

The Emergence of European Political Subject from below?

Attempts to build a European Social Movement in the context of Authoritarian Statism and the lack of Strategy

Introduction

We are researchers and activists, dedicated to social change in Europe. Therefore, our interest in European social movements is not simply scientific but also political. While we have been involved in political activism, organizing and social movements in Austria our approach to social movements in Europe comes from two different angles that we try to converge in this paper. One of us has researched social movements¹ (NL), the other (MAK) has been involved in some attempts to build a social movement in Europe (namely in the *Alter Summit* and *Blockupy*) while working for the NGO Corporate Europe Observatory. This paper is an attempt to incorporate our political experience in social movements on the national/local level and the European level with our theoretical understanding of the current crisis and the social actors involved.

Massive social movements have spread since the outbreak of the crisis. They have varied geographically as well as timely. They are a reaction and a rejection of the current crisis policies. These “new movements”, while predominantly still national, reference each other and increasingly launch Europe-wide mobilizations (*N14*, *For a European Spring*, *Alter Summit*, *Blockupy*). One of the main features of the movements is the weak role of established institutional actors (trade unions² and parties) and the strong link they create between economic demands and the question of a more radical or real democracy.

While the movements have gained strength and public support, they haven't been able to achieve any considerable concessions by the ruling powers. On the contrary, the movements face a diminishing democracy as elected governments are replaced by

¹ cf. Neva Löw: *Wir leben hier und wir bleiben hier! Die Sans Papiers im Kampf um ihre Rechte*, Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster 2013 (to be published soon)

² The Alter Summit process marks an important exception in this regard as it tries to connect trade unions and older social movements with the demands of the new movements.

technocrats and political decisions are increasingly moved to the European level. There, they are transferred to institutions with least democratic control (i.e. the DG ECFIN or the ECB, either in the framework of the “Troika” or the establishment of the European Economic Governance).

The movements are commonly described as being entirely new, particularly regarding their organizational forms. In this respect, our paper focuses on the strategic stakes and perspectives of the movements. The movements not only address the national context but increasingly the European level. Hence, the question to what extent a European social subject arises from below in opposition to current European crisis polices.³

To conduct our analysis we start (Part I) with a theoretical outline of the current state of European crisis management, which we understand as “authoritarian statism” (Nicos Poulantzas)⁴. Our first thesis therefore is that the EU state apparatus complex is developing in terms of an “autoritarian statism”⁵. This reduces the necessity to organize political consensus and thereby ensures the precarious unity of the “power block”⁶ while the institutions of liberal democracy prevail. Therefore, the new movements have to be conceptualized in the context of the economic crisis and crisis management, which affects the state.

In this regard, we understand social movements as strategic-relational actors, within a strategic-selective context.⁷ When speaking of social movements we are well aware that they are not cohesive actors “but a coherent non-unified family of forces”, that is constantly revising and reformulation its tactical priorities⁸

Related to this we argue that the attempt to shape a civil society and citizenship on the European level is itself an element of authoritarian statism and prevents the establishment of a genuine European political subject from below.

³ cf. Leigh Phillips: A European ‘demos’ is being built by accident, 2013

(<http://blogs.euobserver.com/phillips/2013/03/15/a-european-demos-is-being-built-by-accident/>)

⁴ cf. Nicos Poulantzas: State, Power, Socialism, 1980 p. 203 et seq.

⁵ cf. Nicos Poulantzas: State, Power, Socialism, 1980 p. 203 et seq.

⁶ Ibid. 136-137

⁷ vgl. Hay, Colin: Political Analysis. A critical Introduction, Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, 2002, insbesondere S. 126ff.

⁸ Cf., Bieler, Andreas and Morton, Adam David: Another Europe is possible? Labour and social movements at the European social forum, in: Globalizations 1, London, 2006, 310

In Part II we examine contradictions that hinder effective coordination of social movements on the European level or even the emergence of a genuine political subject from below. Part II is based on personal experience - mainly within the *Alter Summit*, and expert interviews with Sol Trumbo, a campaigner at the Transnational Institute and a self-described *indignado*, and Alexis Passadakis, researcher at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation in Brussels and an activist in ATTAC-Germany and other networks. Sol Trumbo gave us important insight to the *Agora99* process and subsequently the new movements⁹ in general, while Alexis Passadakis gave us a more general overview of different initiatives he is involved in, in scientific as well as in activist contexts.

After examining the contradictions, we will finally outline our findings from which we will derive strategic implications and questions, that seem important to us from a scientific point of view and in terms of building effective resistance to authoritarian neoliberal policies and bringing progressive social transformation.

Part I - The EU in times of Authoritarian Statism

The Concept of Authoritarian Statism

Nicos Poulantzas developed his concept of “authoritarian statism” during the crisis of the Fordist mode of regulation¹⁰. The main attribute of the transformation of the state which is articulated with the transformation of social classes and the relations of productions is the increasing exclusion of the popular masses from state power while formal elements of the bourgeoisie democracy stay intact.

