THERE IS ALWAYS AN ALTERNATIVE: A STUDY OF CONTROL AND COMMITMENT IN POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

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Emil Husted

# THERE IS ALWAYS AN ALTERNATIVE:
## A STUDY OF CONTROL AND COMMITMENT IN POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

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# There is always an alternative

*A study of control and commitment in political organization*

PhD dissertation by

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# Table of contents

# List of figures and tables

# Acknowledgements

In many respects, authoring a PhD is an awfully lonely thing to do. You sit in your office, day after day, wondering if anyone will ever read those precious sentences that took you so long to produce. And when you finally realize that more than half of all academic texts are read by no other than the author, you feel even lonelier. The only thing that really helps is to know that you were never alone. In fact, a small army of people have been following you all along. Some taught you stuff, some helped you write stuff, some read your stuff, some listened to your stuff, some dragged you through stuff – and some just loved you. This is true for anyone, me in particular.

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/Emil

Vesterbro, August 2017

# Preface

This dissertation contains four peer-reviewed papers published by or submitted to different academic journals. All four papers are included in the dissertation with permission from the respective publishers. Some of the papers have also been presented at different academic conferences. The specific details of each paper are listed below.

- **The first paper** (chapter 5) has been published in the open access journal *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* (2017, vol. 15, no. 2) under the title 'The Alternative to Occupy? Radical politics between protest and parliament' (www.triple-c.at). The paper is co-authored by Allan Dreyer Hansen, Associate Professor at Roskilde University.

- **The second paper** (chapter 6) has been published in the journal *Organization* (2017, vol. 24, no. 5) under the title 'Spaces of open-source politics: Physical and digital conditions for political organization' (www.journals.sagepub.com/home/org). A version of the paper was presented at the 32$^{nd}$ EGOS Colloquium in Naples, Italy, July 2016. The paper is co-authored by Ursula Plesner, Associate Professor at Copenhagen Business School.

- **The third paper** (chapter 7) is in second review at the journal *ephemera* under the title 'Mobilizing the Alternativist: Exploring the management of subjectivity in a radical political party' (www.ephemerajournal.org). A version of the paper was presented at the ICA Regional conference and the ECREA conference on communication and democracy in Copenhagen, Denmark, October 2015.

- **The fourth paper** (chapter 8) has been submitted to the journal *Organization Studies* under the title 'Some have ideologies, we have values: The role of values in political organization' and is currently awaiting an editorial decision (www.journals.sagepub.com/home/oss). A version of the paper was presented at the Diversity Workshop in Copenhagen, May 2017, and at the 33$^{rd}$ EGOS Colloquium in Copenhagen, July 2017.

# 1. Introduction
## The problem of particularization

One has always to remember that collective victories and defeats largely take place at the level of the political imaginary. To construct a political vision in the new conditions, in which keeping open the gap between universality and particularity becomes the very matrix of the political imaginary, is the real challenge confronting contemporary democracy. A dangerous adventure, no doubt, but one on which the future of our societies depends.

*Ernesto Laclau (2001: 14), Democracy and the question of power*

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how a political party manages to mobilize support from across the political spectrum without having any policies to show, and how it subsequently manages to maintain that support throughout the process of constructing an elaborate political program and entering parliament. Typically, such questions are investigated by political scientists, meticulously working their way through electoral statistics and comprehensive membership surveys, in an effort to delineate the dynamics of voting behavior. With this dissertation, however, I intend to identify a new path to the study of political parties. Instead of looking to political theory for political answers to political problems, I look to organization theory for organizational answers to political problems. By using concepts and methods from organization theory as a point of departure for studying political phenomena, I believe we can learn something new and interesting about the organization of politics as well as the politics of organization.

More specifically, I explore the case of *The Alternative*, a recently elected political party in Denmark. The Alternative was founded in late 2013 as a reaction to the unsustainable nature of neoliberal capitalism and the 'old political culture'. However, instead of presenting a list of tangible demands and trademark issues, The Alternative was launched without any kind of political program. Save for an overall focus on sustainability and entrepreneurship, all they initially had was a name, a short manifesto, and six core values (courage, humor, empathy, transparency,

humility, and generosity). A few months after the launch, The Alternative began drafting a political program. With inspiration from the open-source community, they invited the general public to participate in a highly inclusive bottom-up process that culminated with the publication of the party's first political program in May 2014. A year later, The Alternative ran for parliament and was elected with almost five percent of the votes as one of the youngest parties in the history of Danish politics. Since then, support for The Alternative has continued to grow. In fact, in the year following the elections, the party sextupled its membership base and went from 0.2 percent to 7.8 percent in the opinion polls. This begs the question: How is it possible to undergo a transformation from a vaguely defined movement-like organization to a well-defined political party without marginalizing all those supporters who thought that 'the alternative' was something different from what The Alternative turned out to be? This is the puzzle that drives this dissertation.

## New parties, new problems

Within the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of a new type of political parties. These are parties such as *Podemos* in Spain and *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy, and to some extent also *SYRIZA* in Greece, which have all crystallized more or less directly out of popular movements[1]. For instance, Podemos was founded in the immediate aftermath of the so-called 15-M movement (also known as *Los Indignados*) in an attempt to translate the anti-austerity message of the movement into tangible political results (Iglesias, 2015). In a similar fashion, Movimento 5 Stelle (or simply *M5S*) emerged from a protest movement initiated by Italian comedian, Beppe Grillo, and organized around an immensely popular internet blog (Tronconi, 2016). Some have referred to these parties as 'hybrid parties' because of their attempt to consolidate the horizontalism of social movements with the verticalism of political parties (Chironi & Fittipaldi, 2017), others have called them 'populist parties' because of their 'illiberal rhetoric', which tends to divide society into two antagonistic camps (Kioupkiolis, 2016; Zarzalejos, 2016). A more accurate label, I think, is that of 'radical parties'. What makes these parties radical has to do, not only with their political 'logic

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[1] This does not mean that such parties never existed prior to the emergence of Podemos, M5S, and SYRIZA. One very noteworthy example of an older party is that of *Die Grünen*, which I will return to in chapter 2. The newness consists in the current proliferation of these parties.

of articulation', which does indeed share the main characteristics of populism (Laclau, 2005), but also with the way in which they entered parliament.

One way of understanding the emergence of political projects in general is through the dialectic relationship between what Laclau (1996) calls 'the universal' and 'the particular'. When political projects emerge and become hegemonic, they usually go through a process of universalization, in which a political struggle is detached from its particular context and turned into an 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 2001). Crudely put, an empty signifier is a signifier that lacks a signified, which means that it has little positive content of its own (Laclau, 1994). One example of an empty signifier might be the word 'democracy', which can only be defined consensually by describing what *it is not:* Tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy etc. Hence, instead of pointing to something particular within a system of signification, the empty signifier points to that which is negated by the system, i.e. its 'constitutive outside' (Staten, 1986). In doing so, the empty signifier is capable of representing a wide chain of political identities united in common opposition to an externality. Laclau refers to this type of identity-chain as a 'chain of equivalences'. The identities in the chain are equivalent because they partially surrender what initially made them differential and stress that which makes them equal, namely the distance to the outside (Laclau, 2005). In radical politics, the empty signifiers may have many names, but the constitutive outside is often known as 'the elite', 'the establishment', or, in the case of The Alternative, the 'old political culture'.


A classic example of political universalization, in which a particular identity becomes hegemonic by extending its chain of equivalences, is the transformation of the social democratic project from a political struggle concerned with improving the conditions of the working class to a much broader struggle associated with the expansion of the welfare state (Hansen, 2017). A more recent example is that of the Pirate Party, which began as a local struggle about copyright laws and internet freedom in Sweden. Today, the Pirate Party is an international party, represented in more than 60 counties, and concerned with a wide variety of political issues – many of which have little to do with the original struggle associated with the Pirate Party (Almqvist, 2016). We can thus say that the Pirate Party's political project has been universalized – that is, emptied of meaning – in order to represent more than its original particularity allowed for. Instead of serving the interests

of a particular community (i.e., internet activists), the party now works for the betterment of society as a whole (i.e., the people).
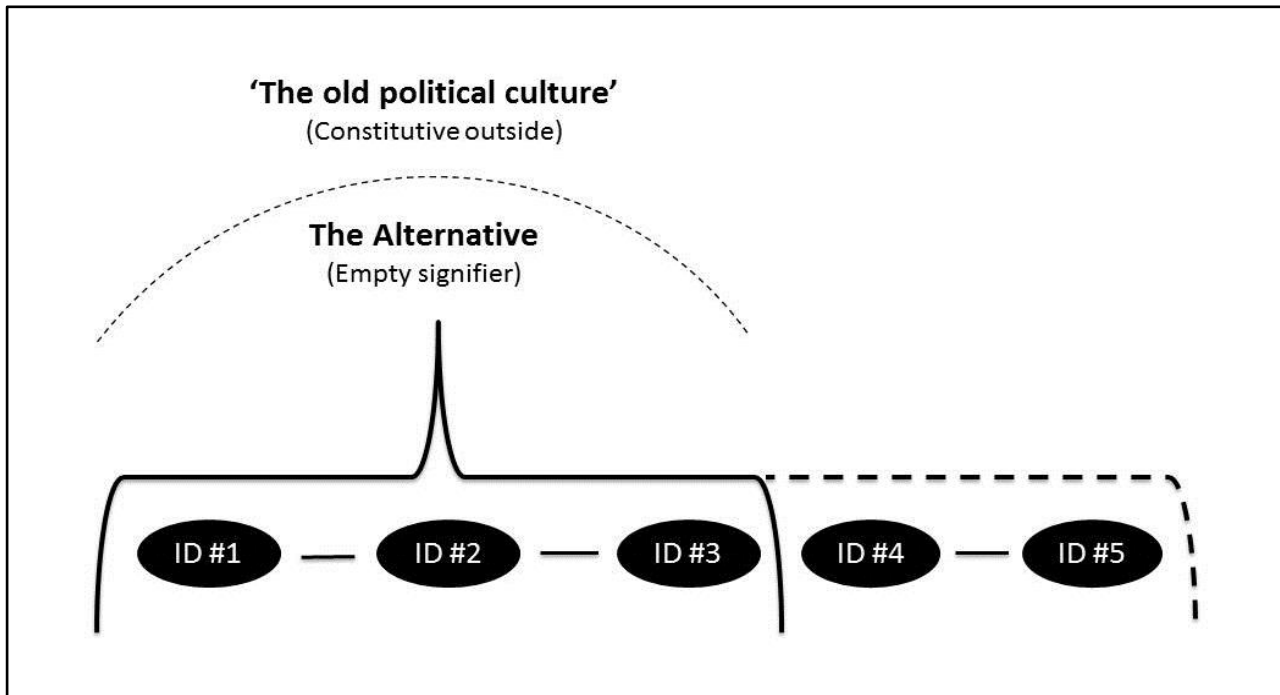


**Figure 1**: An illustration of the problem of particularization as experienced by The Alternative. 'ID' refers to the particular identities represented by The Alternative, and the dotted arch symbolizes the antagonistic frontier separating The Alternative from its constitutive outside.

