons, yoga is highly popular

among men, which raises interesting concerns in relation to the construction of alternative forms of masculinity (Griera forthcoming).

The profile of yoga volunteers follows a similar pattern. Most volunteers are aged between 30 and 50, with a white middle-class urban background. Among our sample, we have identified a gender balance with a similar proportion of male and female teachers. Yoga volunteers are, mainly, accredited yoga instructors, but there are others who are still undergoing teacher training and for whom involvement in prison teaching is part of their training. Many of them belong to the kundalini¹ yoga movement and—although they share with prison staff a secular framing of yoga—this style of yoga has a strong spiritual basis which finds expression in classes through, for example, the chanting of mantras or the development of specific kriyas.² As one of the volunteers explained: “yoga means union. That is, what I am doing to you, I am doing to myself and to the world because everything is one: this is yoga. In our yoga, you start with ek ong kar, the kundalini yoga base phrases and ek-kar, which means that everything is one.” This spiritual tone can also be discerned in the discursive motifs that configure the narratives detailing the social involvements of yoga teachers in prison.

Analysis of the volunteers’ motivations to altruistically teach yoga in the prison setting reveals comparable discursive motifs. Most describe their social involvement in teaching yoga in prisons as an outpouring of gratitude and as a way to give back to society that which yoga has conferred upon their own lives. In the interviews, their own experience with yoga is depicted as self-transformative, as this yoga teacher expressed:

(...) as part of my time, or part of what I dedicate myself, I give it to life and named it ‘life,’ ‘existence’—everything that is God. For me, it is a gift living that experience [of yoga] so the minimum that I can do is to offer [yoga] as a gift. I also see it as a way to feed everything else [social change], as well as at an energy level. It’s like that.

For most of the volunteers, yoga is not only a physical activity, but a practice that has opened a “path of self-discovery,” an “alternation” process facilitating important changes in their lives and re-invigorating their biographies (Berger 1963, p. 68). Their involvement in the yoga milieu has been concurrent with the internalization of an “holistic theodicy,” enabling them to understand themselves, their relationship to others and the wider world (Griera 2017). This personal experience is what moves them to bring yoga to prisons and to promote the idea that the adoption of yoga can be a crucial ‘turning point’ in the inmates’ process of rehabilitation and transformation, in a similar way that it has been for them. One volunteer explained: “I see that I am helping them to wake up, to open their eyes to some things ... I am giving them an oasis of wellbeing, of peace, of light, of connection with themselves, within a desert and so establishing a strong life situation.”

They consider that work with the body through yoga asanas (poses) is a plausible catalyst for personal transformation at the physiological, mental and spiritual levels. From this point of view, inmates are especially sensitive (or receptive) to opportunities for change: their suffering is interpreted in terms of karma and—making a conscious effort not to be judgmental—volunteers conceptualize yoga as an opportunity for redemption. They believe and state that beyond (and despite) physical imprisonment, there is a mental imprisonment which can be overcome, as this other volunteer narrated:

I try to provide them, remind them, that the strength they are looking for is within, that is, they have to wake up ... The philosophy of yoga is that power is in your hands, that is, it is yours and what you are looking for, through practice, is to connect more and more to that

¹ Yogui Bhajan popularized modern Kundalini yoga during the seventies in the US. From there, it has been exported all over the world and it provides a combination of yoga asanas, tantric ideas and Sikh mantras. It is said to be the ‘most spiritualized’ form of contemporary yoga styles (Khalsa 1986; York 2004).

² *Kriya* refers to a set of practices, mainly breath control techniques and exercises, that are practiced to achieve a specific outcome. The word is a Sanskrit term that means ‘completed action.’ See: <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5022/kriya> (last accessed: 15 August 2019).

power, to really understand that it is there, that God is there, that you can do what you want with your life [and] that, if you are not doing it, it is because you have not managed to digest something of your past, or it is your way of seeing the world that leads you away from that.