Bop Jessop therefore concludes: „authoritarian statism must be seen as normal form of the capitalist state (and thus as still essentially democratic in character) rather than as an exceptional form.”¹¹ The four main features of authoritarian statism can summed up as follows:

⁹ The term “new movements” is used by us to describe those movements which are mainly operating without institutionalized actors like parties and trade unions, like the *indignados* in Spain. How new they and their organizational forms are really are, is a different question.

¹⁰ While Poulantzas never used this term himself, because he had a different periodization of capitalism (cf. Nicos Poulantzas: *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, 1975 p. 42ff.)

¹¹ Bob Jessop: *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods*, New York University Press: New York 1982, 170

- A power shift towards the executive state apparatuses and the concentration of power within them.
- The distinction between legislative, executive and juridicative power diminish increasingly while laws become less relevant.
- Political parties, once represented social forces, lose their role of articulating interests and instead become institutions that propagate policies decided elsewhere within the executive state apparatuses towards their social base.

The root of this transformation of the state can be found in the relations of productions and their articulation within state power: “the contemporary state is caught in its own trap. [...] from now on the State can go neither backwards nor forwards, can neither stand outside nor control the heart of the economy.”¹²

The reason for this is that the state has to increase its role within the capitalist crisis but in the meantime is unable to control the situation because the relations of production stay capitalist. The expanded role of the state in the maintenance of capitalist accumulation and the ad-hoc solution to contradictions within the accumulation process contradict the ability of the power bloc to develop and implement a hegemonic project. This means that the state’s ability to keep the power bloc united decreases as contradictions between different capital fractions increase. The tensions within the power block increase. The very ability of the dominant faction to enforce its interests hinders the establishment of a hegemonic project that integrates more interests. Therefore in the context of the articulation between the political crisis with authoritarian statism “such statism does not designate univocal strengthening of the State but constitutes the effect of a tendency to strengthen-weakening of the State, the poles of which develop in an uneven manner. The authoritarian statism of the contemporary State is terrifying real. But in spite of this (or rather because of it) the State remains a clay-footed colossus, fleeing ahead on treacherous ground.”¹³

¹² Nicos Poulantzas: *State, Power, Socialism*; London 1980, p. 191

¹³ *ibid.* p. 205

Authoritarian Statism and the politics of Economic Governance

The crisis policies of competitiveness and austerity aim to restore the profitability of transnational corporations (TNCs) and financial capital, as the dominant class forces within the neoliberal phase, through attacks on labor on the one hand and through accumulation by disposition¹⁴ by attacking and privatising the welfare state on the other hand.¹⁵

Several initiatives to lock in national economic and fiscal policies have been implemented since the crisis has started. Countries that have obtained financial assistance to refinance their sovereign debt on the financial markets are subject to a close surveillance regime under the so called Troika (of DG-ECFIN, IMF and ECB). They receive financial assistance (in tranches) under the condition that they implement economic and fiscal measures outlined in so-called “memorandums of understanding”. While the memorandums were originally measures of immediate crisis management, the establishment of a tight framework of so-called “economic governance” have been ironically described as “Troika for everyone, forever.”¹⁶

The economic governance reforms consist of the “Six Pack”, the “Fiscal Compact”, the “Two Pack” and the currently discussed “Competitiveness Pact”.

The main attributes of these reforms have been the lock-in of national fiscal and economic policies. The Six Pack along with the Fiscal Compact set certain provisions for government fiscal policies. Governments are forbidden to run deficits above 3% of GDP and are obliged to reduce their debt levels to 60% of GDP. The Fiscal Compact, in addition, demands that national budgets don't run structural deficits above 0,5% of GDP. The recently adopted Two Pack binds member states to transmit their national budgets to the European Commission in advance and gives it the opportunity to reject the budget.¹⁷ The economic policy is also constrained. With the outbreak of the crisis it has become clear that the euro and with it the abolishment of exchange rates has

¹⁴ cf. Harvey, David (2004): Die Geographie des „neuen“ Imperialismus. Akkumulation durch Enteignung; In: Zeller, Christian (Hrsg.): Die globale Enteignungsökonomie. Westfälisches Dampfboot: Münster, S.183-215, p. 196

¹⁵ cf. Corporate Europe Observatory (2013): BusinessEurope and Economic Governance (<http://corporateeurope.org/eu-crisis/2013/03/business-europe-and-economic-governance>)

¹⁶ Kenneth Haar, Steffen Stierle (2012): Troika for everyone, forever (<http://corporateeurope.org/eu-crisis/2012/11/troika-everyone-forever>)

¹⁷ Also the European Commission so far hasn't the power to finally prevent a member state of adopting a budget.

contributed to the building up of major imbalances between member states: surplus countries on the one hand - led by Germany - and on the other hand deficit countries, like Spain, Greece and Portugal. These imbalances have been re-interpreted as a lack of competitiveness in the countries running a current account deficit. The imbalances are not only under surveillance but if the European Commission concludes that a country runs an "excessive imbalance" the country can become subject to a corrective program similar to the provisions made in the memorandums.

