

# Alter-Europe: Progressive activists and Europe in the aftermath in the time of crisis

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## I. Beyond institutional politics

### 1. Below the surface

On May 15th 2011, ten days before national general election, a crowd took over the Plaza del Sol in Madrid to protest against the lack of alternatives proposed by the two main parties; the centre left Socialists and the right-wing “Popular Party”. Inspired by the recent events in Tahrir Square, one of their goals was to implement direct democracy in the plaza’s and neighbourhood camps and assemblies. Following Madrid’s lead, ‘Indignados’ camps bubbled up in all Spanish cities and across various European countries. Then on September 17<sup>th</sup> of the same year, activists set up camp in Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park to denounce rising inequalities and the power of the richest ‘1%’ over national policies. In its turn, ‘Occupy Wall Street’ inspired camps and actions in dozens of US cities and all over Europe, from London to Moscow. These mobilisations captured the attention of the mainstream press, and were celebrated by progressive activists as a much-awaited reaction against the economic crisis. Yet two years on from that day in the Plaza del Sol, the economic crisis and the austerity plans which generated so much indignation remain on top of the European agenda. Meanwhile, the squares are empty, tents have gone, and most occupiers’ assemblies have disappeared. Was it nothing more than an ephemeral outcry?

Another topic practically omnipresent in the mainstream media since the start of the financial crisis – and certainly since 2011 – has been the future of the European Union (EU), most notably the future of the Euro. Yet fieldwork and interviews conducted with progressive activists across Western Europe point that while European public intellectuals and progressive media all focus on Europe as the primary space of action with which to counter the crisis, and to the importance of the EU as a key actor<sup>2</sup>, progressive activists have a far less consensual opinion. While a few stress the importance of the European level, many consider Europe neither a target nor as an important scale of action, and several discount Europe altogether.

To grasp these two paradoxes, we need to have a closer look at what is going on below the surface of mainstream media coverage, widely covered events and institutionalized civil society. The qualitative research conducted in 2012 shows that behind the scenes, vibrant citizens’ initiatives are still going on, and indeed were so prior to the events of 2011, but in ways that typically do not correspond to the institutionalized and most visible part of civil society, and which only get media coverage during ephemeral actions. Political debates, societal changes and democracy, are not only happening under the

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Habermas 2012.

spotlight of global media, through professional politicians and intellectuals. They are also (and foremost) produced in the shadow of everyday life, by ‘ordinary citizens’ who develop thousands of small but significant debates, initiatives and practices. These active citizens develop different cultures of activism and practices, resulting in different stances towards Europe, EU institutions and democracy.

Adopting a grassroots agency-centered perspective and a more inclusive concept of citizenship and democracy lead us to an alternative interpretation of the two above mentioned ‘paradoxes’ concerning progressive activists in Europe.

1. It suggests that the “indignados” and square occupations were actually only the tip of the iceberg, the visible part of a wide range of citizens’ initiatives that oppose austerity policies and that implement concrete alternatives. Even more than the economic crisis, these actors point to a ‘crisis of democracy’. They are outraged that citizens do not have their word to say when it comes to economic policies. They advocate for a deepening of democracy but also seek to ‘live democracy’, to implement democratic practices in various sectors of their political and daily life.

2. It suggests a different perspective on the role of ‘Europe’. Different cultures of politics need to be distinguished, rather than lumping ‘activists’ together as one group. Strategies, concepts of social change and democracy vary considerably among progressive activists practicing. Some citizens want to build stronger democratic institutions; others no longer trust elected representatives and promote a change that starts at a local level and in daily life. From that point one can assess the relationship of these cultures to ‘Europe’ as a political space: for example, while ‘expert activists’ may focus on action at the level of European institutions, other cultures of activism may relate to ‘Europe’ in a different manner, if at all.

Thus the first part of this article will provide an overview of *four cultures of activism across progressive activists in Europe*. It doesn’t constitute a full map of informal politics, but synthesizes the logics of action implemented by some of its driving forces. The second part analyses their *stances towards Europe and the European Union*. It focuses on the impact of nation, age, cultures of activism and the perception of social agency at a European level. The analysis of these successive factors points to a strong connection between European identity and the sense of agency at the European level. It suggests that, among the people we interviewed, activists who feel strongly European are those who are convinced that it is possible to have an impact on EU policies. Conversely, those who feel politically blocked at the European level do not claim a European identity.

## 2. Methodology

This paper draws on first hand empirical material from three qualitative research. The first one was based on 37 interviews conducted with progressive activists in France, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Poland and Germany, a focus group discussion organized in Paris with nine activists from different sectors of civil society and networks, participatory observation in activists meeting and events in 2012 as an autonomous research in the framework of the “Subterranean politics” research project, coordinated by Mary Kaldor and Sabine Selchow (2013), as well as the focus group organized by the Subterranean Politics project in Brussels on June the 21<sup>st</sup> 2012, which gathered a dozen activists and ten scholars from across Europe.

The second research focuses on ecological transition activists, with over 40 interviews and two series of 6 focus groups in Belgium and France (2013), as well as a previous qualitative research. Data and results of the third research still need to be included in this analysis. This latest research focuses on democratization movements in Moscow (23 interviews, 2013), with additional and comparative data gathered in New York City (Occupy Wall Street, 7 interviews, 2012), Mexico (#YoSoy132, 14 interviews, 2013) and Rio de Janeiro (23 interviews, July and August 2013). The analytical perspective draws on previous extensive research on the alter-globalization movement and on local food movements (Pleyers 2010, 2011).