Inmates' experiences of the harshness of prison life are considered not to represent an obstacle for personal and spiritual transformation but, on the contrary, to prove advantageous. Volunteers' narratives of hope are presented to the yoga class in order to help inmates to make sense of what [Goffman \(1961\)](#) defined as the major suffering of imprisonment—the feeling that your life has been paused and is meaningless. Prison becomes, then, re-interpreted as meaningful and as a space for personal and further social transformation. Volunteers firmly expect that individual changes will have a ripple effect on the inmates' complete lives—from their relationships with fellow inmates and family to society in general, as one of the volunteers narrated:

I have the feeling that I am doing what I have come to do, which is [to teach them] how to awaken awareness and help them at the same time. It's like a domino effect, right? I see that we are giving small inputs that generate changes in people and these changes are at the same time generating changes [in] the people that surround them. [It's like a domino effect that [operates] among all the people that are in that [the yoga and holistic spirituality milieu].

Nonetheless, the will to deliver yoga to prison extends beyond this personal stance and is framed as part of what is called “karma yoga,” the kind of yoga that implies a social action and “doing good to the whole world and loving all beings.” Therefore, teachers express their aims to have both an affect and effect on the prison's wider context ([Engelke 2012](#)). The will to bring yoga to prisons is articulated through a logic of gratitude and is, therefore, not very different from motivations for proselytism in other religious contexts. However, karma yoga is not only conceived as an altruistic task, underpinned by an assistential attempt to promote individual wellbeing in prisons, but is also described, through use of discursive motifs common to social movements, as a practice capable of nurturing wider social and political emancipatory projects. Indeed, some of the yoga volunteers conceive that the local and individual changes that yoga encourages may have global and collective impact:

We are thousands of millions, that is, we are very many people, each with their small parcel. It's [like a little garden, because it is what is being [created], or this [yoga] is supporting a paradigm shift that is taking place.

For the volunteers, therefore, yoga is not only an altruistic task but rather one that is framed by a broader project of social transformation—a process which the practice itself has the potential to initiate. However, yoga teachers are not totally unaware of the risk they incur of becoming instrumentalized by prison authorities in order to contribute to the disciplining of bodies and minds. They address this challenge by way of two assertions. On the one hand, they emphasize that calmness is not a synonym of passivity but instead might be a necessary precondition of the reflexively required if one is to resist and challenge the system. Volunteers intuit that, beyond the institution's perception of yoga as a free-cost activity that encourages tranquillity, there is a subversive and transformative dimension of their teaching. Behind the peacefulness that apparently facilitates disciplinary demands, volunteers explain how they encourage self-empowerment and resistance to the submission and docility promoted by prison authorities for the mechanical rule-following. They want to turn aggressiveness and violence into a positive force capable of generating individual changes by fostering self-esteem and self-consciousness. On the other hand, most of the volunteers link this self-transformation to the New Age's holistic motif, highlighting how social transformation is predicated upon personal transformation ([Dawson 2007](#); [Heelas 1996](#)).

3.2. Holistic Spirituality in the Streets

Holistic spirituality encounters in public spaces are proliferating, but empirical research on those occurring in open-air contexts is scarce ([Hegner and Margry 2016](#)). While the focus has increasingly

been drawn to forms of religious practice arising from different faith traditions, which are more visible, institutionalized and—sometimes—problematized (Becci et al. 2013, 2017; Burchardt and Grier 2019; Hjelm 2015); holistic expressions of spirituality are growing in the midst of public squares, streets or parks in a more unnoticed way and have received less attention. Since 2015, when the project on urban religious expressions was started in Barcelona, we identified that, beyond processions and festivities organized by formal religious communities, a wide range of holistic spirituality activities were informally and regularly taking place at the beach, public parks, avenues, streets and squares. Frequently, small groups use public environments for their practice; occasionally, massive events, which differ significantly from traditional spiritual festivals, are arranged (Becci and Grandjean 2018; Gauthier 2013) with social and political transformative intent. Why are these activities taking place outside the holistic setting? Why do holistic practitioners want to be visible? How do participants and organizers understand their social impact?

