

## **Social movements and the European crisis: activist and researcher reflections**

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### **Overview**

*On June 28, the Transnational Institute Amsterdam hosted a symposium with activists from a range of movements and researchers from the three main European networks of social movement research (Council for European Studies, European Sociological Association, European Consortium for Political Research). The goal was to share experiences from participants' different standpoints, map out the current situation of movement organising in Europe, and identify strategic implications in a way that can be usefully shared with activists across Europe.*

*The participants were Jille Belisario, Coffi Badou-Bonsou, Brid Brennan, Ewa Charkiewicz, Daniel Chavez, Laurence Cox, Nicole Doerr, Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Garan Hobbelink, Kees Hudig, Satoko Kishimoto, Maria Kousis, Caroline Lindo, Marianne Maeckelbergh, Jerome Roos, Heleen Schols, Orsan Senalp, Seongcheol, Benjamin Tejerina, Markos Vogiatzoglou, Peter Waterman, Andrea Teti, Sat Trejo, Ewout van den Berg, Sol Trumbo Vila, Hilary Wainwright and Angela Wigger.*

*The symposium discussed three key questions:*

- 1. Where are movements at? New and old elements, strengths and weaknesses (introduced by Benjamin Tejerina)*
- 2. How can movements help each other? Networking across differences, solidarity, building a European movement? (introduced by Marianne Maeckelbergh)*
- 3. How can movements win? Movement strategy in the crisis (introduced by Laurence Cox)*

*Following the event we asked participants to write up their reflections arising out of the discussion to be jointly published by the TNI, Red Pepper and Interface. Below are the results!*

## **Reflections on the symposium**

### **Scholars and activists: making the most of different perspectives**

***Heleen Schols***

#### *Choosing the easy way*

In late June 2013, I participated in a one-day meeting in Amsterdam under the title 'engaged research symposium'. In a group of about twenty people we discussed a wide variety of themes. Amongst the topics were movement networks, critiques of Keynesianism, the role of the media, the relationship of social democracy with capitalism, and police repression- to name just a few. One of my comments in the closing plenary discussion was that we can only contribute to positive change if our struggle for it is fundamentally democratic and participatory. I argued that our strategies need to match our goals.

When I think back now about that remark, I have to admit I chose the easy way. I was sincere, but also kept a safe distance from concrete, practical applications of the ideals I was referring to. Limiting myself to such a general statement was the easy way because it's at the practical level that beautiful ideals get sticky. They require the working out of difficulties and dilemmas. And that also goes for that afternoon's meeting. Because participating in the symposium, while inspiring and useful, had also made me feel frustrated at times. From what I later learned by talking to others, I was not alone in feeling some ambivalence. This is why, when invited to submit a reflection on the symposium, I decided to write about this ambivalence and my reasons for it.

#### *Experiences with 'neutrality'*

I'll say a bit more about the symposium in a minute. But first, let me go back to the autumn and winter of 2011/2012, when I was deeply involved with the Occupy movement in Amsterdam. Especially in the first weeks after the camp was set up, there were many euphoric moments as the movement managed to attract and give a platform to people who were not used to speaking out, and to being listened to. Our insistence on inclusivity led to some beautiful encounters. For example, I clearly remember the moment that a tall, lean man who had been hovering around a public General Assembly abruptly demanded the meeting's attention for his loud complaint about our use of 'fancy words'. After a few minutes' discussion, in which the tall man explained in some more detail what he meant, we agreed on ways to cut out on jargon, unnecessarily technical language and inside jokes.

But many less rosy memories also present themselves. There were seemingly endless meetings that excluded those who could not stay out in the winter nights, for example because of the cold or because of duties at home or work. Our insistence on there being no leaders in our little camp made it very hard to discuss informal leadership structures. Looking back, I think in a way this was

similar to so-called 'gender-blind' and 'colour-blind' approaches to equality. These approaches aim for equality by treating everyone alike. Unfortunately, insisting on neutral standards often amounts to rendering invisible how privilege and power work. Therefore, claiming that everyone has the same opportunities can easily perpetuate oppression. The many critiques of such 'gender blind' or 'colour blind' approaches show that you just can't wish away inequality and you shouldn't wish away difference.

It should have been no surprise that the 'leader blindness', as I now think of it, in our Occupy camp was not helpful in the long run. The simple truth is that our good intentions of horizontality and equality were not enough. And while the camp provided a steep learning curve and valuable experiences for many, connections to other groups and struggles beyond our Occupy camp remained more limited than in numerous other Occupy groups worldwide.

In hindsight, I think the inability to forge links with other struggles was connected to our inability to thoroughly address dynamics of power, privilege and diversity within the camp. We often put up with people creating an atmosphere that did not feel safe or inviting to many. Ironically, this was partly due to a wish not to exclude anyone, even if they harassed others. Sometimes, it was because we judged that it would be more useful to focus our energy on even more pressing issues.

This wasn't the reason the camp ended. There were many other reasons, too. But still, it was important. Being aware of internal power differences is not sufficient for building a strong movement, but I am sure it is necessary. We can't afford not to address these issues because the sources of different types of domination and exclusion are connected. They are connected through the way our societies are structured, for example through the state. You see it in the way LGBT rights issues get hijacked to support anti-immigrant discourse. As many have argued, this is not a coincidence: capitalism works *because* it creates exclusion, *because* it is sexist and racist, to name just two of the axes of difference that are relevant. Necessarily, our struggle for more equality and justice needs to take into account these connections between different types of privilege and domination. For me, talking this through with fellow activists has been helpful, as have been writings by other participants in the Occupy movement, such as many thoughtful pieces in the recent book 'We are many. Reflections on movement strategy, from occupation to liberation'.