The results are neither exhaustive, nor representative. They may nevertheless provide a perspective that helps to understand some categories of European progressive activists and their agenda as well as to set provisory categories and questions for further research.

Our primary concern in the selection of actors has been to go beyond the ‘usual suspects’ (intellectuals and institutional civil society activists) and classic biases in media coverage (see Fillieule, 2008). Mobilizations that get the most media coverage are not always the most frequent, innovative or significant ones, while journalists often focus on leaders with good communication skills, transnational spaces and happenings that provide spectacular images, rather than day-to-day activism or behind the scene advocacy. In order to take into account a possible ‘generation or age effect’, younger activists (22-35 years old) are over-represented in the sample.

## II. Four cultures of activism

Four primary cultures of activism are discernible among the progressive sector of progressive activists in Europe we interviewed: ‘square movements’, ‘ecological *transitioners*’, ‘expert activists’ and ‘mobilizers’. “Cultures of activism” have been defined as coherent sets of concepts of social agency, action and social change (Escobar, 1997; Dubet, 1996; Pleyers, 2010). Like ideal-types (Weber, 1995), they are heuristic tools that may help us to understand some features of progressive activists 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.

### 1. Square movements’ activists: camps and assemblies

The indignados, Occupy and other ‘square movements’ brought together thousands of citizens from different backgrounds, many of whom had no previous experience of protest. Inspired by Tahrir Square in Cairo, indignados and Occupy mobilizations emerged partly as a “generation movement” (Feixa and Norde, 2013), as it mobilized young citizens belonging to a generation that has grown up in a neoliberal environment of income insecurity with diminished welfare state, where neither work nor public services can be taken for granted (see Rosenhek & Shalev, 2013). ‘Our generation has experienced in its daily life what it means to live in a neoliberal world. For us, the crisis is nothing new.’ (an activist from Occupy London Stock Exchange, 2012).

Across Europe, indignados/Occupy activists vigorously denounce the austerity politics promoted by the European Union and national governments. But, for them, austerity policies are merely symptomatic of a greater problem: namely, the actual and structural limitations of representative democracy. These activists denounce an ‘*empty democracy*’, claiming that the policies that have a real impact on their lives are settled in circles that operate beyond the influence of the ballot box. The ‘M15’ movement in Spain, for example, began as a denunciation of a ‘*democracy without choice*’; Spanish citizens believed that the 2011 general elections did not offer a choice between alternatives, given that the two main parties had no significant differences in their policy approach. Activists also point to the collusion between corporations (and banks in particular) and policymakers: ‘*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, an Indignado, Barcelona, 2012)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> It echoes the concerns of Occupy Wall Street activists, where citizens claim that the two political parties are under the hold of big corporations and the richest “1%” of the population.

Crucially, indignados and Occupiers consider democracy not only as a *claim* but also as a *practice*. They seek to implement prefigurative activism and place experimentations in horizontal and participatory discussion and deliberation processes at the core of their activism (Ganuza & Nez, 2013; Glasius & Pleyers 2013). In the first few weeks of the camps, the daily general assemblies of Occupy LSX became efficient enough to disseminate information, discuss and adopt practical decisions during the first part of the meeting, by then attended by over 200 people (see also Occupy Wall Street, 2011), while the second part of the meeting was dedicated to broader political or strategic issues, such as how to reach out to other sectors of the population.

Movement assemblies, camps and neighbourhood meetings become ‘spaces of experience’, understood as *places sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society which permit actors to live according to their own principles, to knit different social relations and to express their subjectivity* (Pleyers, 2010: 37-40; Bey, 1991; McDonald, 2006). The Occupy camps claimed objective was to implement collective, horizontal decision-making processes, respecting gender equality<sup>4</sup>. In many cities, including in London, the camp kitchen provided local and vegan food. Libraries were set up where people could freely take books, and a system of free exchange allowed everyone to leave or take clothes and objects. ‘Around St Paul’s cathedral [Occupy London main camp], I was able to avoid money, universities ... and all the things that people tell me I have to do to have a happy life ... We build spaces where you find freedom of imagination...’ (Mike, an activist from Occupy London Stock Exchange, OSI/LSE focus group, June 2012).

Reflection on the movements’ own practices and the development of techniques to increase the open, horizontal, anti-sexist and democratic features of the assemblies remain a major focus for activists:

‘I’m now working on a great project, looking at developing alternatives to the traditional methodology of assemblies. We try to move from ‘general assemblies’ to ‘open spaces’, a methodology that allows an optimal management of diversity and that has no limits in terms of the number of participants. I’m really excited about this project!’ (M15 activist, Barcelona, interview, August 2012).

By occupying a square and taking part in indignados assemblies, youth and ‘ordinary citizens’ assert themselves as actors and active citizens against the crisis and the deadlocks of institutional politics. Experimenting with concrete forms of direct democracy is also a personal, and often transformative, experience.

‘What was interesting in the [indignados] movement is that we tried to organize ourselves horizontally, to talk, to communicate, to make sure that everyone had a voice and that this voice was as important as any other. ... It requires being open, truly open ... If we want to get at a point to make a true democracy work, we need to be honest and open with each other.’ (Laure, an ‘indignada’ in Brussels, interview, 2012).

Indignados camps and assembly aimed at providing time and space for every participant to express oneself and take an active part in the camp and movement organization, notably through long group discussion and the multiplication of commissions and working groups in charge of specific issues.

Personal subjectivities and histories mix with social and economic claims and with national or global history. Activists’ insistence on the consistency between one’s actions and values brings a personal commitment at the core of indignados’ commitment. Indignados and occupiers consider that changing oneself is a fundamental step towards a better world.