We have observed that—in addition to the weekly demonstrations for *Free Tibet* that take place in a central square of Barcelona and which have an exclusively political purpose—public meditations with an overtly spiritual tone, that encourage holistic practices as a vehicle for social and political action, have grown. These civic actions, which are not only collective and public but also have as their non-profit driven objective the promotion of holistic practice to effect social and political transformation, are the object of our attention.

In the case of Catalonia, these meditative civic actions have been mainly organized by groups and individuals informally linked to the Catalan Platform of Buddhist groups.³ Actually, most have been mainly promoted by *Wake Up*, an international association that gathers Buddhist and non-Buddhist people involved in the mindfulness practice inspired by the teachings of the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. *Wake Up*'s mission is succinctly expressed as the pursuit of a social transformation through mindfulness practice.⁴ Invoking the figure of Thich Nhat Hanh as a peace activist in the Vietnam war, *Wake Up* frames their activities—particularly public events, such as meditative flash mobs in cities—in terms of “contributing to building a healthier and a more compassionate society.” Nonetheless, there are also other organizations that, increasingly, promote public meditations within the civic arena. In Catalonia, for example, the public activity of the Catalan movement *Conscious Country*, which has encouraged recent public meditations in collaboration with different holistic and religious organizations, is especially noteworthy. This movement is a platform of different experts and associations, created between 2011–2015, with the aim of building a conscious nation by awakening the individual and collective consciousness, which not only results in inner peace but also has beneficial social consequences.

In our fieldwork, we have thus identified two modalities of holistic civic action promoted by these two organizations. Firstly, public seated meditations that are organized with a social and political objective, usually related to peacebuilding and non-violence (for instance, the 2011 public meditations, coordinated by *Wake Up* in Barcelona's squares in order to promote human rights in front of the Catalan Government and Barcelona City Council or the peace day commemorations of 2015). The *Marathon of Silence*, organized to alleviate the tensions in Catalans politics during autumn 2017, gathered together Brahma Kumaris and Zen Christians along with diverse holistic, Buddhist and mindfulness groups, to perform various public meditations in front of the Parliament in order to promote serenity, peace, tolerance and compassion.

³ The Catalan Platform of Buddhist groups (CCEB) was founded in 2007 in order to coordinate and create synergies between various associations and Buddhist centres of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands with the will to present Buddhism to—and represent Buddhism in—society. See: <https://www.ccebudistes.org/es/origen-y-objetivos-de-la-ccb/> (last accessed: 20th September 2019).

⁴ Mindfulness is a technique that represents a form of vipassana meditation aimed at consciously anchoring the mind in the present moment. Starting with a basic technique of breathing, it gradually develops into intentional awareness of one's bodily sensations, emotions and ultimately thoughts, in attempt to calm the mind (Arat 2017).

A second type of holistic initiative, with a similar discursive motif, has proliferated recently: meditative marches. These marches resemble the religious processions which periodically occupy the central streets of the city, since Buddhist monks (from Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village monastery in France), dressed in their brown robes, lead the march; there is also a likeness to political demonstrations, apparent in the exhibiting, by marchers, of posters and signs. Some of these silent marches are organized once a year by *Wake Up* in order to direct 'collective energy' towards the goal of peace. However, there are also marches which have taken place in response to specific events. For instance, in 2017, after the terrorist attacks in Barcelona, *Wake Up*—along with other Buddhist groups and a Christian meditation movement in Barcelona—organized a massive silent march through the city streets in order to express solidarity with the victims, endorse peace-building and protest against violence. Likewise, in 2018, *Conscious Country*—along with several civic local associations, different religious communities and local peace activists—organized a silent march at the Arc de Triomf in which people dressed in white in order to promote peace.