To fully understand the economic governance in the context of authoritarian statism, it is necessary to take a look at the institutional set up of these new rules. On first sight it could be simply interpreted as a strengthening of the European level vis-a-vis the national level, but this would be too narrowly considered.

Economic governance can be interpreted as a displacement in the weight of different state apparatuses within the European ensemble of state apparatuses¹⁸ and their internal logic. Three developments are important here: a concentration of power in one of the most undemocratic European institutions: the Directorate General of Economic and Monetary affairs (DG-ECFIN), the rising of a technocracy by pseudo-objective rules and an authoritarian constitutionalism.

In the institutional framework of the European Union the Commission is lacking democratic legitimacy. Contrarily to a national government, it is installed by the Council and approved by the European Parliament, while it is the only institution with the right of legal initiative. Within the Commission, the DG-ECFIN can be seen as the avant-garde of neoliberalism. This applies to Commissioner Oli Rehn as well as its high representatives.¹⁹ The DG-ECFIN has also been very open to the interests of TNC's and financial capital. With the Six Pack and the Two Pack it was in particular this institution which was enormously strengthened, not only vis-a-vis the national states but also within the Commission. The Six Pack gives DG-ECFIN almost the sole power to determine if a country meets its budgetary targets or if a macroeconomic imbalance

¹⁸ cf. Wissel, Jens: Die Transnationalisierung von Herrschaftsverhältnissen. Zur Aktualität von Nicos Poulantzas `Staatstheorie, Nomos: Baden-Baden 2007, p. 88

¹⁹ cf. for example the Director General's view on economic reform: Buti, Marco (2010): Reforms and Re-Elections: Lunch Talk. Speech by Marco Buti. High-Level Seminar on the political Economy of crisis-induced Reforms . Paris, IMF premises 3 December 2010

exists and therefore the power to make a country subject to financial sanctions.²⁰ The decisions are not based on obvious political decisions, but are hidden behind pseudo-objective mechanisms. Objectively measurable budgetary data and a scoreboard that measures macroeconomic imbalances within the Six Pack compose this “technocratic ideology.”²¹ In fact, the decisions are political - as the different treatment of the Belgian and the Dutch deficit demonstrates²² - but grounding them on objective data, is supposed to immunize against political debate and critic. This can also be interpreted as a form of authoritarian constitutionalism. The Fiscal Compact plays a particularly paradoxical role in this respect. On the one hand, it locks in national fiscal policies and obliges the national governments to include this into the national constitutions; on the other hand, the Fiscal Compact is an international treaty outside of the legal framework of the EU and is in a conflictuous relation to it.²³

The structure of the European Union therefore presents only limited structural possibilities for subaltern interest groups to intervene. This is especially apparent in the established trade unions attempts to influence European politics.

The multi-level governance of the European Union gives trade unions easy access to supra-national decision makers, however trade unions have a much lower chance of making an impact on the outcome of policy making. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has focused their attention and energy towards taking influence on the DG for Employment and Social Affairs in the European Commission, on the European Parliament and the Social Dialogue. Within the European Commission, the DG for Employment and Social Affairs is rather weak. As already mentioned, the DG ECFIN is the dominant apparatus within the European Commission. Given the marginalized position of the DG for Employment and Social Affairs, the trade unions interests are even less likely to have an impact. Similarly, the European Parliament has become a crucial contact point for the European Trade Union Confederation.

²⁰ It is only the European Council that can prevent sanctions by voting against them (contrary to actively decide on them)

²¹ Nicos Poulantzas: *State, Power, Socialism*; London 1980, p. 241

²² Corporate Europe Observatory (2013): *The dangers of the Two-pack*
(<http://corporateeurope.org/news/double-jeopardy>)

²³ cf. Lukas Oberndorfer: *Vom neuen zum autoritären Konstitutionalismus*; in: *Kurswechsel* 2/2012 p.62-67

Amendments have been influenced by the ETUC, however the position of the European Parliament within the European Union remains weak.²⁴

Since the Treaty of Maastricht in 1991 the European Commission has given the ETUC and its counterpart a negotiating mandate within the Social Dialogue. However „the significance of the social dialogue should not be exaggerated“²⁵. Very few agreements have been concluded and additionally the general macroeconomic direction of the EU is not covered by the Social Dialogue.²⁶

Economic Governance and Political Crisis

To understand the described economic governance in terms of authoritarian statism, we have to relate this to the political crisis, which lies at the heart of this development. With Poulantzas we can define a political crisis as follows:

“The political crisis consists principally in substantial modifications of the relations of force of class conflict, modifications which themselves specifically determine the exact elements of crisis at the heart of the state apparatus. These elements are formed by the contradictions between the classes in conflict, the configurations of class alliances of the power bloc and of the exploited-dominated classes, the emergence of new social forces, the relations between the organizational forms and the representation of classes, and the new contradictions between the power bloc and certain of the dominated classes, that support the power bloc, and so forth.”²⁷