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<sup>4</sup> At least, that was the stated aim. There has been a lot of self-reflective criticism on how this didn’t always work.

*'I think that things happen much through a change of oneself. ... After having been part of the indignados, I don't see 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).

*'The goal of the movement is the development of a new subjectivity and a change that is not only political because capitalism is within ourselves, in our consumption habits, our way of thinking, in the way we connect to other people, in our sexuality, in the way we think about ourselves. It is hence also a spiritual revolution.'* (Daniel, Barcelona, 2012).

The prevalence of these subjective and expressive dimensions may explain the insistence of direct participation and the avoidance of authority, representation and delegation.

*'We don't represent anyone. Everyone can come and bring her own ideas, her own expertise, as an individual. Actually, it is really the idea of questioning the authority... There is indeed more focus on the individualities, even though it is a movement that criticizes individualism.'* (Cécile, an indignada in Paris)

Like many alter-globalization youth camps, the indignados camps in various cities were « No Logo » camps (Pleyers, 2004), where banners and slogans from political parties and civil society organizations (including alter-globalization organizations) were not welcome: *'It is a movement without pre-conceived labels, that would restrain the field of possibilities'* (Cécile, indignada, Focus group in Paris). This reveals both the mistrust of these activists towards institutional politics, but also towards 'activism as usual'. Indignados-style activists in France were characterized by their desire to distinguish themselves from more institutional civil society actors, including trade unions, anarchist networks and the main alter-globalization organizations. Interviewees considered more experienced activists as 'too hierarchical', 'formal', 'institutionalized' and 'invasive'. This perspective also allowed citizens with diverse opinions to join the camps, which took the role of an open agora rather than a closed community.

However, the path from these very diverse, expressive and informal spaces to longer term convergences and strategies seemed uncertain for many activists, even very soon after the event:

*'A general idea able to unite the movement was missing. We said 'Something is wrong', this was the first and fundamental idea. But then, what do we make to fix it? There, there were so many different trends, so many ideas. There were people from everywhere and it couldn't work anymore'* (Augustin, Brussels, 2012).

Like alter-activists youth camps (Pleyers, 2010: 84-86), square camps and assemblies are ephemeral: once they end, groups tend to dissolve and networks unravel. However, in his study of the Freedom Summer participants, D. McAdam (1989) has shown that such an intense experience of political activism during one's youth can transform social identity and political beliefs in fundamental ways. An active participation in an Occupy camp represents important moments in which individual lived experience intersects with collective history. It may have a long term impact on the participants' political stances and commitment towards a more democratic society.

## **2. Transition movements and critical consumption**

In the last decade, Western Europe has witnessed a rise in actors seeking to implement more sustainable lifestyles, with less consumption and stronger communities. They define themselves as 'objectors to growth and speed' and question the economists' GDP and growth and the indicators of wellbeing (Schoor 2010). This field of activism ranges from the transition movement (Hopkins 2011) to voluntary simplifiers, local money initiatives, critical consumerism and to 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).

While Indignados and Occupiers implement prefigurative activism in public spaces and in their movements' camps and organizations, critical consumers and 'local transition activists' focus on prefigurative actions and the consistency between practices and values in their daily life, as behind alternative consumption lies the question and possibility of a radically different society. In the words of I. Illich (1973: 28), it is a matter of 'moving from productivity to conviviality'. These 'convivial relations' or community activities, are a key feature of this activism pathway (Convivialist Manifesto, 2013). Creating a stronger local social fabric is now the force at the center of a multitude of community-minded urban movements, ranging from the 'critical masses' of bicyclists who promote the use of bicycles – and the safe passage of their riders – in cities (Eliasoph, Luhtakallio, 2013), to the community gardeners who create small, green areas in disused corners of the city. While some critical consumers and local activists emphasize the political dimension of their commitment, others do not consider their practices as activism: 'I don't see it as activism. It is just a change in our way of life' (a Swedish student, interview, 2012).

Rather than the economic crisis, many activists interviewed rank climate change and environmental damages as their main concerns. They consider it a personal responsibility to lower their impact on the environment.

'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, a young activist in Paris).

The roots of social change thus lie in a change of one's lifestyle and in alternative practices at the local level. Subjective and personal dimensions are particularly strong in this way of action.

'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, Belgium)

'The idea is not to make efforts. It is not about implementing little changes. It is about desalinating oneself. Once you become better aware of your needs, you simply become happier!' (David, Brussels)

Relationships with state institutions and the need for coordinating players are poles of tensions and a source of permanent debate among these activists and local networks. Some trust that limited institutional support may foster their activities and help local food producers, while others strongly oppose any form of institutionalization. Likewise, while some foster cooperation with policy makers, others connect their activism with mistrust in institutional politics and conventional activism.

'I trust more in the vote with the credit card than in the vote in the polls. Actually I won't go and vote at the next elections. I don't believe in it anymore. I believe we have to re-build everything starting from the ultra-local level' (Eloise, Paris)

Many 'transition activists' proudly claim that they go beyond rhetoric and implement concrete alternatives. However, the spread from self-transformation or social change in a limited group to larger scale transformations often remains a blind-spot in the overarching quest for society change, especially as many of these groups are reluctant to engage in large scale coordination and institutionalization.



### 3. Expert activists

Committed intellectuals and expert activists have published dozens of appeals<sup>5</sup>, books and articles on the Euro crisis and European austerity plans. They develop both rigorous analyses and political statements underlining the irrationality behind the way that both the EU and national governments deal with the crisis, challenge the EU and government experts, and propose concrete alternative measures to the austerity model (see for example the European networks “Roosevelt initiative 2012” and Tax Justice Network<sup>6</sup> or the French network ‘Les Economistes Attérés’<sup>7</sup>). As in Habermas’ model of deliberative democracy, they trust that rational and well-developed arguments will ultimately be taken into account by policy makers and believe that their activist expertise has already achieved significant results.