Each of these different forms of public and collective meditation, in common with yoga teaching in prisons, are presented as secular pursuits, albeit acknowledging an intrinsic spiritual dimension. They are narrated, by their organizers and participants, in terms of promoting peace; that is, they are articulated as peaceful and silent acts, lacking any explicit religious purpose (even though most of the organizations involved are connected to traditional religions and the majority of participants either belong to, or are affiliated with, Buddhist or Christian meditation groups), as this Buddhist leader explained:

If what you are told is the need to be aware, you are aware. Even if you are not in any religion, then you support it while you can accept the things that it tells you. That's why it is good to unmark labels that [exist] already [and which are] in a way, obsolete and that is why also mindfulness that has emerged, which is the meditation of all life. The Satipatthana Sutta is from 2500 years ago [and] cannot be explained as it [was] explained before, as if it were a religion.

These two modalities of holistic civic action are both organized and designed as flash mobs. These gatherings, arranged through social media networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram or WhatsApp) are a fluid network of individuals—not necessarily known to each other, although they are usually actively involved in different mindfulness and Buddhist settings—who form into a tangible holistic community of practice for these events; although the profile of people participating in these events varies, certain commonalities can be identified. From our participant observations, we have identified that the ages of participants range from thirties to late sixties and determined that many are white middle-class women from an urban background.

A central feature of holistic civic action is that such communal expressions are closely entwined with the altruistic intent of participants. Such events are free of charge and supported by donations, as one the organizers and participants explained: "another issue of going out on the street is because we believe that this teaching [meditation] should be open to everyone, that is, everybody must be able to reach it." This openness, through which these two modalities of holistic civic action are motivated and justified, is not only explained in economic but also collective terms, as is evident in this organizer's remark: "we want to make serenity and calmness visible to the streets. We can no longer keep our spiritual commitment at home." There is a will to become visible, in order to create awareness about the possibility of acting differently at both the individual and collective levels. There is, thus, a form of 'conscious exhibitionism,' rooted in the belief that the mere disruptive presence of meditators in the street might create conditions for change by raising awareness among the population, as the promotion material of the *Marathon of Silence* explains:

In light of the tense situation that has been generated, it is advisable that serenity and interiority become visible on the street and especially in emblematic places. For this reason, a set of events, we call a *Marathon of Shared Silence*, is open to everyone. We meet ourselves

without flags or emblems, above the noise of the words and the slogans that divide; people may say we are united in silence, in an attitude of internalization, meditation, prayer, visualization or projection of the future, according to their individual preference. People who are fasting for the same reason are welcome. We are convinced that a collective gesture, which is persistent, sprouting from the heart and fortified by the strength of thought that is well focused, will help overcome the spiral of confrontation.

Arising from the action repertoires of social movements, these public and collective dimensions (in common with those integral to the practice of karma yoga in prisons) are anchored in a spiritual tradition. Sometimes, the organizers, particularly those who are involved in Buddhism, claim the roots of such initiatives and identify with socially engaged Buddhism. For instance, *Wake Up* tactically evokes the figure of the Thich Nhat Hanh as either Zen Master or—especially during public meditations—as peace activist. As a Buddhist leader who regularly participates in seated meditations and silent marches explained, these individual and local dimensions of social and collective transformations are also observed in prison:

We are mobilizing for something, which is to convey to society the message that we are not selfish people that are at home doing our practice—although [this] is still basic and fundamental because the healing of the soul itself is also very important. If you are not healed, you cannot heal anyone, but this aspect of showing that we are here is also important: [it shows] that we are about to help, and we want to integrate ourselves into society at all levels. That is why these Thich Nhat Hanh walks transmit the expression of a different way of walking, a conscious way of walking and doing all things. Walking consciously is just like a metaphor [for] being conscious in our lives; we have values and we have to respect and take care of them. These values are solidarity and meditation. Mindfulness is also doing everything you do every day but consciously.

These initiatives are built upon the expectations of the performative material and spiritual power of meditation, as one of the organizers of the seated meditations during the Catalan political conflict stated, “We are convinced that a collective gesture of silence and focused thinking, which blossoms from the heart, will help to overcome the confrontational spiral.” They all place a special emphasis on the importance of each breath, during which thoughts are personally and communally directed towards victims and the suffering. These embodied individual and collective experiences are interrelated, as one participant in a silent march explained: “from individual peace there is an irradiation towards outside and collective change becomes possible. There is the aim of covering the city with this peace and channelling this inner peace to the world.” As another participant of seated meditation asserted: “by meditating we can generate a positive energy and help politicians to focus and take conscious decisions.” Meditation is, then, not to be considered a ‘passive’ technique but rather having as an endeavour creating concrete thaumaturgical effects.

4. Discussion

The comparison of the two cases described in the previous sections reveals the convergence and combination of three shared aspects that enable a re-consideration of classical approaches to holistic spirituality in the vein of recent contributions (Cadge 2007; Fedele and Knibbe 2012; Hedlund-de Witt 2011; Oh and Sarkisian 2011) and—as reported in this paper—the unveiling of a more accurate picture of contemporary holistic and civic involvement. These three aspects are the forms of public expression that holistic spirituality assumes, the discursive and embodied imaginaries of change and the reinterpretation of its individualism.

4.1. Beyond the Private: Holistic Spirituality and Its Public Resonance

The first and clearest observation from our research is the public expression that holistic spirituality finds in these two cases. Holistic spirituality does not remain bounded to the private sphere or restricted

to what has been termed the “spiritual milieu” (Heelas et al. 2005) but instead gains presence and visibility within the public sphere. Our interviewees do not want to remain confined within their spiritual centres and communities but rather wish to create a ‘public’ impact—either within a public institution or in public space. This eruption into the public sphere is not accidental but emanates from an explicit wish to be present and to be seen. This ‘move’ from the private to the public that has taken place during the last two decades—in the context of the growing normalization of religious diversity in Catalonia (Griera 2016)—is not arbitrary but in fact is discursively presented as the result of a reflexive and conscious decision with the aim of producing a tangible effect in the world and contributing to social transformation.

There are two elements that are interesting to underline. On the one hand, this growing public presence has not generated alarm or suspicion but has instead been greeted by widespread public acceptance. As Fedele and Knibbe (forthcoming) show, holistic spirituality is increasingly becoming a lingua franca between the religious and the secular world. Holistic spirituality derives its popularity and mainstream consent from its chameleon-like nature, which allows its members to navigate—and interrelate amidst—different social and cultural domains. This is also possible due to the readiness of holistic members to innovatively develop spiritual forms of expression and engage with different repertoires. In this regard, for instance, public meditators are blending together repertoires originating from holistic spirituality and from various social movements, while yoga teaching volunteers are able to introduce yoga to prisons by representing it as a technique conducive to physical fitness and thus a suitable leisure activity for inmates.

On the other hand, these holistic followers do not only want to be seen; they seek also to transform the public sphere. Their social engagement is closely linked to an imaginary of change. They direct their agency into the production of a specific future of harmony, peace and environmental consciousness (Cantó-Milà and Seebach 2015). The act of choosing holistic practices—either yoga or meditation—as a means of intervention in the world is not fortuitous but rather discursively elaborated by stating that transformation of one’s body and self is crucial to fostering social change. Therefore, while some holistic practitioners also participate in other social movements, they nevertheless maintain that they consider these actions—teaching yoga in prisons and doing public meditations—as forms of social engagement and activism *per se*.

This is interesting since it contradicts, or at least calls into question, some *etic* definitions and classifications of forms of social engagement used in other studies. Likewise, it fosters a more nuanced understanding of the ‘efficacy’ of social actions, not only in individual but also in collective terms, raising questions, including the extent to which a political demonstration is a more efficient means of challenging a political regime than a public meditation. The answers to this type of questions extend far beyond the scope of this research. It is important, nevertheless, to note that most of our interviewees were reflecting on these issues and drawing on social and holistic imaginary that justified the relevance of practicing meditation or yoga to effect world change.

