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Disrupting European authoritarianism

Grassroots organizing, collective action and participatory democracy during the Eurozone crisis

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ideas into movement

Many critical scholars have tended to analyse the recent development of the European Union (EU) and its member states as a one-way street towards authoritarianism. European crisis management and disciplinary pressures resulting from global capitalism, they argue, have constricted the room for democratic decisions and significantly increased existing tendencies to erode liberal democracy. Drawing on activist experience (and in an attempt to avoid the 'left melancholy' that characterizes a number of critical analyses), we try here to provide a more nuanced picture.

In doing so, we argue that activists' experiences during the European crisis have highlighted the increasingly exclusionary nature of the institutions, procedures, and limitations of liberal democracy under capitalism. In addition, they have allowed us to identify new – albeit fragile – forms of social organization that have challenged this growing authoritarianism. In particular, grassroots organizing around daily social problems, alongside efforts to achieve collective self-help, inclusive solidarities, and a feminization of politics – as well as first-person and new forms of participatory democracy (presentist democracy) beyond state institutions – have all been able to partially disturb and disrupt new forms of authoritarian governance.

The political turn towards authoritarianism, we conclude, not only largely fails to oppress contradictory movements, but may even – at least for a certain period – produce 'a veritable explosion of democratic demands'. The trend towards authoritarianism in the EU thus produces, and is confronted by, undercurrents that challenge it.

Democracy under authoritarian neoliberalism

We are fighting against ... hermetically sealed governments that do not respond to reason.
They have their plan and they do not reconcile it with the plan of the citizens.

Within the social sciences, numerous concepts and debates have sought to capture what they consider to be an erosion or exhaustion of democracy in recent years. These include references to a façade, as well as to simulative, post- and zombie democracies. For instance, Ian Bruff discusses the 'rise of authoritarian neoliberalism'. He asserts that authoritarianism does not include only the exercise of brute coercive force but also reconfigures the state and institutional power to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent. In the current phase, he identifies three aspects of this reconfiguration:

1. Material circumstances are a primary and sometimes only concern of state activity. This can be used as an excuse for the state's inability to reverse processes such as increased socioeconomic inequality and dislocation.

2. The space and activities deemed appropriate for non-market institutions are recalibrated and often limited in a comprehensive, long-term way.

3. The state is reconceptualized as an increasingly non-democratic entity owing to its subordination to constitutional and legal rules.

Subjected to the requirements of global capital, governments throughout the EU have sought to shield themselves from the demands of their respective populations, in part in an attempt to render social conflict invisible, and to avoid a crisis of legitimacy. At the EU level, this has included the adoption of rules-based constraints that circumscribe (future) politicians' room for manoeuvre.

Indeed, supranational treaties and institutions have historically acted to lock in a combination of austerity and authoritarianism, functioning as a new form of constitutionalism. The very purpose of European integration has entailed 'efforts to politically contain challenges to the disciplinary neoliberalism project through co-optation, domestication, neutralization and depoliticization of opposition'. Key elements of this constitutionalism include independent central banks and macroeconomic constraints (regarding debt), enshrined in agreements such as the Stability and Growth Pact of the European Monetary Union (EMU).

The Eurozone crisis witnessed a further hardening of what we might consider to be the European ensemble of state apparatus. Democracies have become less responsive still, in large part to meet the demands of capital. Initiatives such as the Stability and Growth Pact have been tightened in a way that ensures pro-cyclical policy outcomes.

This was most evident in the southern periphery of the EU, and included policies such as the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism (EFSM), and then the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), alongside the European Semester, the legislative 'Six-Pack' and 'Two-Pack', the agreement on a so-called 'Euro-Plus Pact', and the 'Fiscal Compact' – all of which implied strict conditionality oriented towards austerity and neoliberal competitiveness. The new institutional design of the EU, characterized by a democratic deficit, constitutionalized neoliberalism, and the economic constraints of the Euro, has therefore sought to insulate the EU institutions from any form of popular pressure.

The subordination of parliamentary deliberation to financial markets was most markedly expressed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel during a joint press conference with the then Portuguese prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho (2011–2015), when she stated:

> *We will find ways to shape parliamentary participation in a way that it conforms with the markets, that is, that the respective signals form in the markets. … We have to find a way in Europe to do the right thing, even though we are several countries*.

This reflects Colin Leys' observation that 'ruling classes find it harder and harder to resolve the tension between the requirements of global capital and the interests of the population whose votes they need to stay in power'. The authoritarian hardening of state institutions and the hollowing-out of democracy have detrimental effects on everyday living conditions, as well as on opportunities to voice concerns (and demands) within representative democracy. 'Constitutional democracy and its institutions', a Spanish activist concludes, tend to 'become the antipodes … of social movements, as they cut the protection of the poorest and most impoverished layers of our population'.

The post-2008 context has seen EU member states consistently seek to reduce the cost, coverage, and level of welfare provision. This includes reduced welfare generosity, increased conditionality, and an erosion of universal provision. As Bieling describes, we see a 'vicious cycle of public cutbacks, prolonged economic stagnation or even recession, shrinking fiscal revenues and increasing public debt', all of which have resulted in 'an accelerated dismantling of the European social model and the erosion of social cohesion'.

The following five tendencies were especially prevalent. First, a decline in public-sector employment, including reduced or frozen wages, cuts in the number of employees or a freeze on employing new staff, which in turn prompted a greater reliance on private-sector provision because of an associated decline in the quality of public services. Second, welfare retrenchment systematically focused on pensions, as early retirement was restricted or abolished, the retirement age was raised, and the level of pension provision reduced. Third, health systems witnessed a decline in spending, cost-containment measures, selective privatizations (such as more co-payments or the outsourcing of staff) and – in some cases – the exclusion of previously included groups, such as illegalized migrants in Spain. Fiscal austerity measures also led to a greater overloading of the public sector in terms of its capacity to provide services. For instance, access to health care became increasingly difficult, resulting in an increase in the rate of outbreaks of infectious diseases. Fourth, unemployment benefits were reduced, while employment rights were eviscerated. In addition, trade unions were further weakened by attacks on existing wage-bargaining institutions, particularly through decentralization, negating universality principles, and pressures on wages set by the state, e.g. minimum wages and salaries in the public sector. Finally, access to universal social protection measures, such as minimum income schemes, were restricted and less money was invested in social inclusion programmes.

The effect of both economic crisis and welfare cuts was a deterioration of everyday living conditions across the EU. Crisis management took place 'at the expense of ordinary people's living standard, welfare, and jobs'. The degree to which the quality of social life declined, however, varied across different social sectors, increasing inequality and producing further social polarization. As a result, 'social mobilization has turned out to be quite uneven in Europe. Europe-wide co-ordination of trade unions and leftist movements is at best very weak, and a Europe-wide solidarity of the working class is often missing'.

For many households, the crisis resulted in an increasingly precarious income. In a context of widespread job losses, business closures, unemployment, reduced workers' and trade union rights, an increase in precarious work (especially in the form of more flexible/short-term contracts), declining collective-bargaining coverage, and a chronic lack of stable employment, it became increasingly difficult to achieve a secure standard of living through paid work. At the same time, reductions in social security and cuts in pension provisions meant that welfare benefits were insufficient to provide a household income, with the result that household debt reached unsustainable heights. Consequently, affected households had to adapt their daily routines and life-courses to new, more precarious, conditions. In some cases, individuals and households were required to rely on private solidarity networks to compensate for social security losses.

The crisis thus placed a strong strain on family-based solidarity networks that, especially in southern Europe, had played an important part in guaranteeing a degree of social security for ordinary people. Individual social security became increasingly brittle for large parts of the population, placing even greater strain on personal and family relationships. Declining household incomes limited access to both (mortgage-funded) private home ownership and rented housing. In Spain, for instance, a growing number of households depend on benefits, as well as those with no income. Poverty rates rose, especially among groups already vulnerable before the crisis, such as lone parents, families with children, or migrants, prompting hundreds of thousands of evictions and a corresponding increase in homelessness and housing inequality.

Attempts to voice opposition to these trends, or to have them addressed within the institutions of representative democracy, became increasingly difficult. The public sphere served as a protective barrier against an eruption of these grievances through at least three mechanisms.

First, social problems were portrayed as the failings of individual responsibility. The consequences of anti-social legislation, such as unemployment, poverty or housing evictions, were each initially framed as personal failures rather than political problems. 'Emotionally, I felt as if someone had dropped a bomb on me', recalls an activist from the Spanish Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), 'I felt lonely, afraid, ashamed, frustrated. ... If you are corrupt, you can be a hero; but if you don't pay your mortgage, you become a disaster, a failure. And friends and neighbours start getting away from you, they don't know what to say to you, how to treat you'.

Second, discourses challenging disciplinary neoliberalism were side-lined as governments and political parties tended to adapt their political programmes to 'realistic' options – that is, options *within* the confines of disciplinary neoliberalism and new constitutionalism. Alternative political agendas that pointed *beyond* these dynamics were increasingly considered to be irresponsible and a 'topic for faculties of philosophy' rather than serious contributions to political debates.

Third, several European governments have recently imposed measures that curtail freedom of opinion by restricting public protests or trade union action, such as the ongoing state of emergency in France, anti-liberal reforms in Hungary and Poland, or the restrictive public security law in Spain (known as the 'gag law').

This move towards technocratic depoliticization has, however, been only partially successful, as the increasing exclusion of the *demos* from democratic decision-making has in turn prompted anger among those who feel that 'we are battling not only against our employers, but also against the governments, which instead of supporting the workers, stood by the company from the beginning'. In response, we see novel forms of organizing from below and resistant subjectivities that – albeit sometimes appearing to be of a both fragile and temporary nature – have nevertheless opened potential avenues for radical social change. As state institutions 'wouldn't listen to our concerns and complaints', and were reluctant, unable or unwilling to act representatively, discontent and disaffection towards formal institutions accumulated outside the increasingly narrow confines of representative democracy.

Exclusive solidarities and anti–democratic authoritarian populism

This combination of disciplinary neoliberalism, hardened state institutions, increasingly vulnerable everyday living conditions, and the absence of meaningful channels of political representation, combined to prompt a substantial increase in political instability. One consequence of this heightened political exclusion has been the rise of populist discourses pitting 'the people' against 'elites'. Even before the European crisis, populist movements had increasingly begun to cause consternation for much of the mainstream political elite in contemporary democracies. They drew largely upon a critique that accuses that elite of being self-serving and unresponsive and therefore failing to listen to 'the people', who are typically those 'disaffected and disillusioned' workers left behind by the neoliberal phase of capitalism. Likewise, the much-noted trend over the last 30 years, away from 'conventional' forms of political participation towards 'unconventional'

(or 'innovative') forms, often rests upon a concern that formal channels of political representation fail to enable voices to be expressed and/or heard.

Welfare retrenchment and austerity therefore led, in one sense, to growing disaffection and despondency. The rate of depression, anxiety disorder and suicide has risen significantly in some member states. But it also includes disaffection in the form of Euroscepticism and 'Euro-criticism', a growing sentiment that 'the EU not only fails to deliver prosperity to its citizens, but does so through opaque and unaccountable decision-making procedures'. Further, while the EU's crisis of legitimacy has at times been associated with emancipatory demands and movements (see below), it has also provided the potential for the emergence and growth of right-wing populism. As the rise of UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) up until the Brexit vote perhaps shows most clearly, different forms of welfare chauvinism have also emerged because of the economic crisis. In the words of Keskinen et al., this uses the welfare state to draw distinctions 'between "us" and "them" – the natives that are perceived to deserve the benefits and the racialized "others" who are portrayed as undeserving and even exploiting the welfare system at the cost of the "rightful' citizens"'.

This legitimacy crisis has also contributed to the disintegration of the EU. Racist and right-wing populist parties and movements have been able to profit from reduced employment possibilities and the bleak prospects for the future within so-called 'native' parts of the working class. Deeply-rooted racism, in combination with fears of material deprivation, have contributed to new forms of hostility towards migrants and ethnic minorities. Immigrants have served as a scapegoat and been blamed for reducing working-class opportunities in schools, jobs, and housing. The rise of right-wing parties throughout the EU (such as the FN in France, AfD in Germany, PiS in Poland, Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, and UKIP in the UK), as well as the Brexit referendum, have each been strongly influenced by nationalist anti-European sentiments. For the EU, these processes have produced a trajectory of partial disintegration, as countries have unilaterally restructured national systems of state apparatus in authoritarian and nationalist ways (for instance, in Hungary and Poland) or suspended European agreements (such as the guarantee of free movement of persons within the Schengen area).

Pragmatic prefiguration against authoritarianism

> We are trying to recover what was ours in the past, what is common, what is everyone's. [...] Our only goal is to leave our daughters and granddaughters a better life, a better world: ecological, feminist, inclusive... A world that works through assemblies, in which they have the power, in which we all participate through this new way of doing politics we're starting to build.

The contradictions that became visible and intensified during the European crisis included not only a rise of populism, but also the emergence of needs-based struggles that combined grassroots forms of collective self-help with pragmatic demands, such as for decent jobs or housing. Civil disobedience and direct action, such as the occupation of buildings and public spending, has complemented more standard forms of action, such as demonstrations.

What we do is a continuous act of empowerment, of demonstrating that through practice we can change what is unfair. If a law is unjust, our obligation is to disobey it. Civil disobedience is legitimate. They want us to be afraid, because the more afraid we become, the more disempowered we are. But we work every day to overcome fear, to demonstrate that together we can do anything.

The increasingly authoritarian implementation of policies left little or no room for interest mediation and trade union lobbying. Labour interests were therefore often voiced outside established channels of interest mediation, thereby having a tendency to become more radical, and to adopt a more critical stance towards EU institutions. At the national level, the hardening of the state and the shift in power relations between capital and labour have prompted resignation alongside defensive individual efforts to 'muddle through' in the context of deteriorating everyday living conditions.

Austerity policies have also spawned a wave of short-term defensive political and somewhat symbolic general strikes across the EU. Although these saw a relatively high level of participation, they were nevertheless unable to significantly change policy-making. New labour-related strategies appeared (albeit sporadically) across the EU, including for instance incidents of 'boss-napping' in France, workplace occupations, and riots that highlighted the inability of official trade unions to represent workers' voices or demands. Protests also became more frequent, especially (but not only) in southern Europe.

New social movements appeared, such as the 15-M in Spain and the occupation of the Syntagma square in Greece. By establishing new forms of cooperation and deliberation, these movements were able to transform individual grievances into collective demands. The new movements developed a radical–democratic repertoire of action. This successfully politicized parts of the population and brought dormant or previously disarticulated demands to the surface, occupying the centre of public debates.

In some countries, the Eurozone crisis witnessed a flaring up of community organizing. That is, a process in which new actors and identities (pragmatically prefigurative subjectivities) emerge and spaces of new forms of participatory democracy (presentist democracy) are constituted. Non-standard forms of conflict, civil disobedience and a self-enforcement of social rights have marked this process. Rather than seeking demands from the state, capital, and/or other hierarchical structures of authority and inequality, the new social movements attempted to secure autonomous forms of social reproduction that disrupt existing hierarchies by virtue of being able to offer alternative means by which humans can co-exist, cooperate and co-produce.

In Dinerstein's terms, the prefigurative radical seeks the, 'creation of alternative relations and arrangements that assert a dignified life beyond capitalism', including through, 'new forms of production, self-management and cooperative work, nonrepresentational politics, anti-oppressive education, the notion of 'living well', communal property, and economic possibilities'.

In some cases, the new social movements functioned as infrastructures of collective care, that against the backdrop of deteriorating everyday living conditions provided a feeling of solidarity: 'What gives us strength is the solidarity we're receiving. We've received help and money from other workers, from ordinary people... We need to support one another.' As a PAH activist adds,

[W]hen I arrived to the PAH, I felt welcomed immediately. Everyone asked how I felt, how I was doing. And you see that people help one another, people are generous, and supportive, and caring. You realize that people trust you, and therefore you have to be worthy of this trust. Thanks to this reciprocity, you become stronger. [...] And when you share your own experience with others and see that it can be useful to someone else, you realize that you're valuable. Even if you don't have money, you're unemployed, you have nothing, but you're helpful to someone. And for me this is the most empowering thing, this is how you grow as a person.

Hence, the PAH has been struggling to use collective organizing as a means to overcome isolation and form a collective identity. In this sense, it has acted to transform a problem that is widely perceived as being a private one, into a collective, political one. In this way, individuals who had previously been overwhelmed by strong feelings of failure, guilt, loneliness and uncertainty have been able to become agents of political transformation.

The new social movements that emerged during the European crisis thus developed new forms of democratic inclusion: 'we are generating spaces of experience where people learn by themselves, because we believe that living something in first person is what really transforms people. In this kind of horizontal and empowering spaces, people who are normally excluded from political participation find more favourable conditions to participate'. This includes a new 'presentist' democracy that is opposed to established forms of representative democracy, which are increasingly perceived as dysfunctional.

This 'presentist democracy', Lorey argues, 'is the opposite of representative democracy'. Instead, it is a 'new form of democracy that is practised in the moment of the assembly', and as such, 'becoming presentist is not a non-political form of living'. The state and representative democracy, in contrast, have been routinely likened to a largely impermeable 'wall', since their hardened institutions, under the disciplinary pressure of investors and creditors, were unable to consider or even acknowledge the movements' demands.

The new social movements' engagement with everyday social problems and inclusive democratic structures has occurred alongside a feminization of politics that contrasts with the (re-) masculinization of formal politics witnessed with the rise of both authoritarian populism, and a more general authoritarian neoliberalism. As Ada Colau, former PAH spokesperson and now mayor of Barcelona with the platform Barcelona en Comú argues, this feminization not only involved a stronger participation of women in political processes, but also a process of prioritizing care, life and dignity in policy-making.

Even where movements ceased to be publicly visible, in many cases a process of what Candeias and Völpel have tellingly labelled 'successful failure' could be observed, as movements outlived their visible existence. As Arditi is at pains to point out, although those in authority have a habit of re-acquiring the machinery of government following episodes of dissent, those whom they seek to govern nevertheless themselves acquire a new taste for demanding accountability. This, meanwhile, shapes the terrain of what is possible, and what those who seek to govern perceive as necessary in calculating how to execute that governance in such a way that pre-empts the reoccurrence of dissent. In this sense, insurgency and rebellion, in manifold forms, has a 'spectral afterlife' that,

... manifests itself in the cognitive shifts insurgencies generate, the learning experience of life in the streets and of discussions in general assemblies, the memories they create, the leaders that are made in the process of occupation, the subsequent campaigns and partnerships they foster and the policy changes they bring about.

Conclusion

The dynamics described in this essay boil down to what we would like to term 'disrupted democracies': democracies that are torn between the increasingly incompatible requirements of global capital and the contradictory demands of their populations, whose institutions become increasingly unresponsive to everyday grievances. This leads to political instability both in the form of new populism and in structures of self-organization that subvert discourses that routinely declare 'There is no alternative'. In so doing, moreover, they make different potential futures visible.

While the election of the likes of Trump, Duterte and Modi, as well as the emergence of the nationalist, racist and xenophobic forces that have grown in popularity in recent years have understandably fuelled fears and a sense of hopelessness, we nevertheless still see signs of the disruptive forms of agency that continue to exist. We can dissent – even if sometimes only 'imperceptibly'. In Linebaugh and Rediker's terms, the 'many-headed hydra' of resistance, rebellion, refusal, and the rejection of authority, has a tendency, once defeated, to reappear in new forms and new manifestations, creating unfamiliar problems for those who seek to assert that authority.

In terms of considering the strategic options available in the context that we have sought to describe above, therefore, we consider four routes to be both necessary and viable:

- to pursue different forms of decommodification, both in the form of the welfare provision and concessions granted by firms – this could include a progressively designed universal basic income and radical working time reduction;

- to challenge state institutions, in pursuit of greater participation as well as the opening of opportunities for self-governing spaces – participatory budgeting initiatives might be an example here as is the collectivisation of crucial sectors in order to be directed by worker-consumer coops;

- to produce new arenas of public deliberation and conflict resolution, enabling a transformation of individualised problems into collective demands – this concerns local spaces and assemblies, and practices of collective care, but also has implications for media landscapes in terms of ownership concentration, or the challenge of inner-organisational hierarchies in parties and other organisations;

- and to enable an extension of public security, at the national level, subnational and supranational levels – that is, increasing social rights and provisioning beyond centralised nation-state decision-making.

As representative democracy tends towards closure and rigidity, the driving forces of these developments must be sought beyond it. That is, we look to social movements and everyday struggles that seek to prefigure new forms of democracy, co-existence and cooperation, and which either implicitly or explicitly challenge different forms of authoritarianism, whether embedded in representative democracies or not.

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A survey of social movements across Europe shows that although the EU crisis led to forms of economic and political authoritarianism, it also inspired an explosion of social movements that challenge it, involved in old and new forms of grassroots, collective self-help, and participatory democracy (presentist democracy. The trend towards authoritarianism in the EU therefore produces, and is confronted by, undercurrents that challenge it.

This paper is part of a TNI series, Challenging Authoritarianism.

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