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## **Uneven Development and Political Resistance against EU Austerity Politics**

### **Introduction**

In response to the current crisis, European Union (EU) institutions and Eurozone governments have adopted a range of regulatory and treaty-based measures to ensure fiscal discipline through limiting the capacity of Eurozone governments running budget deficits and accumulating sovereign debt. In addition, almost all Eurozone governments have taken measures to deregulate labour laws, such as easing employee dismissals, reducing minimum wages, increasing working time for less remuneration, or introducing new conditionalities and time limits for unemployment benefits, as well as a further decentralisation of collective bargaining more generally. The imposition of EU austerity packages is essentially premised on regaining investor confidence, while labour market adjustments are meant to re-establish a 'competitive' business climate. Accompanied by a vast suspension of democratic rules, these neoliberal crisis recipes have fuelled considerable social unrest and political protests in many parts of Europe. Hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Spain, Greece and Portugal against public spending cuts and changes to labour rights in the last years. Coordination between trade unions and social movements also brought large demonstrations to the streets of Brussels in 2012 and 2013. There were further marches and strikes by health workers, students, teachers, parents, pensioners, employees in the healthcare, pharmaceutical, automotive, shipbuilding and transport industry in many parts of Europe.

To facilitate concerted actions and new left-wing alliances across borders, several pan-European meetings have been organised over the past three years. Events such as Firenze 10+10, the Alter Summit in Athens, the European Blockupy actions and preparatory conferences in Frankfurt, the initiative for a European Spring, Agora99 in Madrid and Rome, conferences of the Euromemorandum Group, or the Strategy Meeting in Amsterdam, brought together a couple of hundred activists and representatives from NGOs and other civil society organisations. This has led to a series of transnational campaigns, manifestos and petitions, as well as joint strike days and other event mobilizations such as weeks of action against EU austerity policies. New networks coordinating national and local struggles have been established, targeting issues of housing, public health, education, debt audits or the commons. Optimistic voices have consequently praised the reinvigorated 'Left', suggesting that a political U-turn breaking with EU neoliberal crisis policies is near. At the same time, sceptical voices are also gaining ground, pointing

at the inability of left-wing forces to articulate a coherent set of political demands and viable alternatives that could generate support of and resonance with wider constituencies.

This raises the question to what extent the context of the crisis constitutes a historical crossroad, marking the beginning of a sustained and enduring pan-European resistance movement capable of translating and generalising local struggles, and pushing them to the EU level. This chapter analyses agents, structures, and contradictions in the formation of left-wing resistance against EU austerity politics from a historical materialist perspective. It seeks to grasp a class and subject-oriented understanding of social struggles and concomitant power configurations, the logics of action of different agents in articulating dissent and resistance, and particularly the uneven development and timing of the crisis and crisis responses. We argue that the coagulation and consolidation of an alternative agenda is far from being realised and that the event-based nature of crisis protests provides insufficient grounds to draw conclusions about the composition and internal contradictions of different forces. The common conception that there is indeed a short-lived window of opportunity for 'change' in the context of the crisis, and that it depends ultimately on the successes or failures of these emancipatory forces whether there will be transformations, is a dangerous fallacy. Rather, as we would argue, we need to understand these developments in the broader context of hegemonic power relations within the EU and beyond.

### **Counter/Hegemony - Perspectives on social resistance**

Historical materialist approaches tend to focus on the internal fractionalisation of national and transnational capital as the main determinants of the neoliberal restructuring at global or European level (see for example Cafruny and Ryner 2003). As a result of this elite emphasis, social struggles are frequently reduced to institutional arrangements, while the (re-)production of social power relations is ignored. The hegemonic constitution of the European integration project, supported by the European state apparatuses ensemble, is implicitly being considered to be consistent and relatively stable. Political opposition and dissent from non-hegemonic civil society groups re-negotiating hegemonic power, and hence the possibility of a counter-hegemonic project, have remained analytically as well as theoretically marginalised. In order to understand the manifestation of new forms of social mobilization and the dynamics of resistance in Europe, we need a perspective that allows for analysing fractures in the emerging European state-project. Social forces should neither be marginalised as concrete subjects, nor romanticized or fetishized at the expense of a deeper understanding of their socioeconomic structures - as it is frequently the case in analyses of 'new social movements' like Occupy, the Spanish Indignados/M15 or Blockupy.