What makes parties such as Podemos, M5S, and also The Alternative exceptional is that they reverse the hegemonic link between the universal and the particular. Instead of universalizing a particular identity, they particularize an already universalized identity by seeking to institutionalize an 'anti-establishment' project. All three parties were launched without a political program. They all positioned themselves as neither left nor right, and they all claimed to represent 'the absent fullness of the community' (Laclau, 1997: 304) rather than a particular constituency. Soon, however, the parties began specifying their political objectives, and today, they are all represented in their respective parliaments. The move from universality towards particularity (instead of vice versa) is a risky move because the attempt to add positive content to an otherwise negative identity may quickly marginalize supporters who no longer feel represented by the project. In

Laclauian terms, we can say that, as soon as the empty signifier that manifests the universal is attributed positive meaning, the equivalential chain is cut short. This naturally poses a problem for political organizations that rely on electoral support for their survival. I will henceforth refer to this problem as *the problem of particularization.*

## Research questions

There are at least two ways of maintaining political support in the face of particularization. One is to convince supporters that the particular and the universal are commensurable. If we reverse the story of the Pirate Party, this would entail convincing 'the people' that their interests are equivalent to those of the 'internet activists'. In the case of the Social Democrats, it would mean adopting the view of traditional Marxist thinking that the interests of the working class and those of the wider society are identical. This is what Laclau (2005: 105) refers to as 'impure' representation, meaning that identity flows not only from represented to representative but also vice versa. However, considering these parties' success in mobilizing support across political and demographic boundaries, this seems like a daunting task, to say the least. The second approach is to postpone or displace the problem through the use of different managerial technologies and organizational practices. If successfully accomplished, this would allow the parties to undergo a process of particularization without ultimately losing their universal appeal. While both approaches may be present in the case of The Alternative, it is the latter that I will investigate in this dissertation. This leads us to the overall research questions:

> *How do radical political parties such as The Alternative manage to maintain a universal appeal when going through a process of rapid particularization? And how might certain management technologies assist them in this regard?*

Before proceeding, it seems necessary to clarify some of the terms used in the research questions above. The first important term is the word 'radical', which is used as an adjective to characterize The Alternative as a particular type of party (a party that reverses the hegemonic link). As explained above, the word does not relate to any kind of political *substance*, but to the *form* of

The Alternative's overall project. Calling the party 'radical' does not necessarily mean that I consider its policies truly revolutionary, or that they are intrinsically good. Instead, it means that The Alternative initially subscribed to a radical 'logic of articulation', involving the production emptiness through the use of empty signifiers (Laclau, 2006; Newman, 2007), and that the party's entry into parliament radicalized the problem of particularization. In chapter 2, I will elaborate on this last point about the radicalization of particularization in relation to The Alternative.

The second important term is the word 'party', which may seem like a fairly mundane term, but it is nonetheless a term that has a very distinct meaning to members of The Alternative. The same goes for another term, which occupies a central role in some of the following papers, namely the word 'movement'. In the first paper (chapter 5), we distinguish between radical parties and radical movements. While the former is exemplified by The Alternative, the latter is exemplified by Occupy Wall Street. What makes both phenomena radical is that they are organized in equivalential chains and positioned in an antagonistic relationship with the establishment. What distinguishes a (radical) *party* from a (radical) *movement* is that the attempt to enter parliament forces the former to confront the problem of particularization by adding positive content to an otherwise negative identity. Hence, in this context, radical parties are political organizations that try to translate the universal spirit of radical movements into realpolitik (see also Dean, 2016).

The last term in need of clarification is the notion of 'management technologies'. Starting from the back, I understand the word *technology* in a Foucaultian sense as a 'matrix of practical reason' that allows people to accomplish certain things in certain situations (Foucault, 1982a: 223)[2]. In that sense, a technology may manifest itself as an artifact (e.g., an assembly line), but it may likewise appear in the shape of organized practices and procedures (e.g., LEAN manufacturing). This brings us to the word *management*. When we think of voluntary associations such as political parties, we rarely think of management in the traditional sense of a boss passing orders to subordinates through hierarchical lines of command. Instead, we tend to think of empowered individuals acting collectively in the absence of coercion and domination. This, however, does not mean that there is

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[2] Foucault (1982) outlines four major types of technologies: Technologies of production (managing things), technologies of sign systems (managing meaning), technologies of power (managing others), and technologies of the self (managing oneself). In the case of The Alternative, all four types are present, though the latter seems prevalent.

no management involved. As scholars like Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have forcefully shown, management exists in many guises, but the primary purpose is always to exercise control over someone or something, including the concept of control itself (Parker, 2002). Taken together, the notion of management technologies refers to manifestations of practical reason mobilized in an attempt to control (often at a distance) something or someone in an organizational context (see Czarniawska & Mouritzen, 2009; Villadsen, 2007).

In this dissertation, I explore three management technologies created and enacted by members of The Alternative: Bottom-up policymaking (chapter 6), subjectification (chapter 7), and value-based management (chapter 8). Whether these technologies are mobilized with the 'conscious goal' (Foucault, 1982b: 364) of controlling specific people in specific places in order to accomplish specific things, is of course impossible to know. For instance, in chapter 7, when I argue that the party's political leadership invites ordinary members to recognize themselves as a particular subject, I have no way of knowing whether this was, in fact, the leadership's *intention.* Since we cannot access the minds of managers, all we can do is to examine the practical effects of those technologies that assist The Alternative in maintaining a universal appeal. This is the purpose of the second, third, and fourth paper in this dissertation.

## Where's the party?

As the research questions above suggest, this dissertation is clearly 'problem-driven', which means that it departs from an empirical problem observed in the world and uses that as a point of departure for understanding broader phenomena (Reinecke et al., 2016). Even though the forthcoming papers all revolve around a puzzle that may be conceived in theoretical terms as a problem of particularization, their analytical ambitions are first and foremost guided by the empirical context. There are two reasons for this. The first has to with the way I entered the field. My first encounter with The Alternative was at a political festival in June 2014, which coincided with the party's first annual meeting. At that time, my plan was not to study The Alternative in any serious manner, but to follow their events out of personal interest. However, having observed the annual meeting and listened to people's stories about the party, I decided to discard my original

PhD plan and focus exclusively on The Alternative. Though I quickly realized that The Alternative had the potential to tell us something interesting about politics and organization, I was only later able to formulate the problem that ended-up driving the dissertation.

As such, my overall research interest was not sparked by a gap in the literature on political parties or by calls for research on the institutionalization of radical politics. It was sparked by my own experiences with The Alternative and the problems I observed there. This brings us to the second reason for choosing a problem-driven approach. After finishing my fieldwork, I began surveying the literature on political parties within organization and management studies, but to my surprise, there was almost nothing to be found. Across the most prestigious and well-read journals in the field, only a handful of papers examined parties from an organizational point of view (e.g., Karthikeyan et al., 2015; Kenny & Scriver, 2012; Moufahim et al., 2015). Moreover, those papers that did relied solely on publically available material and secondary sources. In other words, none of the papers explored the inner workings of political parties from a first-hand perspective. To be sure, these studies are both interesting and important, but I believe we risk missing valuable insights by only analyzing publically available material instead of 'immersing' ourselves in the empirical reality of the parties (Schatz, 2009). While several scholars have provided illuminating insider accounts of other types of political organizations such as social movements and activist networks (e.g., Maeckelbergh, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2014; Reedy et al., 2016), political parties remain black-boxed.

If we look to political science instead, the picture remains more or less intact. Even though countless of books and papers have been written on the question of 'party organization', particularly within the field of comparative politics, the vast majority of these studies draw on a combination of public records and statistical data (see table in Bolleyer, 2016, for an overview). One example is Katz and Mair's (1994) well-known anthology, *How parties organize,* which examines the internal structures of political parties across a dozen Western countries. Despite the ambition to address the 'surprisingly evident' lack of 'the empirically grounded study of parties as organizations' (Mair, 1994: 1), none of the chapters in the anthology get below the surface of the parties. Instead, they maintain an outsider's perspective by surveying membership statistics,

organizational statutes, and financial statements. There are no interviews with members, no ethnographic observations of events, and no attempts to understand the parties qualitatively. More recent publications follow similar trajectories (e.g., Bolleyer, 2013; Gunther et al., 2002; Katz & Crotty, 2006). Obviously, this does not mean that comparative politics or political science in general is devoid of qualitative research (Mahoney, 2007), but it means that the study of parties as organizations has been overwhelmingly dominated by quantitative and non-immersive research that fails to account for 'the inner life of the party' (Barrling, 2013).[3]

The lack of qualitative in-depth research on political parties within organization studies and political science alike has forced me to expand the overall literature review to also include other kinds of political organizations, in order to situate the dissertation properly. Hence, in chapter 4, I frame my work as a contribution to the literature on control and commitment in political organization. In all brevity, my point is that the problem of particularization can be re-formulated as a problem of commitment (*how is political commitment maintained in the face of particularization?*), and that this problem can be postponed or displaced through the use of certain management technologies. Below, I will unfold this argument in more details, alongside some of the other contributions of the dissertation. However, at the end of the day, the biggest contribution may very well consist in the modest attempt to study political parties from an organizational point of view. Hopefully, this can help pave the way for more research on the inner life of one of contemporary societies' most important types of organizations.

## Findings and contributions

One of the main findings in the dissertation, which is presented in the second paper (chapter 6), is that The Alternative can be described as constituted by two loosely coupled systems operating at different levels and according to different logics. While the 'movement part' operates at the level of universality and according to a logic of equivalence, the 'party part' operates at a more particularized level and according to a logic of difference. Empirically, this finding is illustrated by examining how The Alternative's process of policymaking oscillates between openness and

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[3] The journal *Party Politics* recently dedicated a special issue to 'the internal dynamics of political parties', but included only one qualitative paper, which was based solely on expert interviews with politicians (Polk & Kölln, 2016).

closure, and how that oscillation breaks the organization in two. Even though this counters the official portrayal of policymaking within The Alternative, we argue that some kind of decoupling between movement and party is a precondition for success when institutionalizing radical politics, because it allows the Members of Parliament (MPs) to sponsor bills and strike compromises without 'contaminating' the universal aspirations of the movement actors. This finding contributes to our understanding of the organization of radical political parties. For instance, it shows that radical parties should not be treated as one single entity, but as two semi-autonomous systems operating with different objectives and rationales. Accordingly, this means that researchers should look beyond parliament (and the actors associated with that part of the organization) to fully understand how parties like Podemos, M5S, and The Alternative work.

The second main finding has to do with the type of control that permeates The Alternative. When browsing through the literature on power and control in political organization, one quickly realizes that certain implicit assumptions underpin the field. Since the publication of Michels' (1911) well-known account of political parties and trade unions in early twentieth century Europe, formal and hierarchical political organizations have been associated with bureaucratic and even coercive modes of control. While many studies have documented the limits to the so-called 'iron law of oligarchy' (Tolbert & Hiatt, 2009), the image of the political party as a bureaucratic machine that 'reacts with all the authority at its disposal against revolutionary currents which exist within its own organization' (Michels, 1911: 371) still serves as a common point of departure for most studies of hierarchical political organizations (e.g., Gulowsen, 1985; Jenkins, 1977; Osterman, 2006; Piven & Cloward, 1979; Rucht, 1999; Staggenborg, 1988; Voss & Sherman, 2000).

Interestingly, if we consider studies of more horizontally structured political organizations such as social movements and activist networks, the picture changes significantly. In these cases, control is almost always seen as self-imposed and fueled by 'moralistic appeals' (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979: 513), 'normative underpinnings' (Polletta, 2002: 16), or 'prefigurative power' (Maeckelbergh, 2009: 115). This reveals an interesting tendency to equate structure and control, which seems to

exist in the literature on *political* organization but not in the literature on *economic* organization[4]. While a few studies have documented the use of coercive control mechanisms in social movements (e.g., Freeman, 1972), hardly any studies have provided empirical accounts of normative control in formalized and hierarchical political organizations (see Kanter, 1972, for an important exception). This dissertation contributes by trying to break with this pattern.

With inspiration from Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), I conceptualize the different management technologies found in The Alternative as expressions of 'neo-normative' control, which is a subset of normative control that encourages heterogeneity and authenticity rather than cultural conformity. For instance, in the fourth paper (chapter 8), I investigate the role of organizational values in The Alternative and argue that the party's members are caught between two different kinds of moralistic appeals. One the one hand, they are encouraged to pursue their own personal objectives and to take initiative in realizing these. On the other hand, they are asked to remain morally inclusive towards people with different and even opposing views. This means that members are free to live-out their own dreams and visions as long as they do not compromise other members' ability to do the same. Ultimately, this type of control allows an irreconcilable group to co-exist despite severe political differences, which is an important element in sustaining a party's universal appeal. In conclusion, I argue that neo-normative control might be a more liberating management-style than traditional modes of normative control, particularly when exercised in a non-profit and voluntary context (see also Reedy et al., 2016).

