

Alter-Europe: four ways to deal with the crisis of representative democracy

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One year ago, the early days of Occupy Wall Street reached the front pages of mainstream media. The occupation of Zuccotti Park in downtown Manhattan gave a new impetus to a wave of worldwide protests. Starting in the Arab world, it then took roots in Spain with the “Indignados” camps and assemblies that further extended to various European countries along with camp protest in Israel. In its turn, Occupy Wall Street inspired camps and actions in dozens of US cities and all over Europe, from London to Moscow. However, the *Indignados and Occupy may only represent the tip of the iceberg*. Occupy is part of a wide range of subterranean movements that have emerged not only to denounce austerity and neoliberal policies and to advocate for more democracy but also live democracy in different ways. By doing so they explore ways to complement representative democracy and empower citizenship. Beyond their highly mediated mobilizations and behind the scenes of institutional politics, vibrant progressive citizens’ initiatives and movements have developed across Europe and the western world and constitute active poles of subterranean politics.

These citizens and activists share an opposition to the way national governments and the EU deal with the economic crisis. They provide alternative meanings to the crisis and reclaim a more democratic society. Their strategies, actions, concepts of social change, movements and democracy however vary considerably, to the point that some of their discourses and tactics may appear as contradictory. Some citizens want to build stronger democratic institutions; other ones don’t trust elected representatives any more and promote a change that starts at a local level and in daily life. The interviews and exploratory empirical fieldwork conducted in six European

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countries¹ pointed to four main cultures of activism² that animate this progressive sector: occupation/direct participation, local and ecological transition, expertise and advocacy, movement building and protest mobilizations.

Indignados and Occupy camps and assemblies: direct democracy

Indignados and Occupy movements surged in the wave of an economic crisis that has had a devastating effect on youth precarity and unemployment. However, the claims of this movement focus even more on a crisis in democracy, pointing to the actual and structural limitations of representative democracy. Activists denounce an “*empty democracy*”, considering that the policies that have a real impact on their lives are settled in circles citizens have no impact upon. The “M15” movement in Spain started as a denunciation of a “*democracy without choice*”. Many Spanish citizens considered that the 2011 general elections did not offer a choice between alternatives, as the two main parties had no significant differences in their policy approach. This echoes the concerns of Occupy activists in the US, where citizens claim that both parties are under the hold of big corporations and the richest 1%. All over the world, citizens denounce the *collusion between big corporations and policy makers*. The collusion between the island economic elite (in the bank sector in particular) and the political elite (that often belong to the same families) was at the heart of Iceland

citizens’ indignation and successful mobilizations. In Spain, many indignados consider it as their main target: “We must break the vicious link between capital and the representatives of democracy, who are more eager to defend the interests of capital than those of the voting population” (David, Barcelona, January 2012). In Tunisia, the Ben-Ali family controlled the most profitable companies and used its political power to expand their businesses. In Mexico, the young citizens’ movement “#yosoy132” denounces the collusion between the two major and very influential media consortiums, the economic elite and the winning presidential candidate.

Indignados and Occupy activists consider democracy not only as a claim but also as a practice. Experimentation in horizontal and participatory discussion and deliberation processes is at the core of their camps and neighbourhood assemblies. Space occupied by the movements become “spaces of experience”, understood as *places sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society and power relations which permit actors to live according to their own principles, to knit different social relations and to express their subjectivity* (Pleyers, 2010: 37-40).

“We build spaces where you find freedom of imagination. When St Paul was there, I was able to avoid money, universities... and all the things that people tell me I have to do to have a happy life.” (An activist from Occupy London Stock Exchange, 2012).

The subjective dimension is particularly important. Experimenting in concrete forms of direct democracy is also a personal, and often transformative, experience:



“I think that things happen much through a change of oneself. ... After having been part of the Indignados, I don’t see the people in the same way anymore. I realized that everyone has something to say and I try to care about everyone’s opinion, and also about everyone as a human being.” (Anne, Focus group in Paris, 2012).

While some seek to articulate these local democratic practices as a reflection of national and global democracy, other Indignados mistrust representative democracy and only believe in participation at the (micro-) local level.

“I’m not sure democracy can work beyond a certain level, beyond the local or city level. Beyond, it is rather more about coordination than democracy.” (Sophie, Paris, 2012).

Internet is another space where Indignados and Occupy activists develop and defend an open space of expression, call for mobilizations and build tools to empower offline democratic and horizontal processes. ‘Subterranean Politics’ fieldwork done by Tamsin Murray Leach and Sean Deel on Occupy London Stock Exchange points to the strong interactions both of complementarity and tension between the camp offline and online dynamics and discussions. The insightful research of Ariadna Fernandez, Carles Feixa and Mònica Fígueras (forthc.) into the Indignados camp in Barcelona and Jeff Juris’ analysis on US Occupy mobilization come to similar conclusions.

currently active. In Wallonia, a hundred of “groupe d’achat commun” provide local food to some 2500 households.