While it cannot be stated that all EU countries are in a political crisis or in a political crisis of the same type, there is however clear indication that it is true for some (particularly for the southern members states Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal) though with very different features. The deepest political crisis can definitely be found in Greece where strong popular mobilizations, an open rebellion of the lower ranks of the state personal, a weak government coalition, the emergence of new bourgeoisie political parties, but also a strong and open fascist threat can be observed.²⁸ In Spain a strong

²⁴ cf. Andreas Bieler: European Integration and the Transnational Restructuring of Social Relations: The Emergence of Labour as a Regional Actor ?, in: JMCS43/2005 p. 461 - 484

²⁵ Ibid., 469

²⁶ cf. Ibid., 469

²⁷ Nicos Poulantzas: „The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State“, in: James Martin (Editor), The Poulantzas Reader. Marxism, Law, and the State, Verso: London, New York 2008/1979, 294-322, p. 300

²⁸ cf. Vernika Duma, Martin Koechny, Hanna Lichtenberger: Autoritärer Etatismus und Ausnahmestaat. Krisenbearbeitung im historischen Vergleich: Österreich und Griechenland

popular movement, that includes large layers of public sector workers (e.g. the teachers's green tide movement) can be seen as well as a deep crisis of legitimacy²⁹. While the government is rather strong, there are strong tendencies of regional separatism. In Portugal a still strong degree of popular mobilization is accompanied by sharp contradictions between different state apparatuses (the rulings of the constitutional court against core measures of the Memorandum³⁰). Finally, in Italy a very low level of popular struggles exists³¹, nevertheless a profound legitimacy crisis resulting in a weak and shaky government increased through conflicts with the juridical state apparatus is apparent.

Different forms and elements of the political crisis in a highly fragmented European landscape make it easy to understand the social content of the economic governance reforms. To move important economic decisions into a new framework on the European level, is a way to establish "an entire institutional structure serving to prevent a rise in popular struggles and the dangers which that holds for class-hegemony."³²

When we talk of Economic Governance as a authoritarian statism it is important to understand, that it is not exactly the same as the authoritarian statism Poulantzas described in the late 1970s. That is because we have to understand authoritarian statism precisely in the context of an articulation with a crisis that is also not the same, in its roots and symptoms. For example today's crisis paves its way much more in terms of macroeconomic imbalances within a political territoriality which has not existed in Poulantzas' days in the same way, the European Union of a Single Market and a Monetary Union. The fact that the dominant interpretation of the crisis frames it in terms of competitiveness and puts the Member States in direct competition to each other,

(to be published by RLS)

²⁹ Nicos Poulantzas, „The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State“, in: James Martin (Editor), The Poulantzas Reader. Marxism, Law, and the State, Verso: London, New York 2008/1979, 294-322, p. 306

³⁰ These rulings also represent the revolutionary heritage inscribed into the Portuguese constitution after 1974

³¹ Which is in particular due to the historic defeat and weakness of the once powerful Italian left

³² Nicos Poulantzas: State, Power, Socialism; London 1980, p. 210

produces a specific form of authoritarian statism. Lukas Oberndorfer has described this accurately as “authoritarian competitiveness statism”.³³

Shaping Civil Society and European Citizenship in Times of Authoritarian Statism

The social movements that have spread throughout Europe have not led to considerable concessions from the ruling powers. The lack of concessions to the subaltern classes can be conceptualized as the development of an „authoritarian statism“ as means of handling the current crisis. On the level of discourse this is underlined by the conceptualization of citizenship and civil society within the European Union. Both exclude the notion of citizens that participate and of citizens that voice opposition to entire policy initiatives or the EU structure as such³⁴. This strengthens the argument that the EU construction as such is unfavorable to subaltern demands and struggles. Subaltern dissent and opposition is not conceived as possible on a narrative level. Ironically, both concepts were originally introduced to actively strengthen the legitimacy of EU institutions.

First references to European citizenship came up in the 1970s in terms of a „market citizenship“ granting especially European workers the right to cross borders. A new discourse on citizenship was then taken up in the Maastricht treaty in 1992. From then onwards „union citizenship“ applied to all nationals of the member states, and not only those economically crossing borders as workers. The participatory dimension of European citizenship is limited to its participation in the electoral process of the European Parliament. Given the very low voters turnout at European elections, the approach of European institutions towards its citizens focuses mainly on the necessity of informing citizens about their rights. As Stijn Smismans puts it: „In EU official documents citizenship often seems to be conceptualized as a set of rights of which the beneficiaries still live in ignorance or ingratitude“³⁵. The Charter of Fundamental Rights