So, how does this connect to my experiences in the symposium in June 2013? While the meeting was in many ways valuable to me, I can think of two ways we could have made more out of it. Firstly, I think it would have been useful to foreground the difference in perspective between academics and activists. Following from this, an explicit commitment by the group for inclusive communication would have made it easier to remind ourselves and each other to talk in ways that everyone could relate to, and to keep a good balance between speaking and listening by people with different backgrounds.

*Putting our differences to good use*

Our group consisted of people with a variety of ages, experiences and interests. A prominent distinction was the one between scholars and activists. While some of those present combined both roles, it was usually with emphasis on either the academic or the activist role. This was true for me, too: while I had recently started a PhD project about participatory democracy, I was invited and presented myself mostly as an activist.

While many of us expressed our excitement about the mix of people in the symposium, we didn't really discuss what this meant in terms of our outlook on the meeting. I guess you could say we adopted a 'perspective-blind' approach, which made it harder to perceive and discuss how differences in communication style, expectations and needs might structure our meeting. Instead, we enthusiastically dove headlong into discussions about many important topics.

While we discussed topics that were interesting to all of us, we approached them in different ways. As I perceived it, the academics tended to feel more at ease discussing issues on a relatively abstract level and seemed to assume that concepts like neo-keynesianism would be familiar to all. On the other hand, I myself hadn't realised that not all the researchers were necessarily aware of things like the recent March Against Monsanto actions, or the way some activists use n-1 software. In order to make those differences work to the advantage of all, I think it would have been useful to explicitly foreground the implications of our positions as researchers and activists. We could even have woven this into the structure of the meeting. For example, the central question for the last session was 'how can we win?' Because the range of responses to this question was so wide, I think we lost out in depth of analysis and in making links between different perspectives on the answer. Perhaps we could have agreed on focusing the question on our complementary roles, as in 'how can movements work together and what kind of relationship with academics would be helpful in this?'

Opportunities for exchange and mutual learning between activists and scholars are very valuable. To me, the June 2013 symposium was no exception. In order to make even more out of future encounters, I think a more explicit and strategic use of our differences in perspective is key.

## **I. Where are movements at? New and old elements, strengths and weaknesses**

### **They removed ... so much from them that they also took away the fear (anonymous, Spanish social movement)**

***Garan Hobbelink***

One of the sentences written on the walls of Madrid in relation to the activities of the social movement was "Without fear!!" If you read it on the street without knowing what all the implications are in relation to this meaning, you probably will pass through it without any clear insight. The worst thing is that probably, the fear is what make you avoid some individual behaviors and when this happen you are going against your own rational interests. In the context of social movement, where people fight for more social rights and for a more solidarity and equally society, this micro actions that you don't allow yourself to do, due to fear, have an influence in the development of strategist to take action around the concept of social movement.

Fear is an emotion that has a big influence on human behavior. Our whole life is determined by our personal fears and also determines our relation with the world. In our process to ask for social changes, fear is something that can limit us aspirations. For example, one fear can be represented by the possibility to lose what you already have, and this makes a contra balance against the intensity of your demands. For this reason, it is important to become aware of this process to be a bit freer of the social constrictions that manage our live and don't allow yourself to do what you really believe in. In the process of overcoming your fears, you are also giving permission to the others to do the same. This is a way to find the change that you are looking for.

The social stigma is a fear that could slow down also the speed of social changes in relation to the participation in social movements and the position of the discourse that you manage. When you ask for changes for a better life conditions, it is because you see yourself in a society group that have more worse conditions that the others, if you do not have anything to lose, your determination will be clearer and stronger, but if it is not the case, probably you will be in an unclear situation that gives you the chance to identify yourself with the better conditions group. In that unclear situation, do you feel free to accept all consequences of possible stigmatization or the possible reprimand of others because they are full of fear and think different? These situations create fear and in consequences immobilization. One of fear's characteristics is that it makes a stronger influence the more it has a vague and diffuse origin. Maybe in Europe it is not yet completely clear for everyone who is liable and what are the consequences of the chaos that has been created in some countries. We should look to Latin America, they have been able to define a narrative against the policies that has not allowed them to grow as they could in the past, and probably this happens since they lost the fear because they define which policies

and which institutions were responsible. Maybe the same that now are playing an important role in the European crisis.

Until now, a lot of news and opinions have been written since the origin of the crisis but the time is coming to the end in the sense that the consequences of this European economic policies are coming with stronger consequences, and they do not promise any better social life conditions (I would like to think different but Europe is taking money from schools and hospitals and giving it to the banks). Then, it is necessary to physically articulate the civil society and imprint on them clearly which are the real consequences of the austerity plans that are going on now. We have spend time studying and analyzing the crisis and probably it produces less fear, you also may think that reading an article and becoming indignant at home is enough, instead of going to the street and organize yourself with the others but. I know... it produces more fear, stigma and other consequences than reading an article, but as is written in walls of Madrid, it is necessary to win the fear and de consequences related to it to feel to free participate actively.

**On the “decline” of Madrid, the state re-appropriation of public space, and strange hope**  
*Cristina Flesher Fominaya*

During the GJM the constant refrain in Madrid’s movement network was how to break out of the activist ghetto, how to reach out to the people on the streets. With 15-M it seems those dreams were fulfilled beyond our wildest imaginings. And yet...I recently attended a protest against corruption in Madrid. Everyone in Spain, and I mean everyone, is aware of the corruption scandals that have rocked the PP, and also now two of the large unions, added to which are scandals involving the royal family and recurring urban political scandals encompassing both major parties. I therefore expected many outraged citizens to fill the square. Instead very few people were there, in fact, it felt a lot like the “manis” we used to have before 15-M, before 13-M, when we still were quite happy if 50 or 60 people showed up. Of course, just because not many people were there does not mean they don’t care. Maybe they simply had not heard about it. Or maybe they were too busy fighting on the frontlines of the attack on the victims of the crisis, defending people from evictions, or organizing against the privatization of our hospitals in one of the many citizen tides (mareas). I asked someone in one of the groups I know if he was surprised at the low numbers. He seemed surprised by the question. “No, if the big unions don’t call for the mani, then this is what there is”.

All movements have ups and downs and there is definitely a sense of protest fatigue after the exhilaration of the large 15-M mobilizations. Part of the reason I imagine is the relentless and inflexible response of Spain’s ruling parties, who continue to act as though the people of Spain had never taken to the streets at all. The feeling of having exhausted all legal media and mobilizing resources and yet not being able to slow the inexorable advance of the dismantling of the

public good by the “PPSOE” (the acronym used to denote the largely indistinguishable nature of the two major parties by many activists, combining the Popular Party-PP- and Socialist Party-PSOE-acronyms) has to be deeply depressing. It certainly is to me and the same feeling has been expressed by many in the past days. El País recently published a piece called “The decline of Madrid” cataloguing the effects of “austerity”, the dirty streets, the cuts in funding for cultural and other programs, the drop in tourists, the corrupt politicians. The article describes how deeply indebted city leaders refuse to cede a city theatre for a few nights, forcing the last minute cancellation the up to now annual jazz festival that would have brought 40.000 spectators, and place all their hopes and dreams on a *Eurovegas* casino project. Yet, the city still pulses with the life and chaos of any great city, with new surprises around each corner, however many times you might have walked down the same streets. For me the decline, depressing as it is, is of an even deeper nature. It is a corruption of the city’s spirit by those who govern it.

Madrid’s council is proposing an ordinance whereby itinerant musicians will now need to pass an audition to be able to perform on the streets. Musicians not certified will be subject to a high fine. Probably they will need to play Wagner to pass. Jokes aside, it is ironic to say the least that such staunch advocates of private enterprise as Madrid’s city leaders should seek state regulation of an activity that more than any other I can think of requires the free market system to work. After all, if no one likes the music the tips are not likely to keep the musician on the streets. It is a self regulating system par excellence, a perfect example of Adam Smith’s assertion that human nature is to truck, barter and exchange. One street musician said on the news that she was not a particularly skilled musician but that she juggled and did a few other things to engage her public, and that for her sense of pride she wanted to be able to do that to earn her daily crust. She does not want to beg, she said, but the city ordinance might force her to in order to get by.

Not so fast, lady. A few days after the news about the required auditions, another ordinance under consideration was made public, this time against public begging, which will incur a 750 Euro fine. Since people have now resorted to searching through the garbage to forage for food, I expect the city to pass an ordinance that will also make this a fineable offense. Many other “anti-social behaviour laws” or what I prefer to call anti-social laws full stop are being proposed, including forbidding using a bench for any purpose other than sitting. But the city’s leaders are working hard to find a legal loophole for one law that actually protects citizens’ and workers’ health—you guessed it, they want smoking to be allowed inside *Eurovegas*.

I think what disturbs me most about this is that it is not subtle or cunning or dressed up in any sort of padded language. Not because I want to have the wool pulled over my eyes, but because what it means is that we are passed that stage. It is blatant and brutal with no attempt to hide that fact. How much clearer can the message be when the Puerta del Sol, historic central plaza of Madrid, *de rigueur* end point of protests of every stripe, emblematic *agora* of 15-M, is now

Vodafone (logo) Sol. I am not making this up. Every sign in the metro now reads Vodafone Sol and the announcer voice, which sounds exactly the same as it always has, now says “Next stop Vodafone Sol”. Every map of the metro also reads Vodafone Sol, and the red line (Linea 2) is now Vodafone 2. If you have Vodafone you can get a mobile signal on Line 2, excuse me, I mean Line Vodafone 2, and if you don’t, well, too bad. At first I thought it was a culture jam—a profound commentary on the privatization of public space. Then I realized that no, there was no jam involved, that what might have been a jam years ago has now just become a depressingly banal description of reality. Although I note with satisfaction that a few people have drawn black lines through the “word Vodafone”, there are countless “Vodafoned” signs and logos throughout the metro system. Someone told me the city got a million Euros from Vodafone. It probably cost that just to change all the signs. If they were going to sell off the name of the Puerta del Sol they could have at least gotten more for it.

What relevance does this have for social movements? It has to do with a re-appropriation of the public sphere by the state, a move which cannot be understood independently of the crisis and crucially the public response to the crisis. Not content with privatizing public goods such as education and healthcare, the public sphere itself needs to be regulated, not only by repressing marginalizing and criminalizing protest, but by making it clear that those victims of the crisis unable to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and tighten their belts at the same time need to be excluded from the public sphere or punished. It is a systematic alienation from our humanity, a denial of the spirit of solidarity, the same impetus that makes it a crime for the citizens of Lampedusa to rescue drowning immigrants, the same inhumane spirit that forces sailors to violate the first rule of the sea, which is to rescue shipwrecked people, and leaves our shores with piles of bloated bodies. It is the same spirit that tosses thousands of people on the streets when they cannot meet their mortgage payments or rent, offering them no alternatives, while houses sit empty, repossessed by banks bailed out with public money. If not too many people were in the squares, plenty of people are organizing to stop the evictions, putting their bodies on the line to show solidarity to their fellow citizens. But stopping evictions, important as it is, is a measure of last resort, and everyone knows it. The spirit that compels those evictions marches on, slowed but unimpeded.

And yet...My sense of anger and shame in these ordinances and laws is tempered by the strange hope I find in the actions of the old age pensioners I have been speaking with lately as part of my research. Strange because in reality I have no basis for expecting anything to change and yet I find them deeply inspiring. Two days after the protest in the Puerta del Sol, some pensioners chained themselves to a post—in the Puerta del Sol. The next day I went down to Bankia to speak with the pensioners who call themselves simply “swindled by Bankia” or “afectados por preferentes” (affected by the “preferential” investment scheme). According to the stories they tell me, many of them lost their life

savings through an aggressive marketing campaign conducted by the bank managers who would call them at home, one, two, three times and encourage them to shift their savings into an investment product called preferentes without explaining the risks. As one recounted to me the bank manager said “Why do you want your money only earning 3 % interest? Here shift it over here and you will get 7.5%”. The scheme was called “preferentes” as in preferential clients and they were told they had been chosen because of their long association with the bank. One told me he had been saving since 1965 for his old age, and now his savings are gone. Since they had their savings in Caja Madrid (later Bankia) they had every faith in their bank manager. They believe they were deliberately targeted because of their low level of education and their age, both factors making them vulnerable to signing contracts they did not understand, or in the case of one blind pensioner could literally not even read. He kept telling me, “They say we were investors. Liars! We were savers! We saved for years! We did not want to be investors! We would have left our money where it was”. Bankia was bailed out with millions of Euros of public money, but they still have not got their savings back. (Meanwhile the ex-director of Bankia, Rodrigo Rato, who was accused of fraud, has been given a lucrative job at *Telefonica*, one of Spain’s largest companies). The pensioners meet every Tuesday and Thursday in front of Bankia and blow whistles and make a lot of noise, holding signs reading slogans such as “Bankia steals from its clients” and “PP + Bankia = Stealing from Old People. Give us back our money”. Then they decide collectively where to go from there, sometimes blocking city traffic or occupying other bank branches. They don’t ask for permission, they don’t decide in advance, they have no weekly assembly. They don’t have internet. Somehow, they give me hope.



*Pensioners blow whistles and hold a banner in protest in front of the bank branch office of Bankia in central Madrid. The banner reads "preferentes" of Bankia , the corralito of Spain, swindled by the government and their cronies, corruption without solution." October 8, 2013. Photograph: Cristina Flesher Fominaya*

## **II. How can movements help each other? Networking across differences, solidarity, building a European movement?**

**"If we don't burn together, who will illuminate this darkness?"  
Sat Trejo**

I want to speak about solidarity, I want to introduce myself as a young Mexican activist. I am a member of *#yo soy 132 Holanda*, and I represent none. In a sense *#yo soy 132* is a movement based on solidarity, first of those students of the Iberoamerican University who got together to prove how Mexican media lied to the public about the presidential candidate Pena Nieto's visit to the University. A visit that unlike what several newspapers showed in their cover the day after, was not successful and was actually interrupted by hundreds of students protesting. Then, other universities reached out and declared themselves *#yo soy 132*. For the first time in what is a classist and racist society, students from private and public universities with a wide range of sub cultures, political inclinations from around the country got together. The claim was: media democratization, the spirit was based on the principles of nonhierarchical organization and solidarity. Later it was expressed how solidarity and fraternity

were indeed part of the essence of this movement, and how there is a collective memory of the many injustices that have been experienced by individuals and groups in Mexico. Poverty, direct violence, repression of student movements, the disappeared ones, feminicides, indigenous and peasant struggles, unforgettable episodes of State violence like Acteal and Atenco.

After a year of the emergence of this movement, those who like myself are part of it outside Mexico, have a lot to fight for. We organize locally (in The Netherlands) and we are trying to connect to those *#yo soy 132* around the world, share our ideas, our work, and inspire each other. Even if the future of the movement itself is uncertain there are people around the world trying to create a different reality. Some may even argue that the present of the movement itself is uncertain. I can only speak of my experience in the tiny cell *#yo soy 132 Holanda* and those who I have the privilege to work with. We are young, some students, some have a paid job, an engineer, a physicist, a veterinarian, a chemist, etc. Many of us with probably not much in common but the nationality and awareness that makes us get together and organize. In the past few months we have worked on denouncing and making visible the violence in Mexico to the International community. Taking advantage of our position outside Mexico and knowing that we are safe to speak about these issues as we probably wouldn't feel back home. So we speak of violence towards freedom of expression, repression of protests and feminicides. These are but a few examples of the many types of violence experienced in Mexico today.

I think solidarity is what has made *#yo soy 132* possible inside and outside Mexico. I think the work we do in The Netherlands is based on this. Those who can, prepare an interview, others may carry it out, someone might volunteer to put in on the blog, or to translate it. We organize skype meetings to make proposals, decide our roles in the coordination of an event, those who can are present, those who cannot may support in another way, making publicity, etc. Each person decides the way and extent of her involvement. That is how *#yo soy 132 Holanda* works. I also think solidarity is vital to relate to other groups and struggles. I try to be present or support in anyway I can events organized by other collectives of movements in the Netherlands. With the International Socialist, 15-M, Reinform, etc.

I can think of examples in which solidarity has been crucial, as in the case of Zapatista communities in Mexico where international observers have been of great importance particularly due to the military presence in the area. On the recent events in Turkey, a friend of mine from there asked me to join the facebook international solidarity group. She explained what was happening and how important it was for them to know that the world was watching, to feel international support. We talked about the similarities in many of our struggles, in many cases looking to validate our rights to freedom of expression, protest, or being tired of corruption, of governments that are completely disconnected of the realities and needs of the people, and that favor an elite. And we know that these are not exclusive of the case of Mexico and Turkey.

At blockupy Frankfurt 2013 there were people of different parts of Europe chanting in more than 6 languages and denouncing a system that creates the inequalities and crisis we are experiencing today. To me that is solidarity. At that protest there was also police repression, in different scale, but still repression. I was at a protest in Madrid this past week and there too was police repression and intimidation of protesters. I come from Mexico with a history of direct repression (many times violent) but this type of violation to the people's right to peacefully protest is not exclusive of the South. It has been evident to me that the European countries with their human rights discourses have a lot to account for as well. The democratic countries of the world need to respect freedom of expression in order to be considered truly democratic. And in the meantime those who like myself are organizing can find in solidarity strength and common ground to keep on doing what we do. Solidarity is in my view almost an automatic response (for many of us) to the issues that affect us globally (economic crisis) and locally (violence towards freedom of expression). I may not be able to do much about these, but a "we" has a better chance. In Mexico we have some examples of autonomous communities and other ways of organizing collectively in Oaxaca and Chiapas. I know there are examples of autonomous organization in Madrid and in some towns outside the city. Can we win? To me that is not the important question, I think we just need to try to create together these different realities, the different ways of relating to each other. It requires a change of perception and this is present in many tiny cells around the world. Maybe a more important question for me is can we see what is already happening in many places around the world? Can we spot the tiny cells wherever they exist?

### **Solidarity Economies in Times of Crisis**

***Marianne Maeckelbergh***

Since the start of the latest economic crisis (~2008), informal networks of solidarity, many of which were already in place, became key mechanisms of survival for many people. Since so many of these solidarity practices and networks are informal it can be very hard to grasp how they function, where they come from and what the effects of this kind of mutual aid are for people's survival at a time when they cannot fulfill their needs through financial income.

One of the most curious aspects of the current economic crisis is that although so many people who are unemployed, have no income and have little opportunity to earn income, they somehow still get by and still get many of the basic things they need. In the countries that I am most familiar with, the US, Spain and Greece, many people get by through networks of solidarity – friends of friends or total strangers who provide them with essentials. People regularly give each other food, provide essential services, and provide each other with shelter – all for free. It seems to be a very large non-economy, but because it is so informal it eludes the spectator.

In New York, when the housing crisis first hit, people helped each other meet their basic needs by opening their homes to family and friends – multi-family homes were common and fewer and fewer earners had to provide for more and more people. Other tactics of solidarity included providing help to people who had been evicted from their homes to re-enter and re-claim an empty building. But smaller acts of solidarity abounded as well, such as free drinks and food at local shops and bars. Much of this solidarity rested on personal friendship and acquaintance networks and appeared to the receivers of the solidarity to be the result of individual ties, but the scale at which it was happening indicates that it was much more than an individual's good luck.

In Barcelona people face a similar housing crisis, only in Spain the housing crisis is combined with an national unemployment rate of 26.2% and a youth unemployment rate of 56% (as of June 2013). Family networks are the main providers of housing – an entire generation of 20-30 year olds still lives at home with their parents. But there have also been large scale neighbourhood based re-occupations of empty apartment buildings to provide housing for people in the community that have lost their jobs and/or their homes. The occupations have involved thousands of people demonstrating in the streets, and each occupied building hosts a social centre that serves not only those living in the building, but the entire community. Smaller scale solidarity is present as well, everywhere one looks. Clothes are bought second hand or exchanged through informal networks and entire families can be fed by food coops that provide cheap and organic vegetables.

Perhaps the solidarity economy is strongest in Greece. It is not uncommon to hear people talk about supporting their partner, their own family and their partner's family with only their one very low income. And yet people survive. In Athens, many people seem to know someone with a farm not too far from the city, or they mysteriously get vegetables and other essentials for free from a friend of a friend who knows someone who grows his own food. Even tobacco can be gotten cheap if you know someone who sells it as pesticide instead of tobacco – thereby avoiding the high taxes on tobacco. The neighbourhood assemblies that have emerged and solidified over the past few years of political organizing now serve as hubs for the distribution of resources. Regular exchange markets are organized where children can get 'new' toys and everyone can get clothes and other goods for free or in exchange for a few hours volunteer work.

In Greece too housing seems to be the main source of solidarity. Due to the high percentage of mortgage-free property ownership in Greece, a housing crisis has thus far been avoided, but due to 64.9% youth unemployment, 27.6% general unemployment (as of August 2013), plus dramatic salary cuts, many people have nevertheless ended up homeless. Or they would be homeless if it weren't for the generosity of others. For many people in Greece family support is not enough – the wider solidarity networks have become essential and are already functioning on the one step removed as people resort to friends of friends and family of friends to survive. The need for solidarity beyond existing friend and

family networks has led to the many solidarity networks sprouting up all over Greece and last October in Athens, many people came together from across Greece to discuss how better to coordinate these disparate solidarity initiatives as well as how to turn these “emergency solutions” into structural alternatives to the existing economic system.

I have never carried out systematic research into these informal solidarity economies and the anecdotal examples I give here, are only that, examples of something that is happening. What strikes me most about all of these initiatives is that they don't function along the lines of existing hierarchies, and at times they can even break these hierarchies and create new social relations, some hierarchical other less so. For example, these initiatives (un)intentionally shift the boundaries between legality and legitimacy by making illegal action legitimate in the eyes of the public due to a shared sense of need (such as providing illegal housing for homeless people in the millions of empty buildings). These solidarity initiatives challenge the money-centrism of the economy, the production-consumption chain, property relations and individualism, to mention only a few of the taken for granted social relationships we unwittingly reproduce everyday. It may seem unimportant, and the actions of helping each other may seem mundane and simply human, but in a capitalist economy and a world that believes people are motivated only by self-interest, these types of simple gestures represent a divergence from economic doctrines of individual responsibility and blame that is valuable in and of itself.

### **International solidarity with the Greek movement**

***Markos Vogiatzoglou***

I left Greece for Italy in 2010, when the anti-austerity movement of the former was making its first steps. Upon arrival at the latter, I found myself a complete stranger, trying to remain politically active in an uncharted territory. I didn't speak the language, yet what made the situation truly difficult was the “cultural gap”. Unaware of the Italian movement's political map, I was constantly failing to perceive the connotations behind the movements' claims, their historical references, as well as the thin ice of the intra-movement relations that one should be careful not to step upon.

Three years have passed ever since and I 'm still some sort of *no land's man*, a misaligned observant, one eye fixed on the constant turbulence in Greece, the other on my new home's peculiar political habitus. I 've spent my time here roaming the Italian organizations' assemblies and evenings dedicated to Greece, giving speeches and interviews, writing articles and pamphlets, editing, translating and subtitling propaganda videos.

To cut a long story short, I've given my best to become a decent *mascot* of the Greek movement in Italy, in an attempt to reinforce what was termed as *international solidarity to the Greek protesters*. What follows are a few things I've learned during this period.

1. Technically speaking, movement solidarity is the direct or indirect transfer of resources from an entity (individual or organization) to another, in order to serve the latter's political goals.
2. When speaking about "resources", one should not only consider the material ones. Visibility, information dissemination, know-how exchanges, a "helping hand" in practicalities, assistance in building a critical mass, even a mere public statement of a shared stance on an issue, may become movement resources, if treated wisely.
3. In order to maximize the efficiency of the resources' transfer, good intentions are not sufficient. Contrariwise, sometimes good intentions might prove a royal path to hell.
4. I am confident the above cliché has been confirmed several times in the case of the international solidarity to the Greek anti-austerity movement. What is important is to make good use of our shortcomings, through a careful analysis of what went wrong.
5. Running the risk of over-simplifying, I shall note hereby four usual problems international movement solidarity is encountering, using examples from the Greek case to build up my argument:

- a. *One may offer a resource the recipient does not need, or does not know how to handle.*

During the preparations for the 2012 *Blockupy Frankfurt*, the organizers set up a proposal for a "free ride" to the German city. The idea was that the Germans would put the money for the coaches - and the Greek protesters would fill them, carrying their indignation to the entrance door of the European Central Bank's headquarters. The proposal dramatically failed, as the organizers forgot to notify anyone in Greece about their intentions, not only with regard to the practicalities of the transportation, but also relating to the protest event itself! The lesson to be learned here is that one needs *first* to build up strong contact networks in the recipient's country and *then* discuss with them how to concretize the solidarity bonds through jointly organized initiatives.

- b. *Insufficient mapping of the recipient's field might lead to erroneous alliances, embarrassment and, ultimately, waste of resources.*

In June 2013, a wide array of organizations all over Europe organized the Alter Summit in Athens. This was a major project for all sides involved and had all the potentials to be a successful one: the organizers had not repeated the mistake mentioned in point 5a; prior to taking their decisions, they had secured the support of what seemed like the strongest ally in the Greek setting: The party of SYRIZA, which had received some 27% of the votes in the last years' general elections. What they didn't know, though, is that SYRIZA's strength at the grassroots/movement level was negatively correlated

to its rising electoral influence. Furthermore, the way that the party had set up the general framework of the Alter Summit ended up prohibiting any other Greek movement organizations from participating in it. Ultimately, the party people withdrew from the project, leaving behind only a handful of honest activists to cope with the event's content, themes to be addressed, as well as all its practicalities. The Alter Summit was a dreadful waste of resources, in the sense that it passed completely unnoticed by the Greek society. It is important to note here is that securing a strong ally might not be sufficient, if the solidarity sender is unaware of the intra-movement balance in the recipient's field.

- c. *Failure to recognize the incompatibility of the respective sender's and recipient's political projects might lead to erroneous alliances, embarrassment and, ultimately, waste of resources.*

It is rather common for organizations to loosen their political criteria when addressing a spatially distant potential collaborator. This is not to be considered as a flawed practice in itself, yet some prudence is required, in order to avoid reaching outcomes opposite to the ones desired. There are numerous examples to bring from the Greek case, the most hilarious, perhaps, being the June 2012 keynote speech of Tariq Ali at the annual festival of the radical left-wing party ANTARSYA. Ali was supposed to offer a major electoral boost to the party, as the event took place only a few days before the general elections –ANTARSYA was hoping, at that time, to reach the 3% threshold and enter the Greek Parliament. The famous intellectual arrived at the venue under a thunderous applause, but then made a monumental gaffe, as he urged the ANTARSYA supporters to vote for ...SYRIZA, i.e. the party's direct competitor. Needless to note how easily this major embarrassment could have been avoided, should the organizers have asked, beforehand, Tariq Ali on his views with regard to the elections.

- d. *One should avoid focusing too much on material resources, but rather concentrate on a mutual exchange of know-how.*

What has been proven beyond any doubt all these years is that the deficit of international solidarity towards the Greek movement *was not* a material one. What the Greeks missed, what all the Europeans missed, was a cross-national common space for exchange of information, know-how and experience. What I'm referring to is not an umbrella "organization of the organizations", but rather a set of horizontally interlinked nodes operating in a common trajectory. Such a concept might not only prove more efficient than our current organizational forms, but also partially restore the balance between the solidarity sender and recipient. One-way solidarity is a heavy burden for both.

In the years to come, the great challenge we'll need to face will be to

imagine, develop and, finally, create these complex networks in both a concrete and politically coherent way.



*A pensioner who lost his life savings in the Caja Madrid /Bankia protests in central Madrid. October 8, 2013. Photograph: Cristina Flesher Fominaya*

### **III. How can movements win? Movement strategy in the crisis**

#### **A few notes on the current movements**

##### ***Ewout van den Berg***

1) Finding new and creative ways to organize resistance is very important. Political parties do not represent them, while the leadership of unions is focusing on negotiating with the government within the framework of ‘necessary cuts’ rather than organizing resistance. This often leads to a fetishizing of the movement, and rejection of existing structures. But refusing to engage with these arena’s of ideological and social struggle will take the movement backwards. On the height of the Indignados movement, partly because the movement did not care about parliamentary democracy, the conservative party was brought to power. Because protesters at Occupy Amsterdams denied entry to unions, the protest remained restricted to people able to stay at the camp 24/7, and the protest came to a firm end.

Formal democracy is an important way in which political consciousness takes shape. The only established bourgeois party in Egypt came to power on the wave of the revolution. Not being able to fulfill the demands for social justice the party was removed from power by the masses – and the military intervening to prevent further radicalization and economic damage. (If) There will be new elections, new governing parties will not be able to meet the demands of the masses either. This is how people learn. The choice between a former opposition party (the MBs) or the army's contra-revolution democratically voted in (Shafiq) was very real and the outcome was at once a reflection of radicalization as it was a stepping stone towards further clarity of ideas.