*‘We try to mobilize expertise and apply it in relevant policy and advocacy 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, Finland).*

*‘The EU officials, the businessmen and the lobbyists take our activity into account, even if, in the end, our influence is very limited. But yes, we have an influence’ (Kasia, Panoptykon Foundation, Poland)*

Expert activists challenge EU experts by producing a ‘citizen counter-expertise’. They aim at countering the power of corporate lobbies, by providing accurate expertise to EU policy makers.

*‘We must not forget that the European Parliament in Brussels is the capital of lobbies. What is prohibited in Washington is allowed in Brussels’ (Fabian, Paris).*

*‘Lobbyists have taken over the expert role in designing EU policies. ... The EU itself doesn’t have these competencies within itself, so it looks for competencies where it can... the European commission is open to us, so they listen to us and they’ve taken up some of our points’ (Mita, Tax Justice Network, Finland).*

Expert activists’ 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 social change and its sustainability however also requires a bottom-up dynamic, with active citizens, familiarised with macro-economics and able to promote these alternative policies. Popular education is thus an urgent task, to which expert activists dedicate much of their time.

### 4. Mobilizers

“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 in these big ideological issues, even if you are not a priori an activist’.” (Jean, a Belgian leading trade unionist, 2012)*

‘Mobilizers’ believe that neither left-wing governments nor expert activists will be able to ‘force’ a major political change without a strong citizens’ mobilization.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example “Another road for Europe” <http://www.anotherroadforeurope.org>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.taxjustice.net>

<sup>7</sup> [atterres.org/](http://atterres.org/)

*'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' (Ronan, Paris, 2012)*

Hence, they focus on building popular mobilizations and mass demonstrations with the potential to shift the balance of power in the institutional political arena and to influence national governments.

'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'. (Marc, a Belgian leading trade unionist, 2012)

'I am convinced that it is the social movements that will make a difference ... there are times when the mass of small movements make a large movement' (Bernard, Paris, interview 2012)

Through the combination of producing analyses of the economic and political situations and organizing actions, 'mobilizers' aim to shape the public space, setting the topics of discussion and policy agenda. They share with 'expert activists' their focus on convincing policy makers and educating citizens. They seek both to give citizens the tools for a better understanding of what is at stake in policy debate and to make them aware that social mobilization may have an impact on governments' policies. Some have become professional 'social movement entrepreneurs' and play an important role in organizing and connecting up movements<sup>8</sup>, both nationally and internationally. The rise of anti-austerity movements in Europe has provided them a considerable space of actions across Southern and Western Europe (see Flesher and Cox, 2013).

## 5. Cross-fertilization

Most activists, performances and events mix different elements from these four 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, blending alternative food initiatives and popular education (e.g. the 'university tent' at Occupy London) with the discussion and elaboration of expert-produced alternatives, the publication of appeals, newsletters and magazines, and organized days of action and demonstrations. And many of these newer camps and movements would not 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 amongst activists also lead to misunderstandings and tensions. Many of those we interviewed were very conscious of differences in strategy or on the concept of social change among their peers. Most insisted on the complementarity of 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).

Likewise, after the camps in the squares, indignados/occupy movements have combined 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<sup>9</sup>), with expert activists and popular education (see for example the magazine 'Occupied Times of London'<sup>10</sup>) and with more formal civil society organizations. Such cross-fertilizations may contribute to overcoming the ephemeral nature of

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<sup>8</sup> S. Tarrow (2005) has underlined the key role of these brokers in the building of transnational coalitions.

<sup>9</sup> See Sánchez Marta, Losing strength? An alternative vision of Spain's indignados, Reflections on a Revolution, June 23, 2012. <http://roarmag.org/2012/06/losing-strength-an-alternative-vision-of-the-indignados/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://theoccupiedtimes.co.uk/>



their camps and the sporadic nature characterizing movements rooted in experience, subjectivity, creativity and horizontal organization.

### III. Where is Europe?

While public intellectuals (e.g. Habermas, 2012; Pianta 2011), governments and mainstream media portray Europe as the main scale of action and debate for solving the current crisis, progressive activists' stances towards Europe are far less homogenous. Expert activists do consider European institutions as the main targets of their advocacy and Europe as the fundamental scale of political and social change. Experienced mobilizers stress that the European dimension was far more developed among social movements a decade ago, at the time when European Social Forums gathered dozens of thousands of activists from all over the continent. Europe is surprisingly infrequently referred to by the indignados (and almost absent in debate amongst those located in France and in the UK; see Murray and Deel, forthc.) and very remote from many local activists' preoccupations. Most of the local activists we interviewed didn't have much - if anything - to say on Europe or the EU; they did not consider Europe as a relevant scale of action.

Interviews and fieldwork suggest four main explanatory factors that allow a better understanding of these contrasting stances towards Europe among progressive activists<sup>11</sup>.

1. The four **cultures of activism** described in the first part of this paper correspond to different stances towards Europe as a scale of action and towards the EU as an institution.

2. **National perspectives:** With the exception of cosmopolitan expert activists, progressive activists' perspectives on Europe are deeply shaped by the perspectives and debates in their home country.

3. **Generation:** Younger activists develop more radical criticisms of the EU, which they often consider "exclusively neoliberal<sup>12</sup>". Age and generation have an impact on the actors' subjectivity, their strategies and their vision of Europe.