The third main finding is related to the proposition that we can learn something new about the politics of organization as well as the organization of politics by studying political phenomena through the lens of organization theory. First of all, the forthcoming papers show that we can learn something about the *politics of organization* by studying phenomena like The Alternative, because the contested nature of any social configuration is more clearly exposed in political organizations (see also Moufahim et al., 2015). For instance, by analyzing The Alternative's approach to value-based management, we see more clearly how the managerial decision to

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[4] Within the field of Critical Management Studies, multiple scholars have investigated normative modes of control in economic organizations (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Kunda, 1992). However, these findings have hardly ever been transferred to the study of political organization.

espouse some values rather than others is far from neutral, but we also see that the meaning of the values is fully dependent on the context in which they are articulated and, thus, a matter of perpetual contestation. Secondly, the papers likewise show that we can learn something about the *organization of politics* by studying political phenomena with organization theory, because the focus on the practical coordination of political projects provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the hegemonic link between universality and particularity. At least, it helps us see that 'organization' can be an answer to a political problem, and that this answer might have evaded us, had we employed the concepts and methods of mainstream political science.

## Outline of the dissertation

With the present chapter, the dissertation and its main contributions have been formally introduced. **Chapter 2** proceeds with a detailed description of The Alternative as a political organization and its transformation from a movement-like organization to a formal political party with seats in the Danish Parliament. The chapter likewise contains a brief discussion about The Alternative's name and the relationship between naming and affect. **Chapter 3** contains the overall methodological considerations behind the dissertation. It outlines the analytical strategy, considers each of the methods employed (document analysis, interviews, and observations), and closes off with some reflections on the difficulties of studying popular political phenomena. **Chapter 4** is dedicated to a review of the literature. It begins by calling attention to the somewhat surprising lack of studies on political parties within organization and management studies. The chapter then proceeds with a review of the literature on control and commitment in political organization, which is a field of research underpinned by some interesting assumptions.

**Chapter 5** contains the first paper in the dissertation. In the paper, Allan Dreyer Hansen and I conduct a comparative study of Occupy Wall Street and The Alternative. The purpose of the paper is, first and foremost, to conceptualize the so-called problem of particularization, which is a problem encountered by The Alternative and evaded by Occupy Wall Street. The secondary purpose of the paper is to provide an empirical illustration of the difference between radical movements and radical parties. **Chapter 6** contains the second paper in the dissertation. Here, Ursula Plesner and I conduct a space-sensitive analysis of The Alternative's process of

policymaking. In doing so, we are able to show how the process oscillates between openness and closure, and how that oscillation in turn breaks the organization into two loosely coupled systems operating according to two different logics: the movement and the party.

*Chapter 7* contains the third paper in the dissertation. In this paper, I conduct a traditional discourse analysis of subjectification in The Alternative. The paper's primary argument is that the party's political leadership invites members of The Alternative to recognize themselves as inclusive, attentive, open-minded, and self-less individuals. However, by subscribing to this characterization of 'the Alternativist', members deprive themselves of the ability to demarcate the party in terms of political representation. This is what prevents internal antagonisms from arising, which is a crucial element in the struggle to maintain a universal appeal. *Chapter 8* contains the fourth and last paper in the dissertation. In this paper, I analyze The Alternative's approach to value-based management. Departing from a distinction between 'vision values' and 'humanity values', I argue that the former encourages the party's members to pursue their own political objectives, whereas the latter encourages them to remain morally inclusive towards members with different objectives. Ultimately, this allows an irreconcilable group to co-exist despite political disagreements. In conclusion, I analyze one particular value (trust) and argue that trust is what keeps The Alternative from fracturing. *Chapter 9* contains the conclusion, in which the main findings are summarized and the contributions are unfolded in detail.

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# 2. The Alternative

## A rose by any name?

> What's Montague? It is not hand nor foot, nor arm nor face. O be some other name belonging to a man! What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet. So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title.
>
> *William Shakespeare (1599: act 2, scene 2), Romeo and Juliet*

I have always been fascinated by The Alternative's name, not only because of the somewhat paradoxical self-confidence embedded in the definite and singular form of the name ('An Alternative' or 'Alternatives' would probably have been more humble choices), but also because of the sheer emptiness of the word. As Parker et al. (2014a) note, what is considered alternative is fully dependent on what is considered mainstream. In other words, alternatives only exist in opposition to something. This begs the question: For how long can a political party be considered alternative? Is it possible to be alternative and represented in parliament? Is it possible to be alternative and part of the government – or would that require the party to be an alternative to itself? I recently posed these questions to members of The Alternative during a meeting at the party's local office in central Copenhagen. One person laughed and said: 'If that happens, we'll change our name to The Establishment'.

In the previous chapter, I introduced The Alternative as part of a new wave of political parties. In this chapter, I will provide a more detailed account of The Alternative as a political organization. I begin by outlining the historical context in order to give the reader a sense of the political climate that The Alternative grew out of. I then proceed to a formal description of the organization, using the expansion of the political program as an illustrative example of the way in which The Alternative has developed. In conclusion, I turn to a more theoretical discussion about the relationship between naming and affect. Drawing on a combination of post-structuralist political theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, I ask: What's in a name?

# The birth of a party[5]

In September 2011, the center-left coalition in Danish politics managed to break 10 years of right-wing dominance by winning the national elections by the smallest of margins. Only with the help of voters in Greenland and the Faroe Islands did the coalition secure enough support to form a minority government consisting of three parties: the Social Democrats, the Social Liberal Party, and the Socialist People's Party. This was nevertheless an important win for the Danish left, who had witnessed a decade of severe welfare cuts and increasingly harsher immigration policies sponsored by the far-right Danish People's Party. After weeks of intense negotiations, an elaborate coalition agreement was signed by the three parties, making Helle Thorning-Schmidt (leader of the Social Democrats) the first female prime minister in Denmark.

One of the most original characters to emerge from this agreement was Uffe Elbæk, an ex-communist turned socio-liberal, who had been appointed minister of culture based on his long-time involvement in cultural life home and abroad. Elbæk was an unusual figure in Danish politics. Not only did he have a past unlike most other politicians, which included a career as founder and principal of an alternative management school called the 'Chaos Pilots', he also insisted on doing politics differently. For instance, during the election campaign in 2011, he opened his home to the general public and invited anyone interested to discuss his policies and help him improve his campaign strategy. He also established an association called 'Club Courage', based at a gay club in Copenhagen, with the aim of highlighting and applauding people who had shown political courage by challenging the common way of conducting politics. The common denominator in most of these initiatives was a focus on active deliberation and bottom-up decision-making.

Elbæk brought this way of thinking politics with him into the job as minister of culture. This led to a lot of alternative working procedures meant to stir-up the conventions of parliamentary politics. One such initiative was a recurring debate event called 'Culture on the Edge', sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and held at a school for circus performers known as the 'Academy for Untamed Creativity'. Initially, the events were successful, with lots of people actively participating in

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[5] Besides my own experiences and written material produced by The Alternative, the following description is loosely based on Hindkjær (2013), Nielsen and Bonke (2015), Andersen (2016), and Hansen and Stubager (2017).

discussions about the future of cultural politics, but soon news started circulating that Elbæk's husband was employed at the academy and that Elbæk himself had been a board member at the academy. This sparked a media frenzy in which Elbæk was accused of favoritism and nepotism. It all culminated in a parliamentary consultation where Elbæk had to explain if he had been warned by civil servants about the risk of nepotism. With his back firmly against the wall, Elbæk admitted to being warned about placing future events at the academy, thus propelling criticism to even grander proportions.

Visibly affected by the accusations, Elbæk ultimately decided to step down as minister of culture in December 2012 and embarked on a hiatus from Danish politics. However, a few months later, all charges were dropped, Elbæk's name was cleared, and he resurfaced as a common member of parliament. Upon returning, he quickly launched a new project called 'Under the Radar', which was an online platform meant to draw the public's attention to all those progressive initiatives that exist outside the spotlight of mainstream media and conventional politics. Like so many of Elbæk's other initiatives, 'Under the Radar' was a glowing success for those involved, but the impact on governmental affairs remained somewhat absent. This led some of the volunteers working for Elbæk to encourage him to embark on one last political project; one that would target parliamentary politics more directly. At first, Elbæk was reluctant, but he eventually decided that if he found it easy to write some kind of founding document, he would pursue the idea of launching one last project in the name of everything alternative.

### *There is always an alternative!*

It did not take long for Elbæk to produce the founding document of what he eventually called: 'The Alternative: an international party, a movement, and a cultural voice' (The Alternative, 2013a). In the document, Elbæk starts by highlighting some of the challenges facing contemporary society, most importantly climate change and economic inequality, but also challenges that are usually overlooked in the public debate such as social marginalization and loneliness. Elbæk then proceeds to mention all those local initiatives that work to address these problems on a daily basis and the many new forms of organization that exist as a result of these efforts. This leads him to a central question: How is it possible to 'diffuse the experiences of those local initiatives to the rest

of society' and to 'release the willingness to sustainable transition that exist so many places today?'. The solution for Elbæk was to unite all these initiatives in an organization focused on sustainability, everyday democracy, and entrepreneurial creativity and to establish a political party 'that has the courage to imagine a radically different future' (ibid: 1).

The document was well-received by Elbæk's volunteers, though some initially questioned the need for a political party. Why not create an alternative movement instead? However, these disputes were quickly resolved, and the team sat out to prepare the launch of the project. In mid-September 2013, Elbæk resigned his membership of the Social Liberal Party, and two months later he and his co-founder, Josephine Fock, summoned the press to announce the birth of a new political party and social movement called The Alternative. At the press conference, Elbæk and Fock presented their vision of The Alternative: the vision of a party that represents and promotes alternative solutions to climate-related, social, and economic challenges. They also presented a short manifesto and six core values meant to guide them in relation to policies and organizational procedures: empathy, humor, courage, generosity, humility, and transparency. Save for these somewhat lofty ideals, Elbæk and Fock did not present any kind of policy proposals or reform initiatives. As they formulated it:

> What is the political program? What are the solutions to x-number of tangible challenges? We don't present that today. Some may be surprised that we currently don't have the grand party bible on the shelf. But that's a completely conscious decision. (The Alternative, 2013b)

In the absence of concrete policies, the values and the manifesto quickly became a main source of attraction for supporters. The very first line in the manifesto reads, 'There is always an alternative!', and it proceeds by characterizing The Alternative as a 'shout out' against cynicism and a 'countermeasure' to the environmental crisis. The manifesto ends by stating that The Alternative is for anyone 'who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old' (The Alternative, 2013c). These broad appeals initially mobilized a wide variety of political identities, ranging from old-school socialists to free marketeers and from spiritualists to radical atheists. In fact, anyone attracted by the notion of sustainability and the prospect of something

'alternative' seemed capable of reading their own personal preferences into the project. As a member of The Alternative later told me during an interview session:

> In the beginning, it was completely open for everyone. Anyone could set-up a flea market in their garage and claim to represent The Alternative. Anything could be The Alternative. There was no design manual. There was just a logo that people could use for whatever they pleased. That's really how it was. (Respondent #18).

This type of transversal mobilization generated important momentum that allowed The Alternative's name to travel across political and demographic boundaries. However, during the first months of 2014, The Alternative began crafting a political program. With inspiration from the open-source community, twenty public workshops called 'Political Laboratories' were organized. At these workshops, both members and non-members discussed different topics of interest and co-produced a variety of very specific policy proposals. These proposals were then gathered by a steering committee, rewritten, and turned into a 63-page document that served as The Alternative's political program (The Alternative, 2014). In May 2014, the program was accepted at a general assembly in Aarhus, after a marathon-debate involving more than 150 proposed amendments submitted by members wanting to push the program in different directions.

Throughout the rest of 2014, The Alternative continued to expand the political program while also selecting parliamentary candidates. Much energy was spent collecting enough signatures to become eligible to run for parliament. In fact, at that time, few things seemed to matter more than the 20.260 signatures that would get the party on the ballot list. In March 2015, more than a year's hard work payed off, when the political leadership (as the candidates were now called) delivered 13 boxes of signatures at the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Only a few months later, the Danish prime minister announced the elections. Despite little preparation time, The Alternative was ready. A campaign strategy had been prepared, key campaign issues had been selected, and a host of volunteers had signed up to support the candidates.