4.2. Beyond Commodification: Discursive and Embodied Imaginaries of Social Change

In the narratives of our interviewees, there is an acknowledgment of the social perception of holistic spirituality as a ‘selfish’ and ‘individualistic’ form of religion and—in some cases—there is even an agreement of this interpretation. However, holistic practitioners commonly observe that this emphasis on ‘private’ practice has weakened and nowadays many holistic followers also display a greater degree of social and political engagement. There are two elements that need to be underlined in this regard. First is the question of temporality. According to our interviewees, the holistic milieu initially attracted many ‘immature’ people, or people in strong need of self-healing that were not capable of thinking beyond themselves. Nonetheless, they aver that the holistic movement has changed in the last decade(s) and many new social transformation projects have been initiated within holistic spiritual circles. This element of temporality—illustrating the evolution of the holistic movement—is largely absent from most of the studies on the topic yet has emerged as an important factor in our fieldwork.

Regarding the second aspect relating to the aforementioned public articulations of holistic spirituality, it is important to acknowledge that the two studied practices—the teaching of yoga and the organization of public meditations in the streets—are not conducted in isolation but are promoted, articulated and justified in relation to a imaginary of social change. It is not easy to picture the concrete shape of this imaginary of change because is extremely diverse and a little fuzzy, but we can at least trace its contours. In general terms, we might say that is based on two related ideas: ‘the personal is political’ and ‘social change stems from personal change.’ These two maxims are discursively articulated through two dimensions: an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of reciprocity. The idea of personal responsibility is mainly elaborated through the notion of karma and the need to produce a better future for subsequent generations. Reciprocity is mainly justified through the biographical trajectories of participants which emphasize the need to return to society that which holistic spirituality has bestowed upon them. Their imaginary of a better future—and the type of values associated with a ‘good life’—are closely linked to what has been termed postmaterialist values.

However, this imaginary of social change is not only articulated discursively in these general ideas and particular narratives but also in an embodied way. All these changes are, therefore, linked to a specific ethical or value change and simultaneously with the transformation of the body. In this regard, it is the body which first needs to be trained and disciplined in prison before a deeper transformation can occur and it is the body—and a specific disposition of the body—which stands in (dis)conformity in the middle of the street.

4.3. *Beyond Individualism: The Individual Who Is Not Individualistic*

A third aspect, illustrated by both cases, is the centrality of the individual and their self-expression. The organizations facilitating these holistic spiritual expressions are built on individualized engagement. With regard to the delivery of yoga courses in prisons, the involvement of the teachers begins with their own individual interest and motivation. Likewise, the public meditations, either in static or dynamic form, organized by *Wake Up* and *Conscious Country* assume the form of flash mobs, gatherings, arranged through social media networks, in which individuals freely participate. These two cases demonstrate that social engagement emerges from individual experiences of transformation. Self-realization is what motivates the sharing of holistic practices as an outpouring of gratitude, in the case of prison yoga teaching, or as the conferral of a gift in the case of public meditations. Similarly, as we already mentioned, the personal experience of self-transformation is what frames the conviction, shared by yoga teachers and mindfulness practitioners, that holistic practices are effective political tools for generating social transformation.

The empirical findings, therefore, reveal how the individual is central to these public holistic expressions, but a type of individual who is not self-centred. Contradicting some traditional interpretations, this individualized expression and commitment, rather than being either instrumental, narcissistic or apolitical, is in fact vital to holistic actors’ political and social engagement. Our findings concur with the work of [Lichterhan \(1996\)](#) on social movements, which demonstrates that the culture of self-fulfilment—of which holistic spiritualities are framed as par-excellence expressions—is not incompatible with public, political and social commitments. The holistic initiatives examined underline how this late-modern culture of self-realization has not abolished active citizenship or in any respect sabotaged political and social commitment but rather has made possible new forms of political expression based on personalized self-articulation.

Our research points to the need to acknowledge multiple forms of individualism—reaching beyond traditional instrumentalized, egotistic and egocentric expressions—in order to better comprehend the manifestation of—and rationale underpinning—the public, collective and altruistic dimensions of holistic spiritualities examined in this article. Finally, it is also important to note that these articulations of the individual, present in the social engagements of holistic actors, can also be explained by way of reference to a ‘habitus affinity’—using [Bourdieu \(1979\)](#) concept and perspective—between social and holistic spiritual actors. As [Berghuijs et al. \(2013, p. 789\)](#) have shown in their research in the

Netherlands, “demographic factors—especially education, age and gender—are stronger predictors of social engagement than religious and spiritual beliefs, experiences or practices”.

5. Conclusions

Classical approaches to holistic spirituality have generally characterized these expressions as the epitome of late-modern trends of subjectivization, privatization and commodification. Although some initial debates emphasized the seminal counter-cultural dimensions of holistic expressions and thus underlined their subversive potential (Heelas 1996, 2008), many socio-anthropological contributions have represented these expressions as holding an elective affinity with neoliberal logic, as either a marketized product ripe for consumption or as reinforcing of an apolitical ideology. In the vein of new approaches to holistic spiritualities, which offer a more nuanced understanding of these debates, we have explored the ways in which individualized, instrumentalized, privatized and commodified holistic expressions can also be conceptualized as emerging altruistic, transformative and collective forms of spirituality. We have shown that holistic actors are not only actively involved in different social transformation projects, as underlined by a growing set of literature (Berghuijs et al. 2013; Chandler 2008; Farias and Lalljee 2008; Höllinger 2004; Oh and Sarkisian 2011) but also that holistic actors are active promoters of social initiatives aimed at nurturing social change (Hedlund-de Witt 2011).

The two cases analysed are not exceptions. In the last years, we have witnessed a growth of social and political transformation initiatives in which holistic spiritual actors and groups have either been publicly involved or have become the main promoters. Worthy of mention are the Spanish *15-M Movement* and *Occupy Wall Street*—in which political assemblies were accompanied by regular public meditations—as well as the various ecological political movements inspired by holistic worldviews (Becci et al. forthcoming). However, in this fruitful encounter between social transformative projects and holistic spiritualities, it is necessary to distinguish between two different trends: firstly, the social and political initiatives in which holistic spiritual people are involved—and which make occasional use of holistic techniques or concepts—for instance the *15-M* in Spain; secondly, those projects that aim to transform the world through the spread and utilization of holistic techniques. The latter are the kind of projects that we have analysed in this article, in both the non-profit sector and the context of social movements.

More specifically, we have analysed the public articulations of holistic spiritualities and how these are related to the discursive and embodied elaboration of an imaginary of social change. The examination of this imaginary has enabled us to reassess claims that holistic spiritualities are necessarily commodified and marketized and also to identify the rationales behind holistic forms of social involvement. Holistic volunteers anchor their actions through both an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of reciprocity and blend together the different repertoires emerging from social movements, health, leisure or religion. Their engagement has a clear collective dimension but is nevertheless articulated through individualized forms of commitment and expression. In this regard, our research has revealed the need to reconsider acceptations of individualism within current debates on various forms of political commitment (Lichterman 1996). Our fieldwork, therefore, underlines how the almost unnoticed—but increasingly public—presence of holistic spiritualities in public context adds complexity to existing conceptualizations of contemporary holistic spiritualities and encourages further examination. Two topics especially deserve future attention: firstly, future research should focus on the hidden social consequences of the spread of public holistic practices in contemporary societies and assess the impact of these emerging spiritual imaginaries for social change. Secondly, it would be especially interesting to comparatively explore this phenomenon in order to unravel how local context impacts global configurations and vice versa.

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