Organized and (as of yet) unorganized labour still is key. The working class in Egypt was late to rise, but when it did in Mahalla and Suez Mubarak was lost. Over the last six months the movement on the streets receded, while a huge strike wave swept the country. The analysis put forward by Rosa Luxemburg in 'the mass strike', the cross-fertilization of economic struggle and political demands, is here as relevant as it was 100 years ago. This is also the important lesson from Occupy Oakland, where activists linked up with the longshoremen to blockade the port drawing in new layers of workers and extending the (class) notion of the 99% versus the 1% to include a sense of economic power.

2) There is no place for autonomy within capitalism. Autonomous spaces can be important in that they provide an environment for people to be involved and organize not for profit, but for want. But these places have to deal with all the things capitalism throws up: homelessness, racism, sexism, etc. The logic of occupying spaces is that it soon becomes the goal itself, rather than a means to get somewhere. For the majority of the people these autonomous spaces cannot be an alternative to their current lives. This is not something particular to the current movements. The documentary 'Berkely in the sixties' about the student revolt clearly shows the limitations of such a movement and ideas of autonomy go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Charles Fourier.

An important lesson from the Indignados movement is that it recognized when the occupation of public space became an impediment to the movement, and they dissolved into wider neighbourhood assemblies. This was possible mainly because of the local networks already in place before the movement took off. There is no general blueprint for the way in which movements develop.

3) Strategy does matter. This is the lesson of the Quebec student struggle. They organized patiently throughout the province, had maximum democratic structures with local representatives and centralized decision-making and aligned themselves with different workers struggles. The local government was forced to a tactical retreat. We need to draw and generalize lessons from different movements, and go beyond mere enthusiasm. What causes one movement to go down, and another to sustain activism and build broader links within society?

4) Understanding the current conjuncture: left reformism and the crisis. Support for classic social-democratic parties is rapidly declining as they pursue

absolutely horrendous policies to make us pay for the crisis. With the radicalization of the people by the crisis and resistance, this opens up a huge space to the left. This is the vacuum die Linke originally came to fill in Germany, and now widely popular parties like Syriza and Front the Gauche are occupying. This is a welcome development as more people will be reached by radical politics. But as these parties include both revolutionary and reformist tendencies, they also face a number of problems.

As the space they are occupying on the left is so broad, there is a strong pull from the centre. Due to the hollowing out of the political centre and further radicalization by struggle the question of change through the existing state becomes increasingly important. They are called forward by the ruling class to manage capitalism more effectively. This is the case with both Syriza and the Socialist Party in the Netherlands. The July conference of Syriza is the latest example of the parlemantarian logic that influences these parties. This decided to abolish the constituent components, strengthened the leadership over the base and did away with the most radical demands.

What can we learn from this episode: a) theory does matter. A great number of activists were very enthusiastic about the electoral rise of Syriza – as it ‘transcended’ the question reform or revolution – but now these same people are doing away with elections altogether. b) political parties influence the movement, as the rise of Syriza definitely promoted the idea that change could come through parliament. c) political parties do matter, in order to have a focus point where the lessons from the movement and the work places are generalized. There is a need for revolutionary parties which use parliament as an arena for the struggle of ideas, while being involved in the day to day struggles.

### **Everything is impermanent. Capitalism too!** **Laurence Cox**

Somewhere in the fifth century BCE in north India, Siddhartha Gautama told a gathering of homeless wanderers “All conditioned things are impermanent”. Looking at events since that time, it is hard to disagree, whether in relation to states, world economies or cultures. The same is true in our own time: empires and monarchies, fascism and state socialism, dictatorship after dictatorship, have crumbled away within living memory. *This is what they do*, however terrifying they seem at the time.

In fact researchers (and some movement theorists) do activists a disservice when they act as though the most radical analysis is the most deeply structural, the one which proves just how bad things are and how little hope there is of actually changing them. They play into the hands of elite attempts to intimidate and disempower, to use the failures of past movements to discredit the possibility of real change, and they encourage us to rationalise our own depression, paranoia or cynicism as Theory rather than see it for what it is.

What we desperately need, I think, is a stronger sense of *agency* – “theirs”, in understanding not just how the system works but how the *alliances* which underpin it work and how they can come to be taken apart, and in understanding how we can form the kinds of alliances that are capable of bringing about the change we say we want.

*Why do regimes of accumulation end?*

However we date it, the capitalist world system is not so old – a few centuries – although societies structured around class inequalities, patriarchy and ethnic inequality go back further in different parts of the world. It had an origin, and it would be remarkable if it was “the end of history”. Within capitalism, regimes of accumulation and modes of regulation – particular *forms* of capitalism – often coexist (not always peacefully) and succeed each other with great speed. There are of course different analyses, but most will agree that neoliberalism is at most about forty years old; the Fordism / Keynesianism which predated it in western Europe similarly lasted a few decades and in turn replaced earlier arrangements. If we look at European empires in Asia and Africa and their replacement first by national developmentalism and then by neoliberalism, the timeframes are compressed; for Eastern Europe or Latin America it would be more complicated but we would arrive at the same basic conclusion.

As an activist, I am not so interested in the exact analysis – or, come to that, its supposedly underlying economic reasons. What I *am* interested in is the processes whereby such forms of capitalism come to an end and are replaced by something new, whether capitalist or otherwise. At the level of actors and agency – and this has been shown very nicely in a book called *The end of organized capitalism* – what happens is that elite actors, part of the existing hegemonic arrangements, come to conclude that the current arrangements no longer suit them, and the cost of remaining within is higher than the exit cost; and / or that popular actors who have given their consent and participated within the system, withdraw it for much the same reasons. Which side is more important is not a foregone conclusion, and this is part of what makes the study of revolutions interesting as a field of study. 1917 in Russia and 1923 in Ireland, 1945 or 1989 in Europe, 1994 in South Africa or what may be happening in Burma – these are not all identical processes which can be neatly dismissed with the same set of clichés.