While Indignados and Occupiers implement prefigurative activism in public spaces and in their movements’ camps and organizations, “transition activists” focus on prefigurative actions and consistency between values and practices in their daily life practices. More than the economic crisis, many activists we interviewed rank climate change and environmental damages as their main concerns. They consider it as their personal responsibility to lower their impact on the environment. The roots of social change thus lie in a change of one’s lifestyle and in alternative practices at the local level. As a consequence, the subjective and self-transformative dimension is particularly strong in this mode of action.

“It is first and foremost a way to refuse playing a game with which I disagree. At least with vegetables, I don’t play the game, I don’t provide more water to the system.” (Jerome, 23, Paris).

“I do it to feel good with myself. At least I can say that everything that happens, all this pollution, all these environmental disasters, all this waste ... well it’s not my fault. I am at peace with myself.” (Philippe, Liege)

Transition movements and critical consumption: responsible democracy

In the last decade, Western Europe has witnessed a rise in actors seeking to implement more sustainable lifestyles with less consumption and more convivial relations among people. It ranges from the transition movement (Hopkins, 2011) to voluntary simplifiers (de Bouver, 2009), local money initiatives and critical/local food networks. The latter has developed into a large economic sector in most of the western world. In the UK and in the US, networks of “community supported agriculture” (CSA) provide local food for people and local public administrations (Maye & Kirwan, 2010). In France, 250,000 people are involved in a restraint model of an alternative food network, and at least twice as many in less restraining local food networks.

The local food sector is more discreet but particularly lively in Belgium. The Flemish “voedselteams” are so far the most widespread and coordinated initiative, although not the only local food initiative. Some 150 “voedselteams” are active, which represents about 3000 households. They buy their food in over 100 small and middle-range local farms, out of which about half are certified organic farms (see Verhaegen, 2012: 352). Their size and efficient coordination give them a significant impact on the regional food economics and policies. In Brussels, 25 SAGAL (Solidaire AankoopGroep voor artisanale Landbouw) are

While many “transition activists” proudly claim that they go beyond rhetoric and implement concrete alternatives, the spread from self-transformation or from social change in a limited group to larger scale transformations often remains however a blind-spot, especially as many of these groups are reluctant to engage in large scale coordination and institutionalization. The Belgian cases show two distinct ways of dealing with the “dilemma of institutionalization” (Jasper 2006). On one side, in Wallonia, activists of alternative local food networks are more reluctant to support attempts of regional coordination and fear to lose the autonomy of local groups and the convivial dimensions of their activism when sizing up (Pleyers, 2011). On the other side, Flemish initiatives have shown the efficiency of regional coordination both in empowering critical consumers groups and in gaining visibility towards policy makers (see Verhaegen, 2012).

Some successes of the alter-globalization movement have shown the virtue of cross-fertilization among actors defending both perspectives (Pleyers, 2010, chapter 9). In this perspective, local food consumers and producers would have much to gain in fostering encounters and experience sharing across the linguistic border.

Expert activists: argumentative democracy

With the Euro crisis and European austerity plans, committed intellectuals and expert activists have published dozens of appeals³, books and articles where they develop both rigorous analysis and political statements underlining the irrationality of the way the EU and national governments deal with the crisis (see for example the work of the Tax Justice Network (Kohonen & Mestrum 2011) or “Les Economistes Attérés” in France). These activists build their credibility and legitimacy on the basis of the quality of their expertise on a precise topic (e.g. tax justice, public debt or water public management), which allows them to challenge EU and government experts and to propose concrete alternative measures. Like in Habermas’ deliberative democracy, they trust that when arguments are rational and well-developed, they will ultimately be taken into account by policy makers.

“We try to mobilize expertise and apply it in relevant policy and advocacy sorts of processes, rather than mobilizing citizens to make an outcry: we believe that once we create enough public information, people will mobilize themselves.” (Mita, Tax Justice Network, Helsinki)

Most expert activists networks focus much of their energy on the European scale and on EU institutions⁴ (e.g. the Corporate Europe Observatory or the Tax Justice Network). Their conception of social change is institutionalised and rather top-down, as it focuses on policy makers, regulations, institutions and redistributive policies at the national, continental and global level. The push towards this social change and its sustainability also requires however a bottom-up dynamic, and a more active citizenship, familiarised with macro-economics and able to get involved in debates on global issues. Popular education is thus an urgent

task, to which expert activists dedicate much of their time.