³³ Oberndorfer, Lukas: Hegemoniekrise in Europa – Auf dem Weg zu einem autoritären Wettbewerbsetatismus?; in: Forschungsgruppe `Staatsprojekt Europa` (Hrsg.): Die EU in der Krise, Münster p. 50-72

³⁴ cf. Smismans, Stijn: European Civil Society and Citizenship: Complementary or exclusionary concepts?, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 65

³⁵ Smismans, Stijn: European Civil Society and Citizenship: Complementary or exclusionary concepts?, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 62

is often brought forward by EU officials emphasizing the far reaching possibilities European citizens have and are not aware of. This is yet another example of the conception of citizens as passive. „European citizenship confirms existing rights, or provides a regulatory framework shaped by an elite which then attempts to engage the citizen in acknowledging it“³⁶. The difficult ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty has further led to a focus on information campaigns rather than enabling active bottom-up participation.³⁷

The concept of European civil society was broadly taken up by European institutions by the end of the 1990s. The growing social movements that gathered to protest summits of world leaders made it necessary for European leaders to deal with civil society. The growing dissatisfaction, that was articulated in the streets, made European leaders call for Europe's institutions to come closer to its citizens. Therefore, the European Commission identified the reform of its governance as a strategic objective in 2001. However, an exact definition of what civil society is and its role within European politics remained absent. The absence of a clear discourse on civil society by the European Commission enabled the European Economic and Social Committee to promote the perception of civil society as „organised civil society“³⁸ which means the representatives of organized interest groups. This definition of civil society was in the interest of trade unions and associations that had felt marginalized in EU policy making before. Furthermore, the qualification as a „civil society organisation“ meant more public legitimacy and the access to EU funds³⁹. Clearly, this meant that spontaneous and/or not traditionally organized forms of protest did not fall into the perception of a legitimate part of civil society.

³⁶ Smismans, Stijn: European Civil Society and Citizenship: Complementary or exclusionary concepts?, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 62

³⁷ cf. Smismans, Stijn: European Civil Society and Citizenship: Complementary or exclusionary concepts?, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 60-65

³⁸ Kohler-Koch, Beate: The three worlds of European Civil Society- What role of civil society for what kind of Europe, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 49

³⁹ cf. Kohler-Koch, Beate: The three worlds of European Civil Society- What role of civil society for what kind of Europe, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 48

The promotion of „civil society“ by the European Commission was supposed to give EU institutions more legitimacy and especially strengthen the European Commission's institutional position⁴⁰. Therefore, civil society is assumed to support European integration as well as certain policy measures. Hence, it is not supposed to be in a critical position towards EU-policies or even the European construction as such. Hereafter „in much of the civil society discourse the citizen almost entirely disappears from the picture“. ⁴¹

The brief outline of the official discourse of citizenship and civil society within the European institutions gives an explanation on the official handling of dissent movements towards the austerity politics being currently implemented. The complete disregard and absence of these movements within the narrative of European policies is coherent with the discussed conception of civil society and citizenship in the European Union.

Part II - The Emergence of European Political Subject from below?

AGORA99

The first *Agora 99* meeting took place in Madrid in November 2012. The proposal to create *Agora 99* came from the *Blockupy* movement that had taken place in spring 2012. Hundreds of activists, especially from the different Occupy movements in Europe met in Madrid to share their experiences. The reason for establishing *Agora 99* is explained as follows:

“We want to put in relation what we have learnt in the square and the networks in the context of the 15M with the knowledge of other European and Mediterranean networks. We want to produce and space for mix, cooperation and organization that would work at least at a European level. The aim is to end the meeting with a common working

⁴⁰ cf. Smismans, Stijn: European Civil Society and Citizenship: Complementary or exclusionary concepts?, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 65

⁴¹ Smismans, Stijn: European Civil Society and Citizenship: Complementary or exclusionary concepts?, in: Policy and Society 28, 2009, 66

calendar and common events around the three axes (Debt, Democracy and Rights) and common working tools”.⁴²

Agora 99 was meant to share the common experiences of struggle. Given the context of movements flourishing on a national level, especially in Spain with the *15M* and in Germany with the *Blockupy* event, there was a strong desire to have a space of open discussion. The main groups were from Spain and from Germany. Many participants had been part of occupy initiatives and for the most part these “new movements” represented the first political experience for the activists. “Many people got involved for the first time in political activism, so there were a lot of lessons to be learned from these processes in terms of the camps in the square and in terms of the assemblies and the methodologies of the assemblies, decision making processes, direct action, technologies for internal and external communication...”(Interview Trumbo, 2). Many activists had already been in contact with each other before. Social Media and internet communication were strong components of the new movements and therefore discussions and an exchange of ideas had already taken place. The idea was to organize an event in order to meet physically and to have the opportunity to exchange views, experiences and ideas in person.

Agora 99 was a self-organized event meaning that neither trade unions nor established political parties were present or played a role within *Agora 99*. The participants defined themselves as grassroots activists “from below”.⁴³ This is the reason why the “new forms of organization” played a large role in the internal structures of *Agora 99* but also for the discussions that took place. This means that “horizontal assemblies” took place that were “non-hierarchical [and] open...”.⁴⁴ Within the discussions that took place at the event, these internal structures were perceived as being a vital part of the struggle itself: “And for some the use of these new forms of organization are a change in itself. So

⁴² (Agora 99 overflow Europe)

⁴³ Interview Trumbo, 2

⁴⁴ Interview Trumbo, 3

through the process of assemblies and of making decisions through assemblies, you are creating change already”.⁴⁵

The discussions that took place at Agora 99 additionally evolved around basic questions of questioning the current political and economic system as a whole. Within this context the issues of democracy and what “democracy” means and the issue of debt were widely discussed. However, Agora 99 failed in agreeing on a common political discourse and on a common agenda.⁴⁶

ALTER SUMMIT

Alter Summit was the attempt to find a joint response to neoliberal crisis policies, by several social actors mostly from the trade union and NGO sector. It was prepared for over a year and culminated in the *Alter Summit* in Athens from June 7th to June 8th. It defines itself as “a first important step in the setting up of a European social movement able to exercise a power relation and defend a real democracy against austerity.”⁴⁷

The preparation process consisted of regular meetings, which focused mainly on writing a joint manifesto that was supposed to give European movements a common voice in their struggle against neoliberal Europe. The four page manifesto focuses on debt, social crisis, and banks.⁴⁸ Instead of a general alternative, it outlines several “common and urgent demands”⁴⁹, such as the cancellation of the memorandums, the cancellation of the described economic governance reforms, tax justice, affordable housing, a European investment program against the social crisis and the public control of banks.⁵⁰ The driving forces behind the Alter Summit were the Belgian trade unions, the European Attac network, European NGOs, such as the Transnational Institute, and several other organizations. While the actors within the *Alter Summit* have always been very aware of

⁴⁵ Interview Trumbo, 3

⁴⁶ Interview Trumbo

⁴⁷ Alter Summit - Next Steps: <http://www.altersummit.eu/accueil/article/next-steps>

⁴⁸ Alter Summit: A PEOPLES' MANIFESTO. Our urgent common priorities for a democratic, social, ecological and feminist Europe. ROLL BACK AUSTERITY AND CLAIM REAL DEMOCRACY!, <http://www.altersummit.eu/manifeste/article/the-manifesto>

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

the new movements, the haven't played any role in building up the process and neither they have been present in large numbers in Athens.

The *Alter Summit* itself consisted of a lengthy presentation of the manifesto by more than 20 speakers and assemblies on the main issues of the manifesto, which were supposed to develop initiatives and campaigns. The event attracted about 1000 to 2000 people. This was less than the 5000 people the organizers had hoped for.⁵¹

The *Alter Summit* is supposed to be followed by further coordination meetings of the participating groups and networks. So far, there was only one concrete initiative that resulted of the *Alter Summit*;⁵² the "Seminar on Economic Governance and the Troika" in Amsterdam, which was mainly organized by Corporate Europe Observatory, Transnational Institute, ATTAC Austria and also included several people from the new movements.

Contradictions of the movements and obstacles to build an effective Coordination on the EU-Level

Contradiction #1: The tendency to *Selbstverschäftigung*

In particular, within the new movements a tendency of *Selbstbeschäftigung* and self-admiration, that is connected to a lack of strategy, can be observed. The movements have a perception of themselves as something entirely new and describe their own form of organization which they describe as horizontal⁵³. They focus on the national level as well as on the EU. Sol Trumbo states that part of *Agora99* sees "the use of these new forms of organization [as] a change in itself. So through the process of assemblies and of making decisions through assemblies, you are creating change already"⁵⁴. This illustrates the main weakness of these movements in their attempt to constitute something new. It is not so much about analyzing and in effect confronting a specific system of power relations - although their practice already brings them in conflict with

⁵¹ My own estimation [MAK]

⁵² according to my own knowledge [MAK]

⁵³ A view we are reproducing here by labeling them as "new movements"

⁵⁴ Interview Trumbo

power relations - but about creating something aside of the European state apparatus complex.

If we relate this self- perception of the new movements to Poulantzas' concept of authoritarian statism, it becomes clear that these weaknesses are not something entirely new but an expectable reaction:

“Lastly, authoritarian statism is itself partially responsible for creating new forms of popular struggle. In every country with which we are now concerned, we can see the emergence of struggles that have in view the exercise of direct, rank-and-file democracy. These struggles exhibit a characteristic anti-statism and express themselves in the mushrooming of self-management centres and networks of direct intervention by the masses in the decisions which affect them.”⁵⁵

The new movements characteristic anti-statism is the main cause for their inability to develop an effective strategy and therefore to constitute themselves on the European terrain. In our interview with Trumbo he states: “[T]here is no strategy to achieving a common goal. I don’t think that’s an objective either.”⁵⁶

Thus, the main aim of *Agora99* after one year is not to bring an alternative or come up with an effective strategy but “to do an event that brings together a considerable amount of activists.”⁵⁷

The contradiction of *Selbstbeschäftigung* and self-admiration applies mostly to the so called new movements. What applies to most of the initiatives on a European level so far, is that they are unable to reach an effective strategic coordination - let alone a genuine European movement - and so the most they can achieve currently are strong (or weak) symbolic events.⁵⁸ This weakness applies also to initiatives like the *Alter Summit* or the *Blockupy* protest and relates to another contradiction that affects them all: a lack of strategy.

Contradiction #2: The spatial division and its reproduction within the movements

A major obstacle to form a European movement or at least a EU-wide coordination of social struggles is the spatial division within the EU. The immense contradiction

⁵⁵ Nicos Poulantzas: *State, Power, Socialism*; London 1980, p. 246

⁵⁶ Interview Trumbo

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ cf. Interview Pasadakis

between the periphery and the core in Europe in economic terms and in political terms is reproduced within the social movements, the new ones and the traditional ones as well.

The spatial division and unevenness of movements articulates itself differently in the new movements and in the more institutionalized movements like *Alter Summit*.

The new movements root in particular in the peripheral countries like Spain, Greece and Portugal. While they share some characteristics, related to each other in their symbols and find ways to coordinate, they are all genuine national movements shaped by the political structures and the conjunctures in their respective countries. As Alexis Passadakis puts it, their relationship is mainly one of “cross-fertilization”⁵⁹. In our view the main obstacle for the movements to become European ones, is that they do not find an equivalent in the core countries. On the contrary, what we can find in the core are rather caricatures of the new movements. The “Real-Democracy-Now” movement, and Occupy respectively 15O had an impact across Europe, but they have not been able to develop the specific characteristics of the new movements in the core countries, such as an outreach going beyond existing activist circles. Therefore the initiatives were doomed to copycat what they thought are the new movements.⁶⁰ This division within the new movements hinders an effective European coordination.

The same by different means can be applied to the more institutionalized actors. This is in particular true for the trade unions, whereon the one hand the trade unions in the periphery, which are not necessarily more radical than their counterparts in the core, are simply forced by the gravity of the neoliberal attacks to take a more radical approach and which are also more open to EU-solutions as there is not much left of their welfare states. On the other hand, many unions in the north are still able to maintain a

⁵⁹ Interview Passadakis

⁶⁰ A positive exception in our view is *Blockupy* which while already relating in its name to the new movements is a very different approach, bringing together small activist *Occupy* circles, radical left organizations, trade unions and the parliamentary left.

corporatist approach and have national welfare states to defend. This hinders effective coordination between the unions.

We can also find this contradiction within cross-over projects like the *Alter Summit*. While writing the manifesto, it became very clear that there are different perceptions of the same problems shaped by the economic unevenness in Europe. While a central demand from organizations from the periphery were “citizen debt audits”, organizations from the core simply couldn’t relate to this demand in their national contexts, as they posed the problem of debt in their countries much more in the question of a more just tax system.⁶¹

The spatial division of the EU leads not only to different perceptions of problems and an unevenness between different movements but the neo-colonial character of the crisis policies ⁶² puts the movements in the periphery in a direct opposition to the core. At the same time it is not a classical center vs. periphery situation as it is overdetermined by the complexity of the European state apparatus complex.⁶³

Contradiction #3: A cleavage between the new movements and established trade unions

A central difficulty of the current new movements is the discrepancy between established trade unions and the activists of the new movements. As argued before, the new movements represent a certain continuation of the protest forms of the 2000s and the European Social Forum. In this sense, examining the relationship between the ESF and established trade unions can give some insight into the same relation today.

In general the „social partnership“ approach of most established trade unions dominates the thinking of leading members of the European labor movement. This abandons the autonomy of the labor movement on the one hand. On the other hand, this amounts to a strategy that „confirms the logic of neoliberalism through supply side corporatism or

⁶¹ Own observations during the process [MAK]

⁶² cf. Interview Passadakis

⁶³ *ibid.*

progressive competitiveness“⁶⁴. The ETUC has „promoted monetary stability, market flexibility and employability at both the European and the enterprise level“⁶⁵. For movements that struggle against neoliberalism or go even further and question capitalism as such, the general contradiction towards trade unions will always remain. There have been however attempts to find common goals and strategies. Recently, the most prominent one being the first European Social Forum.⁶⁶

The European Social Forum represented a new approach since it was designed as a starting point for renewed cooperation between social movements and trade unions. High-ranking ETUC officials were present at the first forum and several workshops were organized to enable an open discussion about the topic. A common position was found concerning the rejection of the way European integration has been part of a neoliberal project. It was agreed upon that the neoliberal restructuring was a political choice and therefore alternatives did and do exist. This promising consensus led to common actions following the first European Social Forum. The second European Social Forum was different. Here, high-ranking ETUC officials were mainly absent and given that the ETUC organized its own forum prior to the ESF, their members for the most part did not take part in the Social Forum. No panels were organized concerning the relationship between new movements and trade unions and there were no larger common actions following the ESF⁶⁷. A. Bieler and A.D. Morton summarize this contradiction as follows: “...while there is a general consensus on rejecting the neoliberal Anglo-American model of capitalism, the split between those who argue that a consensual model of capitalism based on tripartism would offer an alternative way forwards, on one hand, and those who regard this as a Trojan horse for the introduction of neoliberalism through the backdoor, on the other, remains“⁶⁸.

⁶⁴ Bieler, Andreas and Morton, Adam David: Another Europe is possible? Labour and social movements at the European social forum, in: Globalizations 1, London, 2006, 306

⁶⁵ Ibid., 306

⁶⁶ Cf., Ibid., 315

⁶⁷ Cf., Ibid., 306-320

⁶⁸ Ibid., 320

Trade unions have not participated in Agora 99 and incorporating trade unions has not been a declared goal either. There is a sense of overcoming traditional political structures, such as trade unions, by „creating a new logic and a new way to experience and to organize politics“⁶⁹ Trade unions are perceived as being hierarchical and old fashioned, while the new movements identify as having horizontal structures. Having trade unions and political parties participating would be „something additional“⁷⁰. However, Sol Trumbo sees incorporating trade unions as a goal Agora 99 could have. Since Agora99 is perceived as a space of exchange and discussion, trade union's strategic thoughts would enrich the forum. But it is quite clear that there is a general division between the new movements and trade unions: „ ...you have to take into consideration what are the aims of the different movements...“⁷¹. Having trade unions participate would nevertheless be a success for Agora 99⁷².

NThe forums of the new movements are not the only ones unable to integrate trade unions and other institutional actors. The same is true for the initiatives by those actors, like the Alter Summit. The actors in the Alter Summit, while having a strong admiration for the new movements, lack an analysis why they are not able to integrate them into their initiatives. The Alter Summit with its manifesto that articulates demands directed towards policy makers is in the end not compatible with the political practice of the new movements that are in themselves a critique of those forms of politics. In addition, there material circumstances are hostile to the participation of new social movements. While trade unions and NGOs have the financial resources to send staff members around Europe, to regular meetings in Brussels, Zagreb and finally Athens, the new movements lack these resources. Furthermore the way decisions are taken within the Alter Summit by delegates per organization, naturally contradicts the horizontal approach the new movements are taking.

⁶⁹ Interview Trumbo, 4

⁷⁰ Ibid., 4

⁷¹ Ibid., 4

⁷² Cf., *ibid.*, Interview Trumbo

It is clear that the new movements will have to approach the trade unions and will need to define their (strategic) relationship towards them. Overcoming the strict division between the new movements and trade unions can enrich strategic debates on resistance to neoliberal restructuring and can help the new movements overcome the other contradictions they are struggling with. What is missing to develop such a strategic relationship is the lack of forums where such an exchange could happen in a way that is attractive to both sides. It is also important not to overestimate potential trade unions roles in a possible transformation of society. "Collective bargaining and social dialogue can have positive results in the short term and are, thus, often of immediate benefit to workers affected by it. Without more radical demands and strategies, however, it is unlikely to result in more than some amelioration of the most drastic effects of neoliberal restructuring"⁷³.

Conclusion

The current crisis is being managed in an increasingly authoritarian way and can be described as authoritarian statism. This led to a displacement of the dominant state apparatuses on a national as well as on a European level. As a consequence the demands of the subaltern have been less likely to be incorporated in current policies. This has led to a further marginalization of protest movements and at the same time of institutional actors such as trade unions.

Therefore the current protest movements need to be contextualized within not only a crisis conjuncture but also within an authoritarian statism on a national and European level. It is not surprising that the "new movements" have chosen their specific structures. Also, their strong reference to democracy can be easily explained. Additionally, their inability to formulate a common struggle with institutional actors (i.e. trade unions) needs to be seen in relation to the discussed points.

⁷³ Bieler, Andreas and Morton, Adam David: Another Europe is possible? Labour and social movements at the European social forum, in: Globalizations 1, London, 2006, 320

The contradiction of the new movements to “Selbstbeschäftigung” means that they are incapable of reaching out towards institutional actors such as trade unions. The division between northern and southern Europe poses a further obstacle. The trade unions logic within the national and European state apparatuses prevents them seeing the new movements as possible allies. It is clear that a potential common struggle and common tactic between the new movements and trade unions would be extremely enriching for subaltern resistance to the current crisis management. It is essential for movements to develop an analytical understanding of the social content of the current transformation of the European state complex in the context of the crisis. This implies a strategic relation towards institutional actors and different state apparatuses.

The questions remain: Is it possible to constitute a political subject on the European level that goes beyond symbolism? Is it strategically preferable to address foremost the European level or the national level? Which of the two is more likely to bring about progressive social transformation?

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