By looking at *how forms of capitalism come to an end* we can see two things. One is hope: this is a normal process, it happens frequently enough for many of us to have already lived through one such set of changes if not more. That does not mean that what happens afterwards is always good; that is up to us. It *can* be worthwhile, even if it is not always what we want: feminism, the end of dictatorships, welfare states, the withdrawal of empires – these are not trivial things for those of us whose lives are affected by them.

The other is to focus closely on these *alliance processes*. To the extent that we have seen a long “phony war” – the existence of well-developed challenges to neoliberalism which for all their repression have not gone away (and have not

been crushed by tanks and torture chambers as they would have been in earlier periods) – it represents “their” inability to mobilise enough consent to squash “us”; and both the extent and the weakness of US control of Latin America and the Arab World are illuminating in this respect too. We are seeing a system which has no plan B, and which finds it easier to coerce than to gain consent – but which then has to gain the consent of those who have to support the coercion. This was, as we have seen internationally, easier in Afghanistan than in Iraq; internally it was easier in the US after 9/11 than in Western Europe; and there are real limits, in Europe or Latin America at least, to its hegemony.

To the extent that “we” have provoked a crisis of the routine modes of US hegemony in those regions - as well as (for example) a “retreat to Versailles” of global summits, an intellectual delegitimation of neoliberalism itself, a forcing of climate change onto a global elite which has no ability to resolve it, and a crisis of the EU’s mode of governing, where its political legitimacy is now on very shaky ground in much of Europe – we find ourselves in the situation of the “irresistible force” (or what should be that) and the “immovable object” (or what desperately needs to present itself as that).

*On our side of events...*

It is, I think, difficult to think this through because so many of our modes of analysis are structured by an earlier situation, one in which movements could have relatively sustained and organised existences (in good times at least), were held in check by the wider Cold War and before that world war conflicts, and – crucially – could often aim to have systematic representation “within the system” (in the form of parties, unions, intellectuals etc.) The other part of the picture, of course, is one where the national economic level was particularly significant, for well-known reasons, so that this representation had an immediate, practical, target.

We are now in a different situation, one more similar to that of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with large movements largely operating outside a system which has very little capacity to accommodate them on their own terms, individual elite members taking on particular movement demands in a very instrumental way, and huge ups and downs of movement participation because of this unstructured situation. In this context, many of the themes around which movements have disagreed through the 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular have less purchase than they did. The ritual (and in itself quite neoliberal) celebration of “new” ways of thinking as though they were good in themselves is one way of talking about this situation. What it really means, though, is not that we can afford *not* to think but that we have to think twice as hard – and, if possible, learn from *each other* and across our differences.

I want to highlight two points which seem particularly important to me here. One is the extent to which ordinary people – certainly in western Europe, which is what I know – have become so to speak latent political actors. Since the Right gave up on trying to create a situation in which non-elites had no voice and instead to construct forms of populism, nationalism, fascism, Christian

democracy and the like, this has been a key part of politics. It forms so to speak an unspoken “social contract” which is what Barroso is talking about when he says that there are limits to austerity in Europe. Push people beyond a certain point, in terms of their interests but also in terms of what they feel is acceptable politically, and they will respond.

Secondly, the really transformative moments have to do precisely with these wider social groups becoming political subjects, taking a conscious hand in collective political agency. This is a standard observation in the study of historical revolutions, and it is equally obvious in movement “waves” such as 1968. However we categorise the present, one of the differences between (say) Ireland and Spain or Greece is that in Ireland these groups are not active (yet); and one of the challenges we face on a European scale is that they are only active in a few countries, while in others (the Netherlands!) it seems almost impossibly far away. Part of the difference here, of course, is the different modes of capitalism in operation in different European countries, and the different relationships between movement institutions such as trade unions and political parties with austerity politics.

When these groups do burst into the political sphere they have a double learning process. Partly they use a language inherited from above – nationalism, football, constitutionalism, facebook, hostility to activists. Partly they struggle to find a suitable language to express what they know, on a practical level, about how to do things – the experience of survival in the modern workplace, the loose network of friends with shared interests scattered around a city, design and media skills, and all the discontents they are aware of but for which politics does not yet have a language. It is naturally challenging as well as exhilarating for activists who are not on their first engagement with politics to navigate this terrain. In my own work, one of the best experiences has been seeing how such events bring out *part-time* activists, as well as people who had dropped out of politics for decades but now think it worthwhile re-engaging, and people who are finally finding a way to act on things they have felt for a long time. Not everyone in the protests is 19 (though it is great that so many are!)

### *Finally*

We do, I think, gain something in terms of personal emotional resilience as well as strategic focus if we think about how we can contribute to the breaking-apart of the alliances that currently underpin neoliberalism; if we understand that they are only medium-term alliances, and that right now they are stretched, frayed or brittle (choose your metaphor) in a range of contexts.

Along with everything we are doing anyway, I think we also need to be constantly aware of the broader *potential* represented by the latent political agency of ordinary people, and have a sense of the complexities involved when they do burst into the political sphere, and the rapidity with which this changes.

So I think insofar as we do have a chance – it is only 50-50 but we are here now, and many of us have children whose futures are at stake – it is bringing this

broader picture to what we are doing anyway, putting the things that are (relatively) easy to name because they are in our own zone of knowledge against this harder-to-quantify background, that we have most chance of acting strategically and – to use that unpopular word – win.



*Puerta del Sol Madrid. October 5, 2013. An activist holds a sign that reads "We want our money", indicating the high risk preferentes product aggressively sold to many old people with the "100% guarantee" of Caja Madrid, later "Bankia". On her hat she has a 15-M symbol. Photograph: Cristina Flesher Fominaya*