4. The analysis of the three previous factors suggests that **the perception of the possibility of social agency at the European level** is the main factor in explaining progressive activist stance towards the EU. The more an activist perceives the EU as a public space open to political debate and civil society arguments, the more they assert a European identity and consider Europe as an important scale of action. Conversely, the sense of being politically blocked at the European Union level lead activists to focus their action at the national (mobilizers) or local (indignados and local activists) scale.

#### 1. Cultures of activism and their scales of action

##### *a. Expert activists – Europe as the main scale of action and advocacy*

The expert activists interviewed denounce EU neoliberal policies, but maintain a deeply pro-European identity. The European scale and EU institutions are often their main target of their action. They claim to have an impact on EU policies on specific issues.

'We have some experts who have actually advised the European commission on the EU directive on tax, on how to make it effectively tax evasion proof.' (Mita, Tax Justice Network, 2012)

The EU is seen both as an opportunity and as a tool that has been used to impose neoliberal policies, budget cuts and austerity plans. Contrary to many young and indignados activists, these expert activists do not consider the EU as being structurally neoliberal but believe, to its detriment, that it has become more so: 'treaty after treaty since the 1980s'. They perceive Europe as the main scale on which activists

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<sup>11</sup> which would need to be further tested on extended qualitative and quantitative studies

<sup>12</sup> An expression that came across in the focus group and in various interviews.

proposing alternative policies may have an impact, whether to influence European policies or to have an impact on global institutions (e.g. the WTO) and national policies (see della Porta & Caiani, 2009).

Expert activists point out that the EU is often blamed for neoliberal policies that are actually decided on by national governments. Most expert activists support a stronger European integration, notably in fiscal matters, in order to limit the power of transnational corporations and to get out of the current crisis.

‘People say ‘We like the EU to give us benefits such as a common currency; a kind of regulatory framework for many products and services in Europe; oversight on human rights; and other basically public goods. But we don’t want to contribute taxes to the EU and this’. I see it as a fundamental problem’ (Martin, a Polish-French expert activist, 2012).

‘Expert activists’ is the category that interacts the most with EU institutions. In general, their organizations are very keen on building European networks and, where possible, opening up an office in Brussels. They have formed a perspective on the EU over decades of interaction, cope with European policies on a daily basis and organize seminars in Brussels. They are familiar with EU vocabulary and norms and speak the same expert language as European civil servants, with whom they meet and discuss the grey literature that prepares E.U. meetings and new norms. Moreover, expert activists organize meetings of European Activists, like the ATTAC-Europe Summer School, which helps to strengthen the participants’ European identity.

*‘We invited many European activists of ATTAC to the Summer University to fill the void left by the European Social Forums. We don’t have many spaces for discussions at the European level.’* (a young French expert activist)

#### *b. Mobilizers: the national level and cross-national alliances*

*‘The question is not as much in terms of having targets and interlocutors at a higher scale as of building a stronger social struggle at the national level, and to do it in different countries at the same time.’* (Ronan, Paris)

Mobilizers consider national governments as the primary policy makers. They thus focus much of their efforts on building movement organizations, promoting demonstrations or fostering citizens’ awareness at the national scale. The main mobilizations against austerity, including the general strikes in southern Europe and the anti-tax evasion protests staged by UK Uncut, focus on the national level.

At a time of recession and economic crisis, the general mood among most civil society actors, and in particular those of the trade unions, is oriented towards defending their members at the national level rather than expending efforts on adopting a common European position.

‘This is a very big problem for the trade unions. Germany is a winner of the crisis ... So, the [German] trade unions are not willing to be in real solidarity with other countries’ (Judith, ATTAC-Germany).

Those experienced mobilizers and professional activists who were previously involved in the European Social Forums process have stated their regret that Europe is hardly present in civil society internal debates:

*‘There are movements in every European country, but is there a debate on Europe?’* (B. Dreano, an experienced French activist).

There is indeed a striking contrast between the past few years and the period between 1997 and 2004. Alter-globalization demonstrations took place at each EU summit during those years, along with the European Social Movement process, fostered the rise of a European movement. Trade unions from all over Europe and the unemployed peoples’ network ‘Euromarches’ were among the first civil society

organizations to demonstrate at EU summits<sup>13</sup>. In 2002, the European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence was opened by a one million people march, and the following ESFs in Paris (2003) and then London (2004) gathered over 50.000 activists each.

In contrast, despite widespread protest against austerity since 2008, there has been little pan-European action (Flecher & Cox, 2013; Pianta, *forthc.*). The Greek demonstrations, UK Uncut campaigns, French youth and student mobilizations and the Spanish and Portuguese protests in the squares have all denounced similar policies with practically the same arguments, but without any significant coordination. In 1997, when Renault planned to close its car factory near Brussels, unions organized a ‘European strike’ in the company’s factories in four countries. In November 2012 and February 2013, Mittal successively closed a section of the steel factories in northern France and then in Belgium. Trade unions and governments focused on the defence of national workers, never developed a coordinated transnational strategy.

Some pro-European mobilizers tried to re-launch a European social movement dynamic by organizing an ‘Alter-Summit’ in Athens in June 2013, but it only gathered 4000 attendees, far from the numbers of the earlier European Social Forums that gathered over 50.000 activists in 2002, 2003 and 2004. Both Alter-Summit and ‘Blockupy Frankfurt’ actions conducted on May the 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 and 2013 had a strong symbolic relevance, as they gathered activists from various European countries and targeted European policies. The limited size and the impact of these events were however insufficient to connect the local and national mobilizations and struggles at the continental level. This decreasing will or ability to coordinate protest at the continental level contrasts not only with the similarity of austerity measures across many EU countries, but also with the rising integration of economic policy across the Eurozone.

It is important to note that as ‘mobilizers’ focus on the national scale, national differences and conjuncture are more important in analysing this category. For instance, in the months before the national presidential elections, French activists focus primarily on the national scale. By contrast in Belgium, where they have traditionally invested time and efforts into European networks, a pro-European stance has become part of trade unions and progressive activists’ identity (Gobin 2004; Pleyers 2007). In 2013, Belgium trade unions took a leading role in organizing the ‘alter-summit’ mentioned above.

### *c. Occupiers/Indignados: local, national and global*

Indignados claims, networks and identities are both rooted in the local context and spawn over the oceans and across the world. However, they focus their actions and most of their energy at the local level<sup>14</sup>.

The indignados and occupiers develop global claims such as democracy and social justice and have broadcast the resonance of their local and national movements with similar movements in other countries (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013). The Indignados we interviewed in Barcelona, Paris and Brussels reported being inspired by the example of what was happening in Tahrir Square. In turn, Occupy Wall Street was inspired by both Tahrir and the Spanish Indignados, while the Muscovite punk band Pussy Riot was formed to ‘Turn the Red Square into Tahrir Square’<sup>15</sup>. The Internet is another ‘global’ location where indignados and

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<sup>13</sup> Since 1997, at the EU summit in Amsterdam. Fifteen years later, the Euromarches has lost most of its impetus. The dynamic unemployed network “EuroMayDay” conduct decentralized and very creative actions all over Europe led by precarious, making the movement younger, more decentralized, closer to the way of subjectivity and less coordinated at the EU level.

<sup>14</sup> One may consider that occupiers are a new generation of “rooted cosmopolitans” (Tarrow, 2005), that articulates the local and the global in a way that is partly different than the alter-globalization activists.

<sup>15</sup> Extract from Pussy Riot’s first song, ‘Release the Cobblestones’, November 2011.

occupy activists develop and defend an open space of expression (Gerbraudo 2013), call for mobilization and build tools to empower offline democratic and horizontal processes.

However, while many profess strong cosmopolitan ideals and are in touch with friends and activists in different countries, they are more rooted in the local and national reality than young alter-globalization activists a decade ago. Indignados activists want their actions and assemblies to be as local as possible and refer to their movement as ‘translocal’ or ‘inter-city’ rather than ‘international’ or ‘global’. Occupiers focus almost all their energy at the local level; their assemblies and networks of activists are very committed to local people and issues. And rather than organizing transnational meetings to discuss global claims, the protest wave that started in 2011 lands these global claims in a local context (Bringel, 2013). The local is seen as the scale where it is possible to implement strong and participatory democracy through horizontal, open and participatory assemblies.

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

The national level is also considered a relevant scale of action by many indignados/occupy activists<sup>16</sup>, since they denounce the problems of representative democracy that is primarily organized at this scale and demand that national governments to change their economic policies. In May 2011, the Spanish M15 movement (‘the indignados’) started as a reaction to the absence of political alternatives at the national elections. From the 20<sup>th</sup> of June to the 23<sup>d</sup> of July, the indignados marched from all the cities of Spain to Madrid (see Feixa & Perondi, 2013), collecting claims and proposals from the population and illustrating the national character of the movement.

The European scale seems lost somewhere between actions at the local and national levels, and values and resonance at the global. On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2011, the indignados organized a global day of action, with events occurring in cities across Europe and beyond, and a few protests and actions have been ‘networked’ at the European level. However, these trans-national mobilizations are conducted in a decentralized way, coordinated online and by working groups in dozens of cities. While such networked actions have proven efficient in diffusing information and action repertoires, they may be less efficient in fostering a European identity and creating a European public space in comparison to the experience of a European Social Forum or activist meeting<sup>17</sup>.

Several of the indignados we interviewed question the importance and the legitimacy of the European level. For many, Europe appears as an intermediary scale that has lost most of its appeal or may even be referred to as Occidentalism or ‘quasi-racism’:

*‘I care about the global level, the community level, the regional level... but Europe, does it still make sense among all these levels? And even more, isn’t it in some way a quasi-racist concept? Why should we care about Europe and not the Mediterranean region? ... We have many links with French-speaking Africa for instance. Why shouldn’t we be solidary with them? Why more with the Danes than with the Senegalese people?’* (Sophie, a young Indignada, Focus group, Paris).

*‘I’m always interested in something more global: Europe, the world, the universe ... Why shouldn’t we include the whole Mediterranean area altogether? Because we exchange many things within this area, as well as with a part of Africa, actually almost all Africa’* (Sofia, Brussels).

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<sup>16</sup> It was not the case in France and in Belgium.

<sup>17</sup> Some “indignados” who had previous mobility experience in Europe however asserted a stronger European identity, “I am pro-European and feel completely European but the EU model is completely undemocratic ...”. (David, Barcelona).

Their responses suggest a deep change in the connection between the EU and the cosmopolitan ideal for this new generation of activists. While the EU was once considered to embody a global project and correspond to global citizenship (e.g. Albrow 1996; Habermas 2012; Beck 2009), indignados and young activists question this connection. In the minds of many indignados/occupiers, the EU is no longer the Union embodying a cosmopolitan ideal, but the opposite: a fortress building fences between youth from different continents.

#### *d. Ecological transition activists: local change*

Transition activists maintain that a better society will come from changes to daily life, and that these changes are more important than decisions taken from above by policy makers and institutions.

*'The idea is to show that it is possible to construct something locally, at a scale where we have the means to act'* (Benoit, Brussels, 2012).

*'First of all, as an individual, you must become aware of your own role in society. ... Then you say, 'Well, let's start to rebuild social fabric, connections among people. And let's create social connections by starting at the micro level, precisely to re-create participatory democracy'.'* (Martin, Namur, 2012).

Many local transition activists share mistrust towards institutions in general, and fear that scaling up their activities at the national or European level will lead to the institutionalization that they are trying to avoid. Europe was absent in the discourses of almost all the local transition activists interviewed. Even after persistent questioning on the subject, they typically replied in evasive ways or asserted little interest.

*'Europe is something I don't know much about. ... It's something that may be used and that can bring a lot of nice things. But the problem is that it is very remote from people. I don't feel at all concerned with Europe.'* (Augustin, an Indignado in Brussels)

*'I do not feel European. For me Europe doesn't mean anything... I think I would have been open to feel European if there were reasons to do so, but the Europe we are in is exclusively economic and political. I do not feel we are in a cultural Europe, unfortunately.'* (Eloise, a young teacher and chair of a local food network, Paris).

At a time when the EU and the Euro were portrayed in the media daily as the only actors able to solve the debt crisis, the absence of interest for Europe by these young local activists is particularly significant.

## **2. Variations across countries**

Among the progressive activists interviewed, the debate on Europe is also ***deeply shaped by national contexts***. Activists' visions of Europe, concepts of the welfare state and central demands vary considerably from one country to another. As mentioned above, the 'experienced activists' all consider that social movements have adopted perspectives which are more national and less European than those of ten years ago.

The two interviews conducted in Poland, although hardly exhaustive, suggest that activists may have a better opinion of the European Union in Eastern Europe, where the EU has contributed to the democratic transition and is still considered as more transparent and accessible than Polish government and institutions:

*'I am very often in Brussels and I lobby in the European Parliament. I very much like Brussels because the politicians and the officials there act in a more transparent way. In Poland it is more*

*difficult to get in touch with higher level officials and there is a huge lack of transparency in our democratic process’.*

A number of activists from Barcelona also valued the EU’s contribution to Spain’s democratization, modernization and to the decrease of corruption since the 1980s. However, the current crisis may deeply change their perspective, as the EU often appears as to weaken national sovereignty and the influence of citizens on their politicians.

*‘In Spain, we have a vision of the EU with Germany and France imposing their will on Spain in a series of austerity politics... It affects our national sovereignty and decision power of our country’*  
(Daniel, Barcelona)

Although it was never raised in our questionnaire, the rise of the ***extreme right, nationalisms and xenophobia*** was mentioned by a majority of interviewed activists, and by all of the ‘older’ activists. The post-1929 scenario was frequently mentioned by these interviewees, who fear that, once again, a major economic crisis might lead to nationalism and war. They consider that the current austerity policies foster a similar scenario and thus stress the urgency to build up an alternative vision of the crisis and to promote ‘another Europe’.

*‘We have to choose between two alternatives: either we manage to re-build a dynamic for a progressive Europe (...) or we will see an increasing dichotomy between nationalist and xenophobic movements, to which we will leave a part of the power to deal with social questions; and a global techno-structure, not European anymore but global, and they will feel even more powerful as they will be able to play on the divisions created by identity movements. ... We will have people like Marine Le Pen to amuse the gallery and then serious stuff will be decided between Frankfurt and the City. We -+have already experienced it in various countries’.* (Bernard Dreano, an experienced French activist).

### 3. Generations

While EU policies suffer an unfavorable image among all categories of progressive activists, both the interviews and the focus group in Paris show a generational divide on the stance towards the EU itself. The older activists we interviewed presented themselves as pro-European activists opposing not the EU itself but its neoliberal agenda, while on the contrary, most of the young activists<sup>18</sup> were much more radical in their criticisms against the EU.

The way that each generation has experienced EU integration and policies appears to be an important factor. ‘Older’ activists underline the importance of progressive policies promoted by the European Union.

*‘In my case, I had some experience with the EU a couple of decades ago. [As a trade-unionist], I work on health at work-related issues. The EU 1989 directive is very valuable since it has allowed a huge amount of improvements. I know that there is a useful Europe that has been built, a positive Europe. But these days, I don’t recognize it at all’* (Etienne, Paris).

As young people are the most impacted by job market flexibility, precarity and budget cuts on education and unemployment benefit, younger activists draw on this generational experience and on the European Treaties of the last decade. They thus tend to view the European project as ‘entirely dedicated to the imposition of neoliberal policies’ and ‘free competition’ ‘since its beginning’ (see also Murray & Deel, forthc.).

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<sup>18</sup> Some young activists also testified to a strong European identity, particularly among young expert activists.



Most activists over 40 years old, and those who are younger but who fit the ‘expert activist’ categorization, oppose EU neoliberal policies but strongly value the European integration process, considering it an opportunity to build up a ‘Europe of peace and solidarity’. They insist on reminding younger activists of the advantages derived from the EU, notably those derived from the EU’s social and environmental standards. Conversely, a generation that has not experienced the divided Europe of the Cold War, nor border controls in the Schengen space, appear to take the practical advantages of the EU and European integration for granted. Young activists may thus not mention the things they value in the EU, whereas allegedly negative impacts and the neoliberal agenda are brought into focus. To an extent, this testifies to success in some aspects of the European integration project. Several interviews reveal that some young activists<sup>19</sup> combine a strong European identity with a critical stance towards EU neoliberal policies.

*“The previous generation was very reluctant in criticizing Europe because they remember how Europe used to be divided and the consequences it had. For my generation, Europe is a fact. We have traveled and grown up within it. Hence, it is much easier for us than for the previous generation to have a critical position towards European institutions and democracy in Europe.” (Hélène, a French expert activist).*

*‘Being European is something already incorporated by young people today... I have a feeling that young people are European in their mind. For my younger brother, the Euro is not a change; it is normal. To cross borders frontiers just like that, it is normal for him. It is amazing, he has friends in England, in Germany...’ (Cécile, France)*

Moreover, young activists appear to have developed both *local and global identities*. Indignados and some young expert activists in France, Poland and Spain claim a cosmopolitan identity more oriented toward the global than to the EU: *‘We may feel European, but people like me, we think of us as the global citizens’* (Kasia, expert activist, Poland). This generation has been referred to as the ‘global generation’ (e.g. Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2007). Around the world, young activists are using the tools of globalization to build up global movements (McDonald 2006): networking, circulating news via social media, participating in global chats, sharing common cultural references, and using similar protest styles and tactics. While Europe used to be perceived as a first step toward a cosmopolitan identity, young European activists now denounce the harsh migration policies of ‘fortress Europe’ that oppose their cosmopolitan ideals. This disconnection between the European construction and cosmopolitan ideals may represent a structural factor in the decline of interest for Europe and of a European identity.

#### 4. Perception of social agency

A structural analysis of the empirical material gathered during this research suggests that the main factor which can help to explain these highly contrasting stances towards Europe is the sense of social agency at the European level. The more activists believe they may have an impact on EU policies, the more they feel European. On the contrary, those who are convinced that the European institutions pay no attention to civil society arguments and will stick to their neoliberal agenda whatever happens do not feel very European, nor consider Europe as an important scale of action.

Analysis of the interviews shows a strong connection between the sense of a European identity and the sense of social agency at the European scale. For instance, when asked whether they felt ‘culturally European’, most activists answered referring to European political citizenship and its democratic deficit or to the (im)possibility of a significant political change at the European level.

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<sup>19</sup> Mostly students and young activists close to the “expert activists” category.

*'I do not believe in Europe. ... If changing Europe means changing institutions with other institutions which will then be occupied by the same people, it won't change anything'.* (Eloise, a young teacher, local food network, Paris).

*'In fact, I don't take Europe very much into account. I don't know much about it. I don't understand it much either and it doesn't interest me that much. This scale is too big for me. I feel too small to act and affect Europe. (...) So, I feel easily as an actor, but not at the European level. ... I see Europe as too big, too untouchable.'* (David, transition activist, Brussels)

*'You can't separate the content of the European model from the promotion of the European idea. I think that if you want to promote Europe you should try to make Europe the vehicle of a sustainable society, the vehicle of new regulation...'* (Wojtek, a pro-European, cosmopolitan expert activist)

Likewise, activists closer to a culture of activism which maintains that civil society may have an impact on the EU are also those who assert a European identity. **Expert activists** are convinced that advocacy and good arguments will have an impact on EU policies and claim some successes on concrete issues, and are those who assert the strongest European identity. At the opposite end of the scale, **local transitioners** who believe that no significant change will stem from the EU claim that they don't feel European at all. This withdrawal to the local scale and mistrust in the possibility of change coming from institutions partly results from a feeling of 'being politically blocked at the European level': that the EU cannot be reformed and will remain dominated by neoliberal policies.

Likewise, when defending their European identity, 'older' activists point to the fact that they have experienced the European Union as a means to foster progressive policies and to overcome closed political opportunity structures at the national level. The fact that many young activists do not manifest a strong European identity may be connected to the fact that for 2010s young protest activists, indignados and local transition activists, the EU has come to embody a 'democracy without choice'. They associate the EU, and in particular the European Commission, to neoliberal policies, and believe it will stick to these policies. This has led some activists to focus on the local level and on cultural changes (indignados and local activists), or to (re-)invest at the national scale.

### Concluding remarks: A crisis of European Democracy

This research suggests a strong connection between activists' self-identification as European and their perception of Europe as a space of social agency and political debates. To re-politicize Europe and to re-think democracy at that level appears thus as one of the most urgent challenges for the European Union and its citizens.

The economic crisis and austerity policies have strengthened homogeneous perceptions of national issues and public opinions. Each country appears to have each a clear national position on the crisis and on austerity policies. Like Chantal Mouffe (2012) does in her recent essay, the results of this research plead for a re-politicization of Europe as a public space would rather foster a debate among different visions of Europe. National public opinions are indeed not that homogeneous concerning their visions for Europe's future, while the main perspectives on Europe are shared by a part of the citizens of each member states. Framed in Ulrich Beck's term, European policy makers (as well as its citizens) need to get read of methodological nationalism in order to foster debate on the future of the E.U. at a continental level.

The case of Europe invites us to raise the broader issue of democracy beyond the nation state. As Martin Albrow (1996) and David Held (1995) suggest, such a democracy remains to be invented and cannot be

thought of only in terms of representative democracy and institutional politics. Below the surface of institutional politics and mainstream media, actors of “subterranean politics” are exploring different culture of activism and ways to empower citizenship (see Kaldor & Selchow, 2013; De Munck & Ferreras, 2012). They attempt to re-politicize debates on the European and economic crisis and to develop alternative practices that contribute to the transformation of democracy, society and our way of living together, whether at a small or large scale. Taken together, they offer concrete ways forward for a multi-dimensional approach to deal with structural limits of representative democracy and to explore paths towards a more democratic Europe.

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