Mobilizers: protest democracy

“Mobilizers” focus on building popular mobilizations and mass demonstration able to forecast a different balance of power in the political system and to influence national government policies.

“If we want to influence the destiny of a democratic and social Europe, we must create a balance of power with this political system. ... We, as a trade union, we try to bring any worker or employee and tell them “you have something to say or something to do on these big ideological issues, even if you are not a priori an activist.” (Andrea, a Belgian trade union leader, 2012)

They consider that neither left-wing governments nor expert activists will be able to “force” a major political change without a strong citizens’ mobilization.

“Social progress has never been obtained only by elections. In 1936 [year of the “Front populaire” in France], social benefits were obtained not only thanks to the progressive government but because millions of people were striking and demonstrating.” (Antoine, Paris, 2012)

Some activists and networks have become expert in organizing and connecting up movements, both nationally and internationally. More experienced (and institutionalized) civil society organizations also play a key role in bringing some practical and material help to emerging movements and convergences. For example, trade union activists and organizations have brought an important – but discreet – support to Occupy Wall Street, by opposing the first police attempt to evict the camp at Zuccotti park, by providing rooms where the OWS could hold its assemblies, or by contributing to founding the youth movement.

Complementarity and cross-fertilization

These four cultures of activism don’t exist as such in the reality. Like ideal-types, they are heuristic tools that may help us to understand some features of progressive

subterranean politics in Europe. They exist neither in a pure form, nor as isolated practices. Most activists, performance and event mix different logics of action even if one is often dominant. Indignados/Occupy camps provide a clear illustration of coexistence and cross-fertilizations among these four cultures of activism, with alternative food initiatives and (in many cases) symbolic urban gardening; popular education (e.g. the “university tent” at Occupy LSX) or the discussion and elaboration of expert alternatives and the publication of appeals, newsletters and magazines. Besides, many camps and movements wouldn’t have lasted long without the support of more institutionalized and experienced activists. At the same time, different concepts of social change and of movement organizations also lead to misunderstandings and tensions. Many of the activists we interviewed were very conscious of their differences and most underlined the complementarity among different forms of activism.

“There is not a right and a wrong way to do things. There are various ideas of how to transform society, some are pragmatic and other ones are utopian. Some focus on the global and other on local relations. Some are implemented by unions and other by associations. In my perspective they are all complementary and shouldn’t be opposed.” (Jerome, a local/transition activist, Paris, 23).

To analyze these movements together helps to point out their potential for cross-fertilization, which may help to overcome some limitations specific to each of them (Pleyers, 2010: chapters 8 & 9). For example, Indignados/Occupy movements are combining their energies and creativity with initiatives closer to the other three trends. Connections and cross-fertilizations occur with local human economy projects (this is particularly the case in Barcelona, see Sánchez 2012), with expert activists and popular education (see for example the “Occupied Times of London”⁵) or with more formal civil society organizations (Indignados from Brussels have developed strong connections after the eviction of their camp, see Sallustio 2012). Such cross-fertilizations may contribute to overcoming the ephemeral nature of their camps and the sporadic nature characterizing many recent mobilizations and movements rooted in



experience (McDonald 2006), subjectivity, creativity and horizontal organization.

Rather than contesting representative democracy, as many activists claim to do, these movements explore four ways to complement representative democracy and empower citizenship (see also De Munck & Ferreras, 2012). Taken together, these forms of counter-democracy (direct democracy, responsible democracy, argumentative democracy and protest democracy) offer concrete ways forward for a multi-dimensional approach to deal with some structural limits of representative democracy and to explore paths towards more democratic societies, which remain to be invented.

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Notes :

¹ This exploratory phase of the research is based on 27 interviews conducted with progressive activists in France, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Poland and Germany as well as participatory observation between January 15th and the 1st of March 2012. In addition, a focus group was organized in Paris. The results of this exploratory phase of the research are neither exhaustive nor representative. They may however provide a perspective that helps to categorize some parts of the subterranean politics and set bases of further research.

Dr. Bartolomeo Conti (CADIS-EHESS) and Madeleine Sallustio (Université Libre de Bruxelles) conducted interviews and fieldwork in Paris, Brussels, Namur and Liege.

² Cultures of activism are understood as "coherent sets of normative orientations, concepts of the world, social change and movement organization and logics of action". (Pleyers, 2010: 13). These four cultures of activism don't constitute an exhaustive list.

³ See for example "Another road for Europe" <http://www.anotherroadforeurope.org>

⁴ Expertise is not the monopoly of activists who focus on the European level (some experts focus on the local or national debates). However, there is a strong correlation between the importance given to the European scale and to expertise.

⁵ <http://theoccupiedtimes.co.uk/>