Based on the Machiavellian concept of the 'prince' and Gramsci's 'modern prince', the 'post-modern prince' typifies a new form of political action of multiple and diverse agents whose radical praxis not only challenges the politics of common sense, but also seeks its transformation. The 'postmodern

prince' is not a collective actor but rather a strategy or agenda of a collective political subject directed at constructing a more ethical, just and sustainable world order (Gill 2012). Such a strategy or agenda supported by contentious collective action is tied to historically specific political, socioeconomic and ecological conditions, without necessarily being anchored in class awareness. At the same time we would argue that we can only fully grasp the nature of the ongoing developments through a thorough engagement with class - and hence the deeper structures of exploitation, consent and contestation that engender the social struggles. In the context of the increasingly authoritative austerity politics, class becomes particularly important when focusing on the strategic relationship between organised labour and social movements that seem to transcend class issues. Trade unions (as one specific form of worker organisation) here constitute a core, but also a problematic actor in the European arena. Through institutional co-optation of trade union representation at EU level, organised labour has in effect been conceding to neoliberal restructuring in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is only in recent years that this complicity has developed into what the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the umbrella organization of national trade unions representing the interests of workers at the institutional level of the European state apparatus, now calls a 'critical friendship', indicating the increasing scepticism about the EU's social dimension. Moreover, the diversity and divergences of the national and sectoral labour organisations contributes to uneven responses to the crises, and threatens to stymie the potential of solidaristic, class-based struggles.

And yet, as mentioned above, we do witness an emerging form of protest, and, more importantly, a formulation of alternatives that transcends this uneven dimension by highlighting the shared, combined nature of social struggles. Not being limited by national boundaries, such an emancipatory agenda can become manifest simultaneously beyond and within subnational and national settings. Importantly, conflicts and a certain degree of diversity in demands and identities are inherent. Thus, the agenda of emancipatory forces, or what Gramsci referred to as a 'collective intellectual', is per definition composed of 'a plurality of forms of the philosophy of praxis' because 'critical thought can neither be singular, nor imprisoned by practices of theoretical closure' (Gill 2012: 519). Crucially, this also addresses the issue of methodological nationalism that is too often still prevalent in discussions of resistance and alternatives. The strategic question of where, on which terrain, these social struggles should be waged and alternatives be formulated is indicative of this. Instead of realising the transnational dimension, simultaneous developments and historical precedents of the austerity programmes in the Eurozone, many observers on the Left have so far sought recourse in national strategies, thereby taking an increasingly defensive character against specific structural adjustment measures. This only aggravates the increasing fragmentation of movements and forces, rendering it more and more difficult to rally around in solidarity and on the basis of common interests. But as we will show towards the end of this chapter, it does not have to be this way.

## **Between 99% and avant-garde - divergence and convergence of social struggles in Europe**

The discussion of the role and strategies of social movements is frequently unequivocally positively connoted, particularly in critical social science perspectives. In a context where hardly any achievements can be booked, scholars seem reluctant to research the ambivalent idiosyncrasies and power asymmetries within social movements. Contributions in the media and in scientific analyses alike depart from the terminology of the 99%, a term borrowed from the Occupy movement. This conception is however notoriously unspecific. Less than 1% are actively involved in struggles against austerity, implying that 98% still need to be persuaded and mobilized. The terminology of the 99% pre-supposes moreover a monolithic composition and identical ideological orientation of protesting forces. Historically, left-wing forces have always aggregated a disparate set of struggles, involving a plurality of agents with different degrees of indignation, divergent objectives and rationales for transformative action. Socialist, communist, anarchist, social democratic or environmental justice groups traditionally share a legacy of ideological antagonism. Ever since the gradual fading away of the alter-globalist 'movement of movements' over the past decade, social movements have been increasingly disparate groups lacking a common strategy or coherent substantive criticism and political demands. Although the plurality of forces is united in a critique of the unequal distribution of wealth and a deep-seated dissent with the existing crisis management, another chasm has opened up with the advent of horizontalist social movements that have organised outside union structures and the institutionalised channels of parliamentary representation. Composed of a wide range of participating groups, they aggregate previously politically inactive protesters that are far less entrenched than movements from the past with collective identities and common political demands. Albeit emphasizing consensual politics and grassroots participation, there is no shared understanding of the trenches and fortifications by hegemonic forces, nor an agreement on the tactics on how to overcome them. The weakness and ideological fragmentation of left-wing forces, and the failure to chart an alternative future for Europe is particularly striking vis-a-vis the uprising of the European radical-right, particularly the neo-populist and neo-fascist parties that successfully exploit feelings of discontent and insecurity, as well as a growing Euroscepticism.

A range of studies situate social movements from the political Left as genuine supporters of European integration - in contrast to the growing nationalist, far-right sentiments and populist Euroscepticism among citizens and political parties. Della Porta and Caiani (2009: 123, 125) for example argue that many left-wing groups within social movements merely criticize the specific political direction of the integration process, envisaging another, more social and democratic Europe. In the past, protests targeting the EU such in the case of constitutional referenda or the large protest march in Amsterdam in 1997 against the Treaty of Amsterdam, took place in domestic settings only and with specific remonstrations against national governments. Current protests indicate that social movements increasingly address EU institutions and raise EU-related issues. Particularly in the context of fierce austerity imposed on Southern Europe, many left-wing parties are now increasingly questioning the EU

dimension, most of all the Eurozone membership. However, so far, attempts to transnationalise anti-austerity protests have been rather limited in scope and booked little success.

The pan-European solidarity meeting 'Firenze 10+10' in November 2012 is in many respects emblematic for the divisions of the Left with respect to EU politics. The meeting, ten years after the first European Social Forum (ESF) and at the same location, was intended as a pan-European platform for organized resistance against the authoritarian neoliberal austerity politics of the EU. Unlike previous social forums, which were committed to social inclusiveness and hence covered a broad spectrum of left-wing groups, Firenze 10+10 was intended much smaller in scale, seeking to bring top-level unions into a dialogue with social movements, including new and established political parties and party-affiliated think tanks or NGOs into the discussions. The idea was that locally-isolated or fragmented movements with their specific interests (so-called 'one-issue' movements) combine their efforts in new verve and make transnational solidarity coming true. The outcome of the meeting could not have been more disappointing however. Vociferous protests of many participants about the process of the meeting prevented a joint statement against EU austerity politics. Whereas the first ESF in 2002 with more than 60,000 participants has widely been considered a success, the Firenze 10+10 meeting, which has been attended by less than a thousand people, lacked also the resonance in the media and thereby the wider public. European or transnational NGOs and think tanks are ideally positioned for being a hub for left-wing alliances, but as relatively insulated avant-garde agents (protesters by profession), they face difficulties switching between different action levels, and lack the capacity to trigger mass mobilizations. Better networked and better equipped with resources, while speaking multiple languages and travelling frequently, such transnational activists and their organisations tend to be disproportionately located in Europe's North. The implicit orientation to the EU terrain, and their limited ability to integrate into local movements, not only impedes the formation of alliances but also the crystallization of a left-wing hegemonic project. Ineligible to speak to people with concrete crisis experiences, they lack the necessary organic articulation and anchoring of alternative projects that would allow for a comprehensive counter-hegemonic movement. As a result, abstract narratives of manifestos and position papers attacking neoliberal economic governance at EU level, such as the campaigns against the Fiscal Compact or the Competitiveness Pact, seem doomed to silently abate.

More radical, locally-oriented grass root movements with an explicitly anti-capitalist orientation either stayed away from Firenze 10+10, or gathered at nearby autonomous centres. In the absence of such groups, reformist voices dominated, propagating post-Keynesian crisis solutions in the form of EU investment programs to promote sustainable green (but still capitalist) growth, stimulated by the European Central Bank as a lender of last resort and a fiscal union issuing Eurobonds. The elitist position of participating NGOs and the formalised conference character in which NGO-dominated dialogues take shape contrasts sharply with the disruptive forms of action of street protests and the assembly structures of grass root organisations. The increasing 'NGO-ization' in the form of a professionalization and institutionalization of social resistance through the participation of politically rather moderate yet growing

stratum of transnational activists has been hotly debated in social movement and academic circles for some time. Similar conclusions can be drawn with respect to the Alter Summit organised in June 2013 in Athens, where a few hundred mostly trade unionists and professional activists gathered in 15 assemblies, leading to a short manifesto stating the most urgent demands. The Alter Summit went unnoticed by the wider Greek public, while the initial domination of Syriza in setting up the framework marginalized other groups. Ultimately, the unequal room for manoeuvre of social groups within the EU is being reproduced within progressive movements.

The increasingly authoritarian constitutionalisation of austerity, at the expense of the consensual dimension of the hegemony in the EU project could however be a potential focal point for contentious collective action. The demise of reformist social democratic parties and a growing radicalization alongside crisis grievances and protest actions opens up new spaces for the Left. A rapprochement of trade unions and social movements would be of particular relevance here. The dialogue between trade unions and social movements has traditionally been more conflictual than consensual however, and also now remains beset by conflict in many parts of Europe. Unions, organized in hierarchical structures representing mainly the core workforce, frequently collide with the direct-democratic decision-making procedures and prefigurative direct action oriented politics of horizontalist new social movements. Unions have furthermore been fairly integrated into hegemonic structures through social partnership agreements, as well as revitalised crisis corporatism and new social pacts more recently. The ETUC has hardly voiced radical positions - albeit a slight change in position can be observed, particularly after national unions increasingly questioned its stance and associational power (Horn 2012). Generally, ETUC supports reformist neo-Keynesian proposals of investment and development packages that stimulate demand, capital controls and the protection of labour rights, while falling short of a radical critique of European policies and politicizing the contradictions and fractions within labour. There are clear tensions between more radical grass root unionism and the bureaucratized decision-making structures, control of membership activity and agendas of traditional unions. Moreover, national divergence in economic and social conditions complicates a transnational trade union position. The joint European general strike of 14 November 2012 did not spark an encompassing pan-European day of action, particularly as ETUC member unions from Europe's North refused to join. The structural weakness of organised pan-European labour within ETUC is however not only due to internal divisions, but needs to be located in the context of the vast institutionalisation of organised fractions of industrial and financial capital at EU level. To overcome these challenges, the European labour movement will not only have to recalibrate its own position vis-à-vis the European institutions, but articulate a strategy that can overcome the narrow interests of its core constituency and bind a broader coalition of social forces into a class-based, counter-hegemonic project for European integration.

### **Unequal developments and political resistance**

The unequal and uneven development of the crisis has generated differences in austerity and crisis measures, which also implicates the participation of left groups and unions in a transnational counter-hegemonic movement. Whereas general and wildcat strikes and mass demonstrations have occurred regularly in Southern Europe, no comparable dissent can be witnessed in Europe's North - despite declining real wages, increased precarization and growing poverty. The speed and sequence of the EU crisis measures, and concomitantly, the deliberate bypassing of democratic processes, has marginalized counter-hegemonic forces considerably, making it difficult to exploit the crisis politically for an alternative project. This raises the question how much room for manoeuvre emancipatory projects have left. Some commentators even suggest a complete reversion to the protection of national welfare state structures as part of a 'progressive' left nationalism or regionalism. The Catalan and Basque independence movements, the Celtic parties or the Irish Sinn Fein are examples thereof; however, left-wing initiatives for enhanced autonomy have not led to broad-based support in Europe.

The often defensive nature of current social struggles against EU austerity is rooted in an almost automatic shielding of the status quo of institutional structures and with it, the existing power configuration in member states. How such structures, including corporatist processes, have in fact contributed to the uneven development in the EU is thereby frequently ignored. These different positions engender different logics of action with respect to the terrain and targets of social struggles. Such divergences are however highly problematic in the complex power structure in the European realm: without a common understanding of what to target and at what level, social struggles remain isolated, almost arbitrary. In the context of authoritarian competition state subalterns will have to focus on the transformation of European institutional structure (Oberndorfer 2012: 8). Concentrating on institutional change of EU and nation-state structures contrasts however with the contentious politics of social movements, which not only lack access to representative institutions but also seek to disrupt these polities.

The formation of a collective actor in the sense of 'postmodern prince' and the formulation of a common agenda are impaired by the fact that there is no clarity about the challenges a pan-European movement is facing, and at whom social struggles should be directed. It should also not be underrated that the current developments of the 'new constitutionalism' (Oberndorfer 2012) and the concomitant isolation of European politics from pressures from below, are flanked by initiatives that ostensibly allow for more democracy in Europe, such as the European Citizens' Initiative and the funding of civil society organizations. It is questionable whether in a context of increasing authoritarian power relations an integration or co-optation of critical social forces into the orbit of the European state apparatus can take place. So far this has not materialised. Only occasionally MEPs participate in dialogues and protests of social movements, and the European Commission has not yet approached protest movements at all. In the European Parliament, the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) lack a joint position on how to respond to the crisis, whereas at national level, mainstream left-wing political parties - entrenched by the moderate 'Third Way'-rhetoric at best - keep distancing themselves from a radical critique of

austerity measures. This moderate pragmatism, which is mainly defending the existing order, has limited the political room for manoeuvre to channel dissent in Europe. At the same time, the disciplining nature of debt and the neoliberal crisis rhetoric of an overall belt tightening by way of comparing sovereign debt to individual household debt has become a very powerful justification for austerity measures that is politically appealing and widely accepted as commonsensical in many parts of Europe.

As the inclusion of social democratic demands for a 'European social model' has shown, the European state apparatuses ensemble enjoys sufficient leeway to appease critical voices in the chorus of the hegemonic project. Particularly the widespread call for 'more Europe' can potentially legitimize the authoritarian politics, and the legal codification thereof, rather than fighting it. This dimension is particularly important with respect to long-term strategies and tactics of left progressive movements operating outside the confines of representative governments and parliamentary politics. Counter-hegemonic dissent has mainly been articulated in the streets in the sense of Gramsci's 'war of movement' without consolidating in an effective and stable 'war of position' firmly rooted in organisations of civil society (Scholl and Freyberg-Inan 2013). So far, alliances were exhausted by planning large-scale demonstrations, action days or summits. As much as the short-term vision of the crisis management of the EU can be doubted, so can the social struggles and the capability to formulate medium to long-term alternatives that are not only supported by the networks and alliances of different movements but also organically anchored in the social terrain of the European civil society. Social protests - even in the most affected Southern European member states - have not translated in landslides of left-wing support at the ballot box (and with the exception of Syriza in Greece, hardly any new left-wing parties have been formed). In Spain, the conservative-liberal People's Party gained an absolute majority in parliament at the height of the occupations of public spaces and protests, and also in the parliamentary elections in Iceland, voters have re-installed the same centre-right government that has been blamed for the financial meltdown. While the socialist President Hollande in France continues to follow the neoliberal course of labour market deregulation of his predecessor Sarkozy, and seems to accept the punitive austerity regime without further ado, conservative governments remain stable in Europe's North.

Concerning the EU and Europe in general, there is no consistent imaginary that exceeds the neoliberal model. Progressive left wing discourses at European level contain mainly abstract political and economic claims, which do not link up with concrete everyday experiences and resistance struggles. People may identify with occupying the squares, demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience taking place at local, regional or national level. Comparable sites of identification in the European realm have not yet become manifest, while common symbols of the EU, such as the flag, the anthem or the Euro are entrenched by the European state project. New alliances of the Left would need alternative collective symbolism and emblems that become viral and reproduced in different national context.



## **Conclusion: Uneven and asynchronous crisis development - consequences for emancipatory projects**

The concrete manifestations, frequency and the vehemence of the protests against austerity in Europe vary considerably. While protests in the Northern Eurozone have been weak, the situation is different in the Europe's Southern and Eastern periphery, which have been affected most profoundly by the crisis and the imposed austerity and structural adjustment programmes. Hitherto non-politicized people participated in mass demonstrations, square protests and assemblies in neighbourhoods, strikes or actions of civil disobedience, such as encircling the parliaments, land squats or supermarket raids, or in the case Spain where people organised themselves to block home evictions. At the same time, many of these protesters and grassroots resistance initiatives have been silenced by the disciplinary force of growing un- or underemployment, household indebtedness through mortgages, and authoritarian repression of police forces. Moreover, acts of solidarity from the North towards left-wing groups and unions in the South have been weak. In a context in which transfer payments among member states to compensate (regional) unequal development are hardly possible, there is little reason for optimism that alternatives perspectives can gain ground in Europe (Becker and Jaeger 2012: 111).

To understand social struggles and the formation of a left-wing progressive alliance at European level, a differentiated perspective on the dynamics and contradictions of these processes is necessary. To understand the extent to which social power relations and the fundamental dimensions of the social (re-)production of a counter-hegemonic project can condense at European level, consideration of the unequal and uneven development of the crisis at member state level is indispensable. Local and regional events in Southern member states have mobilized the support and sympathy of the wider population. Nonetheless, whether or not the punctual event politics of new social movements has led to sustainable structures that allow for a consistent and enduring resistance of the European Left against the authoritarian EU crisis regime remains open. One should therefore not uncritically refer to the European Spring - as the invariably positively connoted 'Arab Spring' had to give way to a more pragmatic and more nuanced understanding of social movements, so have the mobilizations against the austerity course to be seen as a moment of particular social struggles and potentially a starting point for the development of collective actions, rather than an already existing monolithic block or a concrete and coherent movement.

Even though the agents of the new social movements, their concerns and everyday experiences are manifold and sometimes contradictory, there are also similarities in the objectives and forms of resistance. Scientific debates and knowledge production about the condensation of European integration into a neoliberal and undemocratic project should exceed the limited confines of critical research on Europe and become part of broader social debates. Universities as public spaces for substantive discussions need to be recaptured as part of an alternative Europe project, involving organically social movements, unions, and people working in the media and the cultural domain, governments and the private sector. Critical scholarship can play a pivotal role in demystifying existing beliefs and contesting

existing power inequalities, and hence contributing to the organisation of resistance. This implies also to break with the 'strategic silences' of the dominant modes of understanding in economics and political sciences (Gill 2012: 518). Only through an understanding of the asymmetrical power relations and through a critical confrontation with the institutions of the European Union can we think about alternatives.

It is on this point that we want to conclude this chapter by pointing towards some of the concrete, and, as we would argue, encouraging attempts to formulate and put into practice resistance and alternatives to the austerity programmes that are being directed at EU level. With all the critical reflections on current social struggles, the very fact that they are taking place at all should of course not be discredited. Moreover, there is a radical and innovative quality to many of these initiatives that needs to be highlighted to transcend the discussion of reformist, pragmatic or utopian perspectives so as to show the transnational solidarity and common struggles inherent in them. Blockupy might here serve as an example of an initiative that is inherently transnational and targeting EU level institutions rather than exhausting itself in existing channels of communication with the EU. It remains to be seen whether and how the initiative will continue, but there is a potential to overcome some of the problematic issues we have discussed in this chapter. Similarly, the discussion of the commons has become a core dimension in many local and transnational forums, taking e.g. cues from the struggles against water privatisation in Italy or Greece, but also previous experiences with structural adjustment in 'developing' countries. Lastly, there is also an emerging transnational cooperation of critical academics who are willing to engage actively in these dynamics of formulating alternatives, for instance through groups of heterodox economists or social scientists. Educational struggles are of great importance for an emancipatory understanding. While in this chapter we have provided a critical discussion of resistance and alternatives to austerity programmes in the EU, we would strongly disagree with any forms of defeatism. We therefore stand by Gramsci's appeal published in the first edition of the Turin Ordine Nuovo 1, May 1919: 'Educate yourself, because we need all your wisdom. Move it, because we need your entire enthusiasm. Organize yourselves, because we need all your strength.'

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