During the campaign, I followed some of the local candidates from Copenhagen. These were all politically untried people who had little knowledge of parliamentary politics or how to electioneer

properly. What struck me the most was the candidates' constant struggle to appear simultaneously *alternative* and *established*. For instance, they would often come up with spectacular and unusual ideas for attracting attention such as dressing up as superheroes or setting-up an alternative dancefloor at a central square in Copenhagen, but simultaneously worry not to come across as the 'circus party' (a nickname invented by political opponents and the tabloid press); and rightly so. In the end, none of those dressing up as superheroes or setting-up dancefloors would enter parliament.

On June 18, 2015, The Alternative earned 4.8 percent of the votes in the national elections, which translated into nine seats in parliament. This made The Alternative the sixth largest party in parliament, but also the third largest party in the opposition, ahead of the Socialist People's Party and the Social Liberal Party (Elbæk's former party). This was a thoroughly unexpected result, not only to media pundits, but also to members of The Alternative. Few had expected The Alternative to exceed the electoral threshold, but hardly anyone had expected them to earn more than handful of seats. Though the election results were gloomy for the left (the right-wing coalition regained power), The Alternative could not have hoped for a better result. By entering parliament as a small opposition party, The Alternative would not be forced into difficult compromises, which had previously broken other small parties on the left. Despite this, The Alternative had bigger dreams. 'This is only the beginning', Elbæk announced at The Alternative's election celebrations. Later, he would state that the ultimate goal is to win the keys to the Prime Minister's Office.

In total, 168,788 Danes voted for The Alternative on June 18, 2015 (out of 3,518,987 valid votes). Of these voters, 56 percent were women and 57 percent were below the age of 40. Only 1 percent of all Danes above 65 years of age voted for The Alternative. In terms of income level, The Alternative had the wealthiest voter base across the three parties that are usually considered left-wing (including the Socialist People's Party and the Red-Green Alliance). Furthermore, The Alternative had the second most well-educated voter base across all nine parties, with almost 60 percent having a university degree and almost 70 percent having a high school degree (Andersen, 2017). Most of The Alternative's voters previously voted for other center-left parties, primarily the Social Liberal Party and the Socialist People's Party (Hansen & Stubager, 2017).
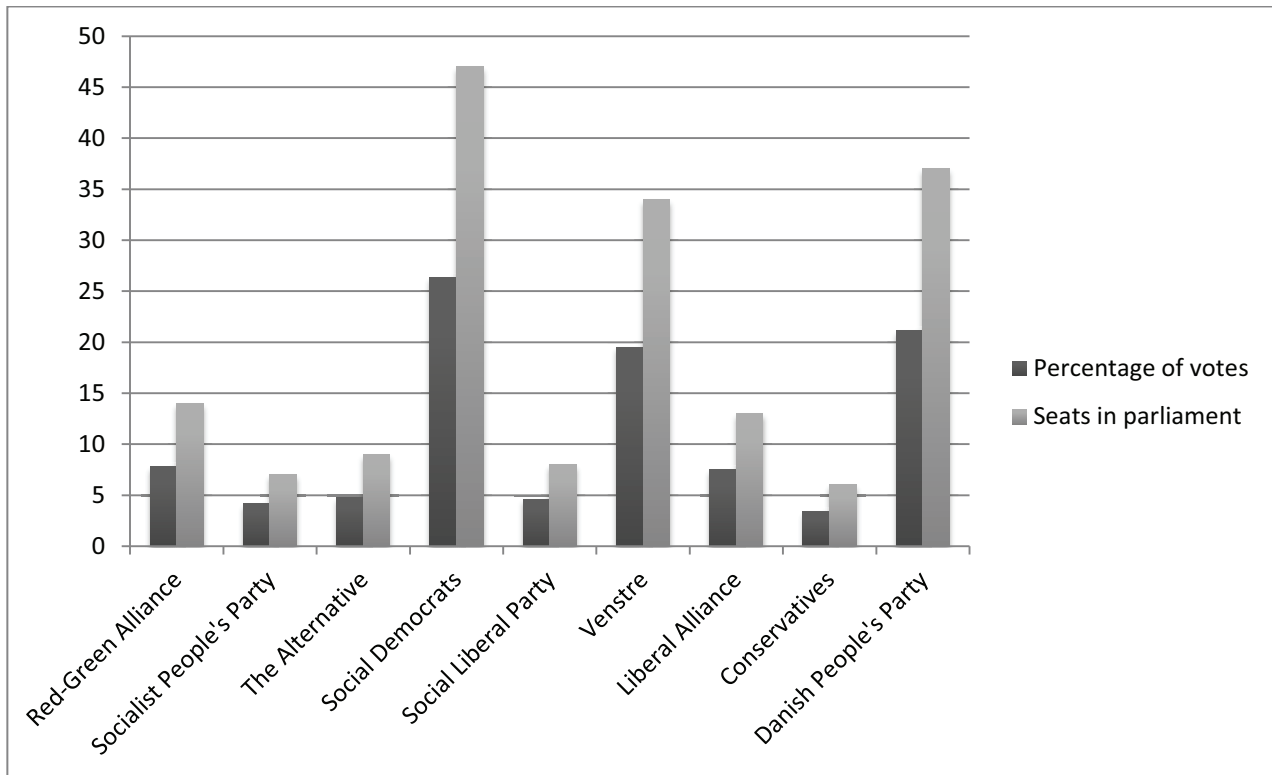
**Figure 2**: The result of the national elections on June 18, 2015. The parties are grouped according to a classical left-right scale. The designation 'left-wing parties' typically refer to the first three parties from the left, whereas the notion of 'center-left' often includes the Social Democrats and the Social Liberal Party as well (e.g., Andersen, 2016). The current government consists of Venstre, Liberal Alliance, and the Conservatives.

The Alternative's role as part of the center-left opposition did not prevent the newly elected MPs from engaging actively in day-to-day politics and from passing bills sponsored by the right-wing government. For instance, shortly after entering parliament, The Alternative helped pass a tax-deduction bill that reduced taxation on sustainable renewal of private homes. Even though the national Energy Council, based on numbers from an older bill, estimated that the $126,000,000 solution would reduce carbon dioxide emission with less than 0.02 percent, The Alternative's political leadership still considered it a good deal. As Josephine Fock, the party's spokesperson on financial issues, explained in a newspaper article: 'what we are interested in is to push all bills in a green direction' (Kristensen, 2015). Such incidents spawned a debate in the media, as well as internally, about the alternativeness of The Alternative. While a few members withdrew their membership as a consequence, most stayed on board and voiced their criticism internally. In fact,

during the year following the elections, The Alternative expanded its membership base with more than 600 percent and peaked at 7.8 percent in the opinion polls.

## *Formal organization and recent development*

The formal organization of The Alternative mirrors that of Elbæk's former party, the Social Liberal Party. It is divided into two sections: a political section and an administrative section. Each section has its own secretariat with a dozen full-time employees. The political section, based in parliament, is headed by the political leadership (the MPs) and deals with matters pertaining to policies, campaigns, and strategic initiatives. The administrative section, based at the party's local office in central Copenhagen, is headed by the board and deals with membership registration, internal communication, educational initiatives, and general organizational development. Though the two sections are formally distinct (they each have their own pillar in the organization chart), they are nonetheless thoroughly intertwined. An illustrative example of this is the policymaking process, which is naturally associated with the political section but coordinated by members of the administrative section (see chapter 7).

Today, The Alternative has been in parliament for more than two years. The parliamentary group has grown by one seat, due to an MP from the Social Democrats changing sides, and the opinion polls have stagnated around 6–7 percent. Approximately 11,000 people are currently registered members, which is a significant achievement, considering that only 4 percent of the Danish population are members of political parties (compared to 28 percent in 1955). In fact, The Alternative is now the fourth largest party in Denmark membership-wise, only surpassed by the Social Democrats, Venstre, and Danish People's Party. The members are spread across the country and organized in one of the 80 local branches and lumped together in 10 constituencies. Even though The Alternative is strongest in larger cities such as Copenhagen and Aarhus more rural areas are likewise well-represented, particularly small islands such as Samsø and Ærø, where large parts of the population are committed to sustainable living.

Since the elections in 2015, the political program has been significantly expanded with a 'nature package' (containing 42 unique proposals), a 'rural district package' (containing 38 unique

proposals), an 'entrepreneurial package' (containing 26 unique proposals), a 'school package' (containing 22 unique proposals), a 'democracy package' (containing 12 unique proposals), and several other substantial initiatives being added to the official catalogue of policy proposals. In total, the party has advanced almost 200 proposals in only two years (The Alternative, 2017). Across the nine parties in the Danish parliament, The Alternative now has one of the most elaborate and detailed political programs, including tangible suggestions for how to fund each proposal. Despite all this, media pundits and political opponents still refer to The Alternative as a 'bluff' and a 'circus party' devoid of political content. When I talk to friends and colleague, I often get a similar response: 'Why don't they present tangible suggestion for how to realize all their fluffy ideals?' Perhaps some of this confusion has got something to do with the party's name.

## What's in a name?

As suggested in the introduction, several political parties are currently going through what I call a process of particularization: Instead of expanding the scope of representation by universalizing the overall project, these parties particularize an already universalized identity by translating radical politics into realpolitik. Of course, this is not to say that political particularization is a new phenomenon. For instance, Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign was also organized around a series of empty signifiers – 'hope' and 'change' – and translated into tangible policies during the course of two consecutive terms (Kumar, 2014). Another example is that of Die Grünen, who entered the West German parliament in 1983 with the slogan: 'We are neither left nor right, but in front' but ended up as a center-left party dominated by 'Realos' (realists) after the German reunification in 1990 (Roth & Murphy, 1998). In fact, if one had to identify a political party most similar to The Alternative, it would probably be Die Grünen.

Die Grünen was founded in 1980 on the back of the many 'new social movements' that emerged during the post-1968 era in Western Europe. Despite the ideological diversity of these movements, they all experienced what Mayer and Ely (1998: 6) call a 'greening of their protest motives'. Movements that previously had little to do with environmental politics suddenly began seeing ecology as a unifying force in the struggle against capitalism, patriarchy, and other dominant discourses. Because proponents of 'Green ideology' managed to re-articulate already

existing elements such as grassroots democracy and decentralization into a new ideological formation that looked nothing like the classical ideologies, the notion of 'Green' became an empty signifier capable of unifying a wide range of anti-establishment groups with only little particular resemblance (Stavrakakis, 1997). The desire to provide these groups with parliamentary representation led to the establishment of Die Grünen.

From the outset, Die Grünen decided not to be a single-issue party exclusively focused on ecology but to become a mass party engaged in all aspects of society. The party thus embarked on the process of constructing its first political program. In order not to exclude any of the demands represented by the Green signifier, the party followed a 'strategy of addition', which culminated in a comprehensive and highly detailed political program – in some states comprising more than 500 pages of policy proposals (Mayer & Ely, 1998). Upon entering parliament, however, Die Grünen quickly realized that priorities had to be made, which led to the marginalization of the party's conservative wing and other factions that could not be reconciled with the official line. Furthermore, the 'utopian' nature of the political program proved difficult to translate into realpolitik, resulting in a situation where none of the party's proposals where accepted in parliament. This led to increasing membership disillusionment and apathy, from which Die Grünen recovered only years later (Mewes, 1998).

In several respects, the story of Die Grünen's formative years is similar to that of The Alternative: both parties crystallized out of movement-like organizations; they were both organized around a type of Green ideology focused on sustainability and environmentalism; they both initially positioned themselves as neither left nor right; they both represented many heterogeneous factions with different and sometimes opposing agendas; they were both launched without a political program but employed an almost 'encyclopedic approach' to constructing it (Mayer & Ely, 1998: 7); they entered parliament with approximately 5 percent of the votes, and their supporters were predominantly young and well-educated (Mez, 1998).

Taking all of this into account, the most interesting similarity – at least for this dissertation – is the fact that both parties went through a process of particularization in which the scope of political

representation was significantly narrowed as a consequence of entering parliament. However, what differentiates the two parties is that The Alternative radicalizes this process. For one, while Die Grünen entered parliament three years after the establishment of the party, The Alternative did so after only 18 months. And secondly, while Die Grünen initially had ecology and the fight against nuclear power as common denominators that tied the party's many factions together, The Alternative had little more than its name.

## *Naming and affect*

Names have always been important in democratic politics. It matters whether a political party calls itself 'social', 'liberal', 'social liberal', or something entirely different like 'Podemos' (we can) or 'En Marche' (forward). This is because names serve as important objects of identification for an electorate constantly seeking to fulfill their social and political identities. As Laclau (2005) has shown, all political identification requires an affective investment in an object of desire, or what Lacan (1966) calls an 'objet petit a'. This object of desire may take many forms, but the important thing is that it is a particular object endowed with a mythical fullness that makes it seem bigger than itself. As such, the *objet petit a* is not a tangible object, in the sense that can be empirically described, but precisely that 'something more' of a given phenomenon that makes it unfathomable because it lies beyond the limits of signification (Cederström & Spicer, 2014). In other words, it is the 'sublime' aspect of the phenomenon that constitutes the object and cause of desire, not its material expression (Žižek, 1989*)*.

Bailly (2009) suggests money as an example of a common *objet petit a*: It is the promise of eternal happiness that fuels the desire for wealth, not the money in itself, which may be one reason why the American Dream still thrives despite the lack of happiness among the top 1 percent. This means that any attempt at materializing the *objet petit a* will inevitably fail, because the very act of rendering it visible deprives the object of its mythical status. As Lacan (1966) notes, such attempts will always be met with disappointment (that's not it!) when the subject realizes that the enjoyment obtained from visualization is different from the enjoyment expected. This is why political identification is a fantasmatic exercise involving the promise of fullness and the incapacity of any political project to deliver on that promise. As Laclau (2005: 116) puts it: 'hegemony is

nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us because it is purely mythical'. Hence, some of the most successful political projects are those that manage to mask the discrepancy between the *objet petit a* and its particular manifestation by, for instance, blaming an 'evil Other' for the lack of fulfillment (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008). In right-wing discourses, immigrants often play the role as the evil Other. In radical leftist politics, the role is often played by 'the elite' or 'the establishment' (see also chapter 5).

Returning to the question of names, it is easy to see why names matter in politics. There is a great difference between the name 'Liberal' and the name 'En Marche' because the former is much more saturated and meaningful – as in full of meaning – than the latter. This is because the distance between the *objet petit a* (the desired fullness) and its particular manifestation (the party) is greater in the latter: From history, we know that liberalism often involves individual freedom and market economy, but there is little consensus on what it means to move 'forward'. This lack of particular meaning naturally provided Emmanuel Macron and his team with the ability to mobilize support from across the political spectrum, in a way that they probably would not have been able to had they called themselves 'The Liberals' (which would arguably have been a more accurate name). The downside, as we are currently seeing in French opinion polls, is that it becomes increasingly difficult for them to eradicate the distance between the object of desire and its particular manifestation without marginalizing all those who thought that moving 'forward' meant moving in another direction.

## *The lure of the alternative*

When The Alternative was launched, most things were open for discussion. The political program was non-existent, the six core values were vaguely defined, and the manifesto only existed in a tentative version to be revised at the party's first annual meeting. However, a few things were set in stone from the outset. One of these things was the green color in the logo, which indicated a focus on environmentalism and sustainability as well as an affinity with like-minded parties such as Die Grünen or the Green Party in the UK. Another thing, not for discussion, was the party's name. Elbæk had chosen the name, 'The Alternative' (*Alternativet*, in Danish), not only because it

sounded good in English, but also because it summarized his own approach to politics (Hindkjær, 2013). As stated in the founding document:

> As a political project, The Alternative in many ways reflects my 30 years of experience as a cultural grassroot, entrepreneur, social activist, educator, and politician. During all these years, one thing has been fundamental to everything I have done: The belief that there is always a better alternative to what currently exists. (The Alternative, 2013).

Recently, much has been written about 'alternatives', not only in organization studies, with the work of Parker et al. (2014b), but also in many other disciplines where counter-cultural initiatives are seen as important objects of study (see, for instance, the journal *Alternatives*). While some suggest specific criteria for what might be considered alternative, most agree that alternatives only exist in opposition to something else. As Cheney (2014: n.p.) notes: 'Alternative organizations are understood in opposition to the familiar, traditional, mainstream, predominant, or hegemonic institutional arrangements'. This means that there is nothing inherently progressive about alternatives, which the rise of right-wing parties like *Alternative Für Deutchland* and the Trump administration's embrace of 'alternative facts' clearly illustrates, but it also means that the adjective 'alternative' is completely empty unless dialectically paired.

As such, one would be hard pressed to find a more mythical *objet petit a* (or, in Laclauian terms, a more empty signifier) than that of 'the alternative'. It can literally be made to represent anything and nothing, depending on its antithesis (i.e., 'what currently exists'). And when this antithesis is only vaguely defined in a short manifesto and six values, the scope of political representation explodes. This is arguably one reason why so many people invested so many different things in The Alternative in the immediate aftermath of the party's launch: Whereas some saw the party as a reaction to environmental depredation and climate change caused by the destructive forces of the market economy, others saw it as a countermeasure to the expansion and bureaucratization of the public sector. And while some saw it as a secular response to the rise of religious nationalism, others saw it as a spiritual awakening in an increasingly disenchanted world. As the interview respondent notes in the quote above: Anything could be The Alternative.

**Figure 3**: This drawing, published in a major Danish newspaper, clearly illustrates the common conception of The Alternative during the party's formative years. A journalist asks Uffe Elbæk: 'What is your tax policy?' and Elbæk answers: 'What do you think it should be?'. Drawing by Roald Als, published in Politiken, February 15, 2015.

This is what makes the process of particularization radical in the case of The Alternative. Even though parties like Podemos, En Marche, or Die Grünen share many of the same properties, their names nonetheless suggest some kind of political direction. Podemos may have grown out of a social movement that claimed to represent 'los indignados' (the indignant) and not any particular ideology, but the notion of 'juntos podemos' (together we can) found in the movement's manifesto clearly indicates a focus on solidarity and community (Castells, 2012). The same goes for En Marche, who also claimed to be a political movement beyond left and right, but whose name easily connotes progress and evolution, which are prominent nodal points in the discourse of liberalism (Freeden, 2005).

In contrast, The Alternative's name connotes nothing but opposition and negativity, which is one reason why I consider the party to be an 'extreme case' of particularization; that is, a case that helps us 'clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences' because it reveals more information about the basic mechanisms of the phenomenon studied (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229). The Alternative is an extreme case in more than one sense. First, the sheer emptiness of the party's name and the lack of tangible policies initially helped constitute The Alternative as a highly universalized identity with little positive content of its own. Secondly, by constructing a comprehensive and detailed political program in less than 6 months, and by entering parliament after only 18 months, the move towards 'the particular' happened incredibly fast. And finally, by sponsoring bills that many people considered 'no-alternative' immediately after being elected, the process of particularization was not only fast but also far-reaching. This rapid move from something incredibly elusive and ill-defined to something very concrete and well-defined is what makes The Alternative an extreme case. However, such methodological considerations require a chapter of their own. To this, we turn to next.

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# 3. Methodology

## Studying in the eye of the storm

Fieldworkers, it seems, learn to move among strangers while holding themselves in readiness for episodes of embarrassment, affection, misfortune, partial or vague revelation, deceit, confusion, isolation, warmth, adventure, fear, concealment, pleasure, surprise, insult, and always possible deportation.

*John Van Maanen (1988: 2), Tales of the field*

Many difficulties have presented themselves throughout the process of writing this dissertation – one being the difficulty of grasping The Alternative as a political and organizational phenomenon, which was at the center of the previous chapter, another being the difficulty of condensing the theoretical contributions of the dissertation, which will be at the center of the next chapter. To my own surprise, however, the most challenging difficulties turned out to be methodological. Moreover, it was not your typical difficulties of knowing what to look for, getting access to data, and coding the material that caused me the most headaches, but something less ordinary perhaps. In fact, it seems that these difficulties are reserved for researchers studying phenomena that many people are interested in and everyone has an opinion about (including oneself); in other words, researchers studying in the eye of the storm.

In this chapter, I will outline the methodological considerations that have guided this dissertation. I begin by saying a few words on philosophy of science and how this study has been informed by a post-structuralist approach to questions of ontology and epistemology. I then proceed to some of the more practical considerations regarding methods and data collection, with a specific focus on the method of participant observation. Finally, I return to the notion of 'studying in the eye of the storm'. Here, I will describe four difficulties that follow from studying organizations like The Alternative: 1) maintaining expertise, 2) maintaining relevance, 3) maintaining neutrality, and 4) maintaining distance. Each of these will be accompanied by a 'confessional tale' (Van Maanen, 1988) from my fieldwork in and around The Alternative.

# Philosophy of science

As mentioned, this dissertation rests on the theoretical contributions of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Even though the four papers in the dissertation draw on a range of concepts with no immediate relation to discourse theory, such as organizational space and organizational values, they are nonetheless written in an effort to understand how a political party deals with the so-called problem of particularization, which is a theoretical problem that owes its existence to the work of Laclau in particular. According to Egholm (2014), this positions the present study firmly within a social constructivist tradition, where the overall aim is to expose the contingent nature of things that we otherwise take for granted. However, social constructivism cannot be regarded as one unified school with a shared set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. There are varying degrees of radicalism across the many theories that could be considered constructivist, with some arguing that social constructions are constitutive of reality *as such* (ontological constructivism) and others arguing that there is indeed a world 'out there' but that we can only access it through dominant cultures and ideologies (epistemological constructivism).

The same goes for the constructivist sub-discipline of discourse theory. Here, the main question revolves around the possible existence of some kind of extra-discursive reality. For instance, in the work of Fairclough and Chouliaraki (1999), discourses are seen as the purely linguistic elements of social life that materialize in spoken and written language, nonverbal communication, and visual images. Similarly, in Foucault's later writings, discourse is seen as a dimension of social life that exists independently of 'the reality of institutions and practices' (Foucault, 1980: 4). Both of these approaches thus assume some kind of extra-discursive reality that may be influenced by discourse, but not constituted by it. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 107) explicitly reject this view in arguing that 'every object is constituted as an object of discourse'. To them, discourses should be understood as meaningful totalities that include both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Importantly, this does not imply questioning the *existence* of non-linguistic elements, such as natural objects and other materialities. To say that everything is discursive is merely another way of saying that all social configurations are *meaningful* and that this meaning cannot be explained with reference to some pre-existing ground or foundation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). In order to fully understand

what this means for the present study, let us consider the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of post-structuralist discourse theory.

## *Post-structuralist discourse theory*

The type of discourse theory that I refer to as 'post-structuralist' – that is, the one advanced primarily by Laclau and Mouffe – has its roots in a fusion of Saussurean linguistics and Gramscian political theory. As the latter is unfolded elsewhere (chapter 5), I will concentrate on the former here. Saussure (1916) developed his theory of general linguistics during three courses given in Geneva between 1906 and 1911. While the courses contained many groundbreaking ideas, the most significant was perhaps Saussure's conceptualization of language as a system of signs that obtain their specific meaning only through their distance to other signs. This means that there are no positive terms in language, only differences. Understanding the meaning of the word 'sister' requires me to know the meaning of the words 'sibling', 'brother', 'parent', etc. Furthermore, all signs consist of two components: an acoustic sound-image (the signifier) and a concept (the signified), and importantly, the relation between these two components is fundamentally arbitrary, in the sense that there is no 'natural connection' between them (Saussure, 1916: 69).

Now, this does not make the theory of general linguistics post-structural. Even though there is nothing natural about the relation between signifier and signified, Saussure believed that only one concept corresponds to one sound-image. This means that any given concept is represented by one word and one word only. As Laclau (1993) argues, this produces a rigid kind of isomorphism by which the order of the signifier and the order of the signified tends to overlap, thus introducing the type of substance that allows us to determine what a word *actually* means at a certain point in time. In that way, language becomes a totalizing structure that provides a solid foundation for other aspects of social life. However, if we look to politics, we quickly realize that this is rarely the case. Words such as 'democracy' or 'welfare', for instance, have no stable meaning whatsoever. In fact, no one seems capable of determining exactly what these words mean. This presents a problem for Saussure's theory, which is based on the assumption that language is a closed system that can be synchronically 'frozen in time' (Howarth, 2000: 18).

Post-structuralist discourse theory, while deeply indebted to Saussure's work, represents a break with his linguistic theory in more than one sense. The first break consists in loosening the isomorphic bond between the signifier and the signified. Instead of one word corresponding to one concept, post-structuralist discourse theorists argue that most signifiers are drifting or floating, in the sense that they are capable of attributing meaning to more than one signified at a time (Laclau, 1994). Even mundane words like 'pig' or 'cow' may mean very different things to different people in different places (say, a Nepalese Hindu and an American farmer). The second post-structuralist break, already prefigured by structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss, consists in expanding the theory of linguistics to also include other modes of signification. As Barthes (1972) has shown in his writings, phenomena such as fashion, fine dining, and even amateur wrestling should also be considered discursive. In that way, the post-structuralist conception of discourse is closely related to Wittgenstein's (1953) notion of 'language games' as something that involves both language and actions – or simply just practices (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987).

According to Laclau (2005: 68), a discourse is defined as 'any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role'. In this definition, we clearly see the Saussurean heritage represented by the emphasis on *relations* rather than substance, but we also see how post-structuralist discourse theory breaks free from its linguistic origins. This brings us back to the discussion about the possible existence of a meaningful extra-discursive reality. While Foucault's concept of discourse is ridden with ambiguities and is thus notoriously hard to pin down (Howarth, 2000), Fairclough has been particularly adamant about criticizing the post-structuralist approach to discourse theory. One recurring theme in his critique is that this type of discourse theory collapses ontology and epistemology to the extent that the latter becomes synonymous with the former. As he puts it in a paper explicitly targeting organization studies: 'we must avoid the "epistemic fallacy" of confusing the nature of reality with our knowledge of reality' (Fairclough, 2005: 922).

While it is certainly not true that post-structuralist discourse theory conflates ontology and epistemology (Laclau & Bashkar, 1998), it is correct that post-structuralist discourse theory operates with a 'negative' ontology (Hansen, 2014). This means that while Laclau and Mouffe

insert a distinction between *existence* and *being* – the world existing independently of discourse, though not in any meaningful way – the former remains a theoretical abstraction, since we cannot access the realm of the non-discursive. In the words of Derrida (1976: 158): 'There is no outside-text'. More specifically, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 111) refer to the ontological dimension of the social as 'the field of discursivity', which is conceived as a horizon of unfixed meaning that, on the one hand, determines the discursive nature of anything meaningful and, on the other hand, subverts the possibility of any discourse to achieve final closure (I will revisit this point in chapter 7 in relation to the notion of 'overdetermination'). For the purpose of this dissertation, all of this is merely another way of saying that meaning is floating rather than stable and that our knowledge of the word is contingent rather than essential.

Thus, returning to the question of the varying degrees of constructivism, post-structuralist discourse theory clearly belongs to the *epistemological* constructivist camp (Egholm, 2014). This obviously raises a series of thorny questions about the way data is generated and the way analyses are conducted. For instance, what is the status of the research interview in a world where all knowledge is mediated by discourse? What can we actually expect interview respondents to tell us about something? Such questions undoubtedly need answering before embarking on a study inspired by post-structuralist discourse theory. However, as several scholars have noted, there is an apparent lack of research on the methodology of discourse theory (e.g., Howarth, 2005; Marttila, 2016; Torfing, 2005). While this may seem to be a relatively significant obstacle, it also provides some room for maneuver in terms of developing one's own research strategies and practices (Hansen, 2004). In what follows, I will outline the analytical strategy of this dissertation. Following that, I will confront some of the thorny questions referred to above in relation to each of the methods employed in the four papers.

## *Analytical strategy*

The analytical ambition of post-structuralist discourse theory is to investigate how 'systems of meaningful practices' – discourses, that is – 'form the identities of subjects and objects' (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000: 3–4). This is done by providing second-order observations of how social actors make sense of their own practices and circumstances. The focus on people's own self-

understandings brings discourse theory relatively close to hermeneutics, in the sense that the ambition is not to provide law-like explanations of social phenomena, as the positivists would have it, but to 'elucidate carefully problematized objects of study by seeking their description, understanding, and interpretation' (Howarth, 2005: 319). That said, important differences set the two traditions apart. For one, in contrast to most hermeneuticists, discourse theorists do not entertain the possibility of 'getting into people's heads'. In other words, the point is not to try and understand what people *actually* think about something, but to ponder the social and political consequences of their articulatory practices.

But what, then, is an articulatory practice? In other words, what is a discourse theorist looking for when descending from the ivory tower and entering the world of empirics? At the most basic level, an articulation can be defined as 'any practice establishing a relation amongst elements such that their identity is modified' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 105). As such, an articulation involves two interconnected aspects: putting forth elements and linking elements (DeLuca, 1999). In a well-known example, Hall (1986) suggests the metaphor of a truck for understanding the process of articulation. A truck consists of two elements: a cab and a trailer. Separately, the two elements have very different meanings, but once the trailer is hooked to the cab, they become part of a new and composite identity, namely a truck. The relation between the two elements is both arbitrary and contingent, in the sense that it is unnecessary and dependent on specific conditions, and it requires actual work to be performed (Slack, 2016). In reality, of course, it is more difficult to know exactly when the identity of something is being modified and when that modification is significant, but the point is to look for linguistic and non-linguistic practices aimed at constructing so-called 'nodal points' (or empty signifiers) that serve to fix the meaning of certain social spaces by tying together otherwise unrelated elements (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 113).

The analytical strategy of looking for articulatory practices, and exploring how the result of those practices – discourses – form the identity of subjects and objects, runs through each of the four papers in this dissertation. In the first paper (chapter 5), the analytical strategy consists of investigating how The Alternative's political project is articulated and how the relations between the elements involved has changed over time. In the second paper (chapter 6), the ambition is to

focus more on the non-linguistic practices by exploring how The Alternative's process of policymaking is tied to three different organizational spaces and how this process ultimately splits the organization in two. In the third paper (chapter 7), the strategy is to ponder how articulations made by the party's political leadership help produce certain subject positions and how the individual members relate to and negotiate those positions. In the fourth and final paper (chapter 8), the analytical strategy involves looking at the articulation of The Alternative's organizational values and how those articulations help the party cope with the problem of particularization.

Now, every analytical strategy has its blind spots. Looking for articulations also means turning a blind eye to other aspects of a given phenomenon. For instance, by employing a post-structuralist perspective that emphasizes pluralism and contingency, the forthcoming analyses turn a blind eye to more essentialist social categories such as class or race, in the sense that these can only be viewed as historical constructs (Geras, 1987; Žižek, 2006). In the previous chapter, I sought to partially remedy this by providing some information about the demographic composition of The Alternative's members, and in the third paper (chapter 7), I include a reference to a membership analysis conducted by The Alternative in 2014. That said, it would indeed be a violation of post-structuralist epistemology to incorporate an actual class perspective or any other essentialist perspective in the dissertation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987).

Furthermore, as Critchley (2004) has noted, there seems to be a normative deficit to Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory – one that makes the theory of hegemony compatible with the logic of capitalism and prevents the researcher from distinguishing progressive from regressive politics (see also Dean, 2016). As Laclau (1990: 191) himself acknowledges, there is no such thing as a 'politics of poststructuralism'. While it is true that the four papers do not contain any normative claims regarding the value of The Alternative's policies and whether the party is *actually* alternative, they are obviously not purely descriptive. For instance, in the first paper (chapter 5), we argue that radical parties and radical movements should remain separate entities and not collapse into one organizational form. Importantly, however, the normativity of that claim is derived from The Alternative's ambition of representing anyone 'who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old' (The Alternative, 2013a), not from our own personal

inclinations. This approach to normativity is based on what Andersen (2014) calls 'the impossibility of critique'; that is, the impossibility of locating a position external to discourse from which critique can be articulated. This implies that critique must always be formulated 'from within' and not from an external position deemed morally superior.

## Methods and data

While it is impossible to account for all the sources of data that have informed the present study, the most important ones are documents, interviews, and observations. In popular terms, these broadly correspond to what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) call 'reading texts', 'asking questions', and 'hanging out' (see also Dingwall, 1997). In the following three sub-sections, I will consider each of these sources and the methods I used to generate the data. Though documents and interviews have been vital to my understanding of The Alternative, I will pay most attention to the observations. This is not because I consider documents and interviews to be inferior sources of data, but because the method of participant observation raises a number of issues that require more careful considerations than the others.

Before proceeding, however, a few words should be said about the 'quality criteria' of post-structuralist research and social constructivist research more broadly. According to Justesen and Mik-Meyer (2012), the two most common quality criteria are *validity* (do we measure what we claim to measure?) and *reliability* (would other researchers be able to replicate our study with similar results?). It is not difficult to see how particularly the latter criterion is inspired by a positivist worldview where knowledge is cumulative and where each scientific study brings us closer to the final truth. However, from a social constructivist perspective where all knowledge is mediated by discourse, the notion of reliability makes little sense. This is why the following pages do not contain any complex coding trees or elaborate interview guides. There are, indisputably, several truths about The Alternative. This study represents only one.

Though some discourse theorists use this as a pretext for dismissing the notion of methods entirely, arguing that it represents a type of ontological reasoning that cannot be sustained within

a constructivist framework (e.g., Andersen, 2003), I do believe there is a place for quality criteria in this research tradition as well. In fact, save for the word 'measure', perhaps, the notion of validity applies equally to social constructivism. Slightly modified, we could say that validity in social constructivism is about choosing and unfolding the methods and analytical strategies that allow one to answer the research question convincingly. This, however, leads to the twin questions: What makes research convincing? And convincing for whom?

## *Communicative validity*

Considering the first question, Riessman (1993: 65) argues that constructivist research is most convincing when 'theoretical claims are supported by evidence from informants' accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered'. As will hopefully become clear in the forthcoming papers, I have tried my best to supply as much empirical support for the claims proposed. This is why all four papers are relatively heavy on quotes and observations, and why some even contain lengthy ethnographic vignettes. Furthermore, though it is often not possible to include alternative interpretations of data in journal articles, I have made sure to stress that my arguments rest on interpretations rather than facts. For instance, in the third paper (chapter 7), I note that inclusivity 'could be interpreted' as an organizational ideal for The Alternative, and in the second paper (chapter 6), we explain why 'we interpret' certain aspects of the Political Laboratories as attempts to broaden the scope of what policymaking might be.

Whether the above makes the following papers seem convincing is, of course, a matter of opinion. This leads us to the second validity question: Convincing for whom? Kvale (1995) argues that one way of testing the validity of knowledge claims in social constructivist research is through the method of 'communicative validity', where the point is to engage in dialogue with social reality. As he puts it: 'What is a valid observation is decided through the argumentation of the participants in a discourse' (ibid: 30). In practice this involves presenting key arguments to research subjects, the general public, and members of the scientific community and to consider their reactions. Importantly, the point is not to engage in dialogue with the ambition of arriving at a truer understanding of social reality, nor is it a matter of establishing consensus about certain claims (Lyotard, 1979). The point is merely to probe the reactions of those involved in the construction of

knowledge and to take possible counter-arguments into consideration by allowing actors to 'strike back' (Latour, 2000).

I engaged with the *research subjects* by presenting and discussing my findings on several occasions. For instance, during The Alternative's annual meeting in 2016, I held a short presentation of my overall argument and hosted a subsequent workshop where a dozen members spent a number of hours discussing the difference between The Alternative as a movement and The Alternative as a party. Similarly, during a political festival in 2015, I participated in a so-called 'development camp' by presenting my findings and discussing possible implications with members of The Alternative. Aside from this, I engaged with the research subjects by asking interview respondents to approve my English translations of their Danish quotes. This often sparked a discussion about the actual meaning of the utterance, which I took into account when using the quote. I also engaged with the *general public* on several occasions by authoring a number of feature articles (and carefully reading the online reader comments) and by participating in two news shows on national TV. Finally, I engaged with the scientific community by presenting three of the four papers at international conferences.

In different ways, all these moments of engagement allowed me to test the validity of my work. Without going into detail, I will highlight one particular instance where a research subject 'struck back', forcing me to reconsider my overall argument. During a private conversation, a member of The Alternative noted that my conceptualization of particularization as a *problem* rested on a certain premise that everyone might not agree on, namely that the main purpose of The Alternative is to grow membership-wise and to become more influential in parliament. While I continue to believe that this is the case – not least because Uffe Elbæk keeps stating that the goal is to take over the Prime Minister's Office (e.g., The Alternative, 2017) – this instance of communicative (in)validation forced me to think hard about the nature of this dissertation, and it certainly helped heighten the level of reflexivity in my research. In hindsight, however, I probably should have done more to cultivate this kind of feedback by sharing texts with members of The Alternative or by setting up a 'case-study integrity forum' (Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2015).

Leaving aside the question of validity for the moment, let us now turn to each of the methods used to generate the data for this dissertation. I will start by considering the most commonly used method in discourse theory, namely document analysis.


## *Reading texts*

During the three and a half years I have spent studying The Alternative, more than 1,000 pages of written material have been assembled and stored. Needless to say, not all of the texts have been meticulously coded and analyzed, but all have been read and taken into consideration. Some of the texts feature explicitly in the forthcoming papers, while others have served as background material. In terms of the former, The Alternative's manifesto and party program have been of great importance (particularly for chapter 5), but so too has a lot of newspaper articles and blog posts written by leading members of the party (particularly for chapter 7). The vast majority of texts have been collected during the course of 26 months, beginning with The Alternative's founding document written by Uffe Elbæk in August 2013 (The Alternative, 2013b) and ending with the party's first parliamentary speech delivered by political spokesperson Rasmus Nordqvist in October 2015 and subsequently published by a Danish newspaper (The Alternative, 2015). A few later texts have also been used in chapter 8, but only to illustrate points already identified in other sources of data (The Alternative, 2016a; 2016b).


The way in which the texts have been coded and analyzed varies from paper to paper. While the overall strategy of identifying and interpreting articulatory practices runs through all of the papers, the specific object of study differs. For instance, in the first paper (chapter 5), we set out to investigate The Alternative's move from universality towards particularity by comparing texts published at different points in time. Here, the analytical strategy involves determining whether the texts subscribe to the logic of *equivalence* or the logic of *difference* (Laclau, 2005), and to clarify how this relates to the party's general development. In the third paper (chapter 7), focus shifted from The Alternative as a political organization to the individual members' identification with those subject positions that are produced by the party's managerial discourse. Here, the analytical strategy involves identifying ways in which leading members of The Alternative tie certain expectations and obligations to the characterization of 'the Alternativist' as a political

subject. In line with the overall ambition of post-structuralist discourse theory, the point of both papers is to investigate how certain discourses form the identities of subjects and objects alike (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000).

## *Asking questions*

The second major source of data that helped me understand The Alternative was 34 qualitative interviews, conducted in late 2014 and throughout most of 2015. All of the interviews were semi-structured, which means that I identified a handful of themes and prepared a range of questions pertaining to these themes but never followed the questions slavishly (Neyland, 2008). The interview respondents were primarily recruited through the method of 'snowballing', in which the researcher allows one respondent to guide him/her to the next (Ekman, 2015). In practice, this involved me asking the respondents if they knew other people who might be relevant for my study. In most cases, the respondents would mention fellow party members whom they regarded as experts within a certain field (e.g., policymaking) or people they admired for their devotion to The Alternative. In many cases, I would approach these people and ask them for an interview appointment, and in most cases, they would agree.

However, not all respondents were recruited by way of snowballing. Others were recruited through the method of 'purposeful sampling', in which the researcher identifies so-called 'information-rich cases' in an effort to acquire deeper insights about particular issues or topics (Patton, 1990). In these cases, I approached people who had detailed knowledge of certain events, processes, or decisions. For instance, in the second paper (chapter 6) information-rich cases are people who participated in the process of designing and facilitating Political Laboratories and Political Forum meetings. In the fourth paper (chapter 8), information-rich cases are people who knew something about the motivation for working with values rather than ideology and people who participated in the process of selecting and describing the six core values.

Besides these two sampling rationales, I tried my best to include people from different parts of the organization. While some of the respondents were members of parliament, others were employed at one of the two secretariats. However, the majority of respondents were ordinary members with

no contractual obligations to the party. The motivation for including respondents from different parts of The Alternative had little to do with trying to construct a fully representative account of the organization and more to do with trying to bring forth a multiplicity of voices. Had I only talked to members of parliament, I would probably only have gotten one side of the story, even though these people might have been the ones with the most detailed knowledge of The Alternative in general. Justesen and Mik-Meyer (2012: 48) refer to this sampling rationale as a matter of exposing the 'polyphony' of an organization. Below, I have inserted a table that shows the number of respondents belonging to each of the three categories.

| Membership category | Number of respondents |
|---|:---:|
| Members of parliament and candidates | 7 |
| Employees and board members | 8 |
| Ordinary members | 19 |

**Table 1**: Overview of interview respondents.

As previously mentioned, the research interview represents one of the thorniest issues for post-structuralists engaged in empirical research. Some post-structuralists, particularly those inspired by the work of Niklas Luhmann, even regard the interview as an autonomous 'interaction system' sealed-off from the outside world (e.g., Besio & Pronzini, 2008; Knudsen, 2010). Their main argument is that the interview is an 'autopoietic' social system, in which meaning is co-produced and re-produced by the interviewer and the interviewee. This means that the interview is incapable of providing us with information about the world 'out there', but also incapable of telling us anything about the interviewee's own thoughts and feelings. According to Luhmannians, an interview can therefore only be used to study the internal dynamics of the interview itself, and in that way, researchers using interviews often end up eclipsing what they claim to investigate (see also Gubrium & Holstein's, 2002, critique of the 'interview society').

Like the Luhmannians, discourse theorists often prefer written material and observations over interviews. That being said, the skepticism towards what Silverman (2005) calls 'artificial' data (i.e., data that is not somehow 'naturally occurring') is not as pronounced in post-structuralist discourse theory. While discourse theorists agree that interviews should *not* be used to acquire factual knowledge of external phenomena, as would be the case with expert interviews, they are frequently used to chart individuals' accounts of their own circumstances.[6] For instance, in her analysis of organizational identity at an American university, Holmer-Nadesan (1996) used qualitative interviews to explore the way in which service workers at the university identify, counter-identify, or dis-identify with the patriarchal and capitalist structures of the managerial discourse. Similarly, in Wetherell's (1998) analysis of masculine identity in a group of young males, she draws on a handful of group interviews in order to show that the constitution of subject positions is highly dependent on the subject's own orientation to his or her surroundings.

In this dissertation, interviews are used in three of four articles (chapters 6, 7, and 8). In line with the post-structuralist ambition of not treating interviews as privileged access points to the outside world, they are only used to illustrate the way in which members of The Alternative relate to different types of management technologies. For instance, in the third paper (chapter 7), which is highly inspired by Holmer-Nadesan's (1996) study, I try to show how individual members of The Alternative – *Alternativists* – identify with and negotiate subject positions produced by the party's political leadership. Likewise, in the fourth paper (chapter 8), I use the interviews to illustrate how members relate to the party's espoused and attributed values and how their acceptance of these values is vital to The Alternative's ability to cope with the problem of particularization. As such, I only used the interviews to ponder the articulations of individual respondents, not to understand the world as it is.

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[6] Hansen and Sørensen (2005: 99) argue that the distinction between 'sayings' and 'doings' is collapsed in post-structuralist discourse theory by treating both as articulatory practices. This makes the problem of not knowing whether interview respondents lie less significant for discourse theorists compared to, for example, hermeneuticists.

## *Hanging out*

The final and, in my opinion, most important source of data consists of approximately 200 hours of participant observation, conducted during the course of 18 months from May 2014 to October 2015. The observations took place during both public events such as festivals and Political Laboratories and non-public events such as board meetings and Political Forum meetings. Furthermore, I made sure to attend both formalized events, such as annual meetings, and more informal events, such as ad hoc meetings in The Alternative's local headquarters in central Copenhagen. Once again, the aim was not to try and construct a fully representative account but to expose the multifaceted or 'polyphonic' nature of the organization (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). Even though both documents and interviews provided me with important information about The Alternative and its members, the observations allowed me to experience the party's internal dynamics firsthand. Without these experiences, I undoubtedly would not have been able to arrive at the conclusions put forth in the four papers.

As already mentioned, I chose to assume an active role during the observations, in order to generate data that would be 'inaccessible from the standpoint of the nonparticipating external observer' (Jorgensen, 2015: 1). In practice, this meant that I participated in discussions (though only during public events) and voiced my personal opinion on different matters (though rarely on matters pertaining to The Alternative's policies). While I maintain that this was a deliberate choice on my part – one that provided me with firsthand experience of life within the party – I am not sure that I could have chosen otherwise. An example will serve as illustration: When my supervisor, Ursula Plesner, and I began working on the second paper (chapter 6), I encouraged her to attend one of the Political Laboratories in order to become more familiar with our object of study. Being a dedicated fieldworker, Ursula agreed and signed up for a laboratory on school policy. When she arrived at the location, the laboratory facilitator greeted her and asked her to find a seat among the other participants. Ursula replied that she would prefer sitting at the back of the room and be a 'fly on the wall'. The facilitator smiled calmly and said: 'Oh no, here, everyone participates'.

Ursula's experience not only illustrates the inclusive nature of The Alternative, which I will return to in chapter 7, it also testifies to the party's approach to researchers, journalists, and other external observers. Outsiders are frequently invited in, encouraged to participate, and treated on an equal footing with everyone else. Importantly, this is not a matter of keeping 'enemies' close, nor is it a matter of simple co-optation. At least, I do not think so. To me, this inclusive attitude seems guided by a genuine curiosity towards other people, combined with a firm belief that 'more people know more', as is stated in the party's debate principles (The Alternative, 2013c). Towards the end of this chapter, I will characterize the difficulties that follow from this kind of almost mandatory participation as a matter of maintaining distance.

Participant observation has previously proven a fruitful method for studying political organizations because it grants researchers access to the 'implicit meanings' that exists within such groups (Lichterman, 1998). Furthermore, familiarity with these implicit meanings likewise improves the researcher's ability to interpret other kinds of data such as interviews and documents (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). However, as argued by McCurdy and Uldam (2014), one needs to be particularly reflexive about the role that one assumes when doing ethnographic fieldwork in political environments, not only for ethical reasons (e.g., harming research subjects) but also because of pitfalls associated with political bias. For instance, while Law (2004) argues that research is always underwritten with personal and political implications, Plows (2008) suggests that being an insider in political organizations makes it particularly difficult to avoid overly sympathetic accounts and taken-for-granted observations, whereas being an outsider might help stimulate critical reflection on such blind spots (see also Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

As such, I chose to assume the role of an 'overt outsider' (McCurdy & Uldam, 2014: 46). That said, much obviously depends on what is meant by the words 'overt' and 'outsider'. First of all, I was an *outsider* because I never became a member of The Alternative, and because I always made a point out of describing myself as an outsider. Secondly, my approach was *overt* because I remained open about my research. I even presented my research on several occasions, during both internal events organized by The Alternative and during public events organized by third parties. I also went on national television a number of times in connection with the national elections in 2015

and The Alternative's annual meeting in 2016. Moreover, I authored three feature articles during the course of my research: 1) an interview-based article with Uffe Elbæk published in 2014 by the online magazine *Atlas*, 2) a slightly more critical piece about The Alternative's aspirations to enter parliament published in early 2015 by the online magazine *Netudgaven,* and 3) a descriptive account of The Alternative's transformation from movement to party published in late 2015 by the national newspaper *Information* (Husted, 2014; 2015a; 2015b).

Having described my role as an overt outsider and reflected on some of the benefits of active participation (I shall return to the problems), a few words should be said about the ethnographic strategies that I employed throughout my fieldwork. As Neyland (2008) notes in his book on organizational ethnography, ethnographers should always start by trying to observe 'everything'. While it is, obviously, impossible to literally observe everything, the point is that 'nothing should be taken for granted and nothing should be assumed to be uninteresting' (ibid: 100). Neyland refers to this approach as a strategy of 'strangeness' where the organization is treated as a peculiar phenomenon in need of examination. As explained in the introduction, my first encounter with The Alternative was indeed characterized by strangeness. Due to my minimal knowledge of The Alternative (and my lacking knowledge of party politics in general), I began my fieldwork by jotting down as much as humanly possible. However, as Neyland (2008: 101) rightly notes, the strategy of strangeness is hard to maintain as one becomes familiar with the field. Thus, the ethnographer must quickly adopt alternative strategies for observation.

My preferred ethnographic strategy has always been one of looking for paradoxes. The word paradox is a portmanteau of the words *para* (Greek for 'distinct from') and *doxa* (Greek for 'opinion'), but in modern social theory it often signifies situations where 'two opposing tendencies are brought into recognizable proximity' (Ford & Backoff, 1988: 89). Within organization studies, looking for paradoxes means attending to 'the contradictory features in organizations that exist simultaneously and synergistically over time' (Putnam et al., 2016: 75). When carrying out fieldwork in The Alternative, this was not a particularly hard strategy to follow, since the party is founded on a series of paradoxical ambitions, such as the overall desire to be alternative and, at the same time, part of the establishment. The first paradox that caught my eye in The Alternative

was the contradictory relationship between the simultaneous pursuit of consensus and pluralism, which is embedded in the party's debate principles. Later, my interest in this paradox developed into an interest in the particularization of the party and the tensions that followed from this.

In practice, I strove to combine the strategy of strangeness with the strategy of paradox-spotting by taking separate field notes. One part of my notebook was devoted to all kinds of ordinary observations. Here, I tried to follow Neyland's (2008) advice about assuming everything to be interesting: What is happening? Who says what? How is the room decorated? How do I interact with members of The Alternative? The other part of my notebook was reserved for more theoretically informed observations geared towards potential paradoxes. Here, I would write down short sentences or questions that would help me think about my observations on a more conceptual level: How is consensus and conflict reconciled? Who is the ideal alternativist? To what extent is non-ideology an ideology? What is the relationship between trust and politics? Though somewhat arbitrary, this division of notes allowed me to move back and forth between the more descriptive observations and the more conceptual ones. However, as Emerson et al. (2011) note, manual notetaking makes it hard to capture the empirical richness as it happens. Hence, whenever possible, I would make audio recordings and listen to these upon returning from the fieldwork.

## Studying in the eye of the storm

In this final part of the chapter, I will describe four intertwined difficulties that I have encountered during my fieldwork. Each difficulty is structured as a type of 'confessional tale' (Van Maanen, 1988) meant to stimulate critical reflection on my fieldwork (Bell, 1999). Obviously, these are not the only difficulties that I encountered, nor are they unique to my study. My argument is that these difficulties are intensified when studying popular phenomena such as political organizations that are particularly contested because most people have an opinion about them. I like to summarize these difficulties as a matter of studying in the eye of the storm: Things might seem tranquil when sitting in one's office writing papers, but as soon as one leaves that safe haven, wind speeds tend to accelerate.

## *Maintaining expertise*

Sticking with the storm metaphor, one could argue that trying to predict political outcomes is like predicting the weather: Small changes in the atmosphere may affect local conditions and completely undermine the most sober forecast, making it almost impossible to say anything substantial about the future. Even in Denmark, where both weather and politics are relatively stable phenomena (it always rains in October when the Finance Act is negotiated), things may unfold in genuinely unexpected ways. There is, however, one important difference between politics and the weather. While the former is cloaked in the objectivist discourse of meteorology, most people recognize that politics is a subjective matter through and through; and while it is generally accepted that meteorologists know what they are talking about, the expert status of social scientists is frequently challenged by the general public, as well as by natural scientists bent on exposing the allegedly pseudo-scientific nature of social constructivist research in particular (the scientific hoax known as 'the conceptual penis' being the most recent example).

A year ago, I attended a concert with a band whose name I have forgotten. One thing I do remember, however, is my friend asking me if The Alternative would continue to grow in the polls. I took some time to contemplate the question while mentally searching for theoretical arguments to back up my answer. 'Well, I think they have established a pretty solid support base', I said, 'but I also think they may have lost some newsworthiness and will have a hard time retaining their alternative identity'. My friend nodded his head politely and said: 'I completely disagree. I think they have shown a new way for Danish politics and that people will acknowledge this sooner than later'. 'Right', I said, trying to come up with a quick rebuttal. But by the time I had thought of something to say, my friend had already turned away to watch the band entering the stage.

Such incidents seem to be an integral part of studying popular political phenomena. At least, it has been an integral part of my life over the last three and a half years. Not only is it difficult to articulate something that people recognize as a valid argument, one must also continuously defend one's right to call these arguments 'scientific'. Of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing. For instance, as Plesner (2011) argues, studying sideways (i.e., displacing the hierarchical

relationship between researcher and research subject) is an important way of enhancing the quality of research, as it forces the researcher to qualify his or her arguments more substantially. Furthermore, the struggle to maintain expertise is certainly not unique to my study or to academia in general. In fact, the constitution of professional identity generally seems to rely on the continuous negotiation of jurisdictional boundaries (Abbott, 1988).

In many cases, however, there are technical or legal ways of policing jurisdictions. For instance, by law, only doctors can prescribe medicine and only certified lawyers are allowed to conduct legal trials on behalf of others. Social scientists do not enjoy such luxuries. This means that there are no easy ways of maintaining expertise. Fortunately, being seen as an expert is not always desirable. In fact, the expert role is often damaging to one's ability to get below 'the surface' of the field (Bryman, 2001). The trouble is that organizations that value scientific knowledge and emphasize the importance of expert advice often interpellate the researcher as such (Bell, 1999). The Alternative is one of those organizations. For instance, the party has established a so-called 'transition council' to advise them on the feasibility of policy proposals and an 'ombudsman council' to ensure that the political leadership follows the debate principles. Both councils consist of a handful of well-esteemed experts whose expertise is frequently emphasized (The Alternative, 2014). To me, the only solution for dealing with the expert role has been to concentrate on – and think carefully about – certain aspects of The Alternative instead of trying to keep up with the most recent developments in Danish politics or within The Alternative.

## *Maintaining relevance*

While this coping strategy may help to maintain expertise, it quickly leads to another difficulty; namely, the problem of maintaining relevance. As already indicated, my study focuses exclusively on The Alternative's formative years; that is, the period from the launch of the party in November 2013 to the opening of parliament almost two years later in October 2015. In a context of rapid change (new initiatives are launched, new statements are made, new policies are proposed), academic research quickly appears outdated and of little relevance to practitioners. Once again, this is not a problem unique to my study, but arguably one of the most general problems in

academia (De Rond & Miller, 2005). That said, when researching organizations bent on constantly reinventing themselves, this difficulty becomes particularly pronounced.

In early 2016, six months after finishing my fieldwork, I was invited by The Alternative's board to speak at the party's annual meeting in Aarhus. This was a welcome opportunity for me to reflect on my findings and to give something back to all those people who allowed me access to their political project. Eager to do my best (and perhaps eager to be an expert), I spent quite a bit of time contemplating what to say. I wrote a draft, deleted it, wrote another one, sent it to the organizers, received some feedback, made some adjustments, sent it again – and then, suddenly, I got no response. At first, I took little note of it, but as we got closer to the annual meeting, I started worrying that something might be wrong. One day, a member of the board phoned me and explained that my participation in the annual meeting had been subject of intense debate in the upper echelons of the party. Members of the political leadership had wanted to remove my name from the list of speakers, but the board had insisted on keeping me on. The reason why the political leadership wanted me off the list, the board members said, was because my knowledge of The Alternative was outdated. Apparently, a lot of things had happened during that half year, and it therefore made little sense having me speak.

## *Maintaining neutrality*

Thanks to the board, I ended up speaking at the annual meeting. I also hosted a workshop during the meeting where a dozen party members spent a couple of hours debating the difference between The Alternative as a movement and The Alternative as a party. In fact, it suddenly seemed as if there never was a problem – as if being outdated was no longer an issue. Members of the political leadership even complimented my talk and participated in the subsequent workshop. Still, it felt as if the air had not been cleared. I was one of the first speakers on stage that day. Later in the evening, bigger names such as Uffe Elbæk would present their thoughts on the coming year. I no longer remember the exact details of Elbæk's talk, but I do remember him emphasizing that it makes no sense to speak of The Alternative as a movement or as a party. The Alternative is a platform, he said, upon which a movement and a party stand.

During his talk, Elbæk never mentioned my name explicitly, but I am convinced that those remarks were targeted at me. To understand why, we need to rewind the clock another year to the spring of 2015, just a few months prior to the national elections. Stunned by the surprising speed with which The Alternative transformed into a formal political party, I authored a piece for the online magazine *Netudgaven* (Husted, 2015a)*. The piece was critical. It was critical of The Alternative's aspirations to enter parliament so quickly and it argued that the process of becoming electable would take its toll on the party's alternative ambitions. I never said that being alternative and established at the same time was impossible, but I did say that being alternative was much easier outside parliament. I made sure to avoid normative prescriptions, but the gist of the text was not particularly hard to decipher: Radical change rarely begins in parliament.

Only a few hours after publishing the piece, Uffe Elbæk wrote me a long and angry e-mail. Curiously, this time the problem was not that my knowledge of The Alternative was outdated, but on the contrary, that I knew too little about the party to draw any conclusions. To be honest, I was a bit taken aback by this, since I had been doing fieldwork in and around The Alternative for almost a full year. However, this was not Elbæk's only criticism. In the article, I had highlighted two incidents that, in my opinion, signaled the emergence of party discipline. The first concerned the party's expulsion of a controversial figure called Klaus Riskær Pedersen (see chapter 8 for more); the second concerned an incident where The Alternative's spokesperson for foreign affairs had referred to the Palestinian movement, *Hamas*, as a group of 'freedom fighters' and where Elbæk had reprimanded her for doing so. To me, these two incidents were telling of the conformity that follows from aspiring to parliament. My argument was not that these incidents were either good or bad, true or false, but that they signaled a sudden need to keep members 'in line'. Elbæk did not exactly disagree that entering parliament requires some kind of discipline, but he thought that I was wrong in turning these incidents into a matter of conformity.

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps I jumped to conclusions. And more troublingly, perhaps I crossed that thin red line between research and activism. Upon receiving the e-mail from Elbæk, I immediately wrote a response explaining that my argument – as stated in the article – rested on a particular theoretical premise and that if one disagreed with that premise, the argument could not

be sustained. Once again, I was met by silence. Elbæk never replied, and from that day on, it seemed as though he was deliberately trying to avoid me. A few months later, I wrote him another e-mail asking if we should have a coffee and sort things out. Elbæk agreed, and during an annual meeting in Odense a few weeks after the national elections, we sat down for a quick chat. Elbæk explained that he felt I was judging The Alternative from a distance, and that if I spent more time talking to the newly elected MPs, I would get a different perspective on things. We agreed to do another interview so that he would get another chance to express his views. Towards the end of our chat, Elbæk became friendlier. He even suggested that his response to my article may have been a product of him growing tired of unfounded criticism from media pundits and that perhaps he had been lumping critics together. Before we shook hands and parted ways, I remember him saying that critique is always welcome.

There are a lot of interesting conclusions to be drawn from this story. One is that, when carrying out research in political organizations – particularly those relying on electoