European crisis and protests: The birth of a critical European civil society?

In recent years, Europe has witnessed an emergence of political activism through the irruption of new social movements – 15M or Occupy –, the birth new political platforms – 5 Stelle, Pirate Party, Zyrissa – and the emergence of new direct actions groups such as Anonymous, Stop Evictions Movements, Cooperatives, to name just a few (Castells, 2012; Mason 2012; Della Porta, 2013; Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2013). This activism has in some countries not just led to substantial pressure on traditional actors of representative democracy and governments, but seem to open opportunities for structural changes in context and procedures of policymaking as well. One scenario is the recognition of claims of citizens and new citizens’ initiatives to have a bigger say in governance, or to have a greater deal of political participation in relevant decision making processes (Keane, 2009; Rosanvallon, 2008; Saward, 2010). Another scenario is the development of alternative circuits of collective services and mutual help outside the sphere of the state – possibly in the tradition of older social economy experiences (Graeber, 2013). The scenarios may be combined. How do we interpret the rise of NGOs, social networking, mass protests, DIY politics, and other forms of “sub politics” in terms of these scenarios and in diverse civil society perspectives?

Much of the debates on these issues focus on ‘crisis countries’ in Southern Europe, but countries in the north show popular uprisings as well. Sometimes primarily in electoral form –(primarily right wing) populist parties opposing European policies of the government (Mudde, 2013) – sometimes more in (primarily left wing) activist forms similar to the ones in the Southern countries; for instance, the German citizens’ platform Zwangsräumung verhindern. What are the dominant organizations and the specific dynamics in various countries? Are general trends recognizable in the South and in the North of Europe? How do old and new issues, material deprivation and moral outrage etc. mix in these countries (Klandermans et al. 2009; Walter et al. 2013)? And most importantly, are there links between activist groups of different Euro countries which allow us to think in something like a birth of a critical European civil society?

Debates and research about European civil society so far concentrate on interrelationships between vested interests and big social organisations in EU-countries and their representation in umbrella organizations and advisory bodies in Brussels. ‘Brussels’ has an interest in this kind of civil society to connect to European citizens (besides the weak electoral ties of the European Parliament and the ambiguous intermediation of national polities) and to develop a ‘European identity’. This artificial construction of a ‘civil society from above’ (Smismans 2003; Koch-Kohler, 2009, Heilbreder, 2012), might now get intertwined with / defied by a new wave of developments ‘from below’ (after earlier transnational protest phenomena such as the Brent Spar Shell boycott).

The four papers to be presented in this panel seek to analyze a wide range of countries, including Portugal, Spain, Greece and Germany. The panel has a comparative and theoretical perspective. Authors are asked not just to present native examples of activism, but to pay attention to their transnational links and to compare them with cases elsewhere. What is their potential for European civil society developments from below?

Europeanisation of social movements and the European Sovereign Debt Crisis: The Case of Spain and Greece

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One of the most striking consequences of the European sovereign debt crisis has been the scale and variety of mobilization by citizens and civil society groups against the crisis policies of authorities at local, national, EU and international levels. Mobilization ranges from the Indignados, Occupy and anti-establishment movements like the Italian Grillini, on the one hand, to more traditional labour, pro-independence and extreme right movements, on the other. Many of these
movements have transnational dimensions understood as strategic collaboration with movements in other countries. They also participate, along with other political actors, in the framing of issues and construction of ‘crisis actors’, essentially those considered responsible for ‘causing’ the crisis and for ‘resolving’ it.

In this paper, we examine these practices to address the main research questions: Has the European sovereign debt crisis contributed to the Europeanisation of social movements? And what are its implications for conceptions of collective responsibility, European identity and the legitimacy of ‘crisis’ governance? We address the questions through ‘bottom up’ case studies of social movement mobilization and claim-making in Spain and Greece.

We address this question using a theoretical framework that builds on existing studies but which permits a broader and more systematic framework for comparing the degree of Europeanisation across time, countries and movements. It does so by focusing on whether social movement targets, participants and issue frames are exclusively national, exclusively European or combine both. We understand processes of social movement transnationalisation as co-terminous with that of social movement Europeanisation, except insofar as Europeanisation processes involve movements primarily operating from within European states and opposing actions of powerholders in Europe. A focus on links, learning and collaboration among European groups, conceptions of collective responsibility and claims about solidarity is particularly important for analyzing the implications of the crisis for patterns of identification among movement participants and the legitimacy of EU, national and other authorities to craft solutions to the crisis. We examine the degree of Europeanisation through two methods. Firstly, we conduct a political claims analysis of social movement practices during 2011 and 2012 using a sample of newspaper articles from newspapers each for Greece and Spain. Secondly, in order to test the reliability of the political claims analysis and develop hypotheses to explain variation among cases we conduct qualitative case studies of two movements in each country, namely the Indignados (The Outraged) and the Catalan nationalist independence movement in Spain and Αγανακτισμένοι Πολίτες (The Outraged) and Το κίνημα της Πατάτας (potato movement) in Greece.

15M Movement: Spanish political activism and its links with other Euro countries

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The political context in Spain is intriguing for those who work in the field of political theory. Since 15th May 2011, with the emergence of massive citizen protests, the crisis of traditional politics and their representative structures has been accompanied by the exercise of “on-the-street” politics. The strengthening of citizen political activism has been expressed mainly through what has been termed 15M movement for the 15th May 2011 call out. The birth of 15M has changed the Spanish political scenario since its appearance has brought a proliferation of multiple citizen initiatives, demonstrations, actions to stop home evictions, self-management initiatives, the formation of new political parties, boycotts, citizen legislative initiatives, amidst many other kinds of action.

The 15-M movement has taken up the language and strategies of civil society through its respect for the principles of non-violence and pluralism. It has been inspired by the forms of action followed by the Icelandic protesters and the Arab spring in 2008-2009. Besides, it has seized the opportunities offered by the new media tools. As a result, a new form of political action has appeared in Spain, which in turn, has helped to inspire mobilizations in other countries.

The present paper attempts to analyze in depth this social movement and their different dynamics and relations with other groups, especially NGOs and political parties, both inside and outside the Spanish borders. In the first place, the paper analyses the goals, manifestos and new media uses
during 2011 and 2012 of the most relevant groups included in this movement: Plataforma Afectados por la Hipoteca (stop evictions movement), iai@flautas (old people's action group) and Democracia Real YA! (Real Democracy now). In the second place, we conduct an analysis of the relations among these groups and other groups such as NGOs -whom play a bigger role due to the strong economic crisis- and political parties. In order to address this last aspect much attention will be paid to the formation of new citizens political parties -such as Partido X- that are flourishing in the last months as result of new hybrid forms of politics. Hybrid forms of politics were distinction between civil society and political parties come to be less clear. Finally, the text focuses in analyzing the links that these groups -in a civil society or political party form- have developed with other countries from Europe, with special attention to the links established with North Europe. The purpose of this attempt is to shed some light to one key question: can we talk of a birth of a European civil society born from below?

Social movements and Trade Unions: the European crisis and the lack of political activism in Germany

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Europe suffers from multiple crisis. Especially, Southern and Eastern Europe is heavily affected by the austerity measures stipulated by the Troika and the European Union. However, across Europe people take places, streets and houses in order to de-legitimize the policies of the political elite home and abroad. Regional differences may be examined along reasons, main drivers and extend. However, for Germany an inconsistent development can be assessed.

The “German way” of competitiveness and fiscal discipline is seen as model for other countries in Europe. But not all is shining in Germany. German politics failed to address needs from people. A rising number of people face daily struggles. Especially, in big cities increasing social-economic as well as rural-urban disparities can be observed, precarious work has increased among all workers and gentrification (“Zwangsräumung verhindern”) is part of the day to day life. The gap between politics and citizens increased as solidarity among the people seems to decline. Paradoxically at the same time the agreement to hegemonial politics and the populist right ("Alternative für Deutschland, AfD") increased. During the last years, "new social movements" in Germany mobilized people against neoliberal politics. Issues of concern are gentrification, nuclear power plants, migration and asylum politics, genetically modified food as well as cuts in the social welfare system affecting children, women and elderly most. Nevertheless, social movements as "Occupy Wall Street", "Blockupy" or "aCAMPada", NGOs and the network ATTAC have failed to gather any momentum. Surprisingly, trade unions did not play a crucial role other than in Southern European countries. Their power to mobilize workers and marginalized groups as well as their willingness to take action face limits. The decline of the rate of unionization goes hand in hand with the nominal decline of strikes and unrest during the last years.

The mismatch of number and diversity of protests contributes co-optation: A broad network of protests, initiatives, activists, but also churches, parties which was institutionalized over the last decades. Recently protest brought about that grass roots politics is now high on the public agenda. Several federal states and many local governments have instituted procedures that enable, or even encourage, citizen groups to participate in the making and administration of public policy. However, both social movements and labour organizations seem to be less willed to collaborate in order to oppose hegemonic power structures and with the intention to achieve social improvements for society.

Our contribution to the conference is a mapping, comparison and examination of different actions by ATTAC and trade unions in Germany and further to discuss the role of cooperation between trade unions and social movements. We focus on decentralized and nationwide campaigns and
alliances. At the same time, we keep an eye on initial reasons, processes and actors from both ATTAC and trade unions. One of our main theses is: A-synchrony of protest and bias between social movements and unions prevent successful protests in times of the European Crisis ("German path dependency").

Four Phases of Portuguese Anti-Austerity Protest Organization and its Relation to Social Movement Activism Abroad

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The anti-austerity protests in Portugal started with the demonstration of the Geração à Rasca in March 2011. Since then we observe long phases of low protest activity sporadically interrupted by large protests. Up until now it has been possible to distinguish four different phases of protest organization. First, the large protest event that took place on March 12, 2011, seemed to put an end to a period of about 35 years of relative silence. More than 200,000 people protested on the streets of Lisbon and other cities in Portugal and abroad. Protesters gathered again in May 2011, when, inspired by the Spanish 15M, they occupied Rossio, a central square in Lisbon. This event was the starting point for the second phase of protest mobilization. The occupation of Rossio led to the creation of several new activist groups and the 15O – a platform of more than 30 activist groups that organized various protests and debated heavily about aims and forms of action. This platform lost its importance after a series of smaller protests and internal disagreements. The third phase of protest organization grew out of negative experiences with the platform 15O. In the first half of 2012, some activists experimented with new forms of more event-based cooperation, like a two-day activists meeting, and occupations of parks and buildings. Overall, this third phase was characterized by low participation and very few street protests. The fourth phase of protest organization started in August 2012 with a new initiative named 'Que se lixe a troika (QSLT)' (Screw the Troika). A group of activists, for the first time also including creative artists and other prominent figures, called for protest on September 15, 2012. More than 500,000 people protested in various cities in Portugal and abroad. More protests were organized and the number of activists who joined the QSLT meetings grew rapidly. This phase of protest is not only marked by more larger protest, but also by tiny, often very creative protest activities, organized by smaller, sometimes independent groups.

Based on two years of field research, including participatory observation of meetings of several activist groups and platforms and qualitative interviews with activists, in this contribution I analyse the four phases of anti-austerity protests. I focus on the organizational structure and the action forms of the movement. Further I point out specificities of the Portuguese case compared to other movements against austerity and draw upon processes of import and adaption of ideas by the Portuguese activists, especially from the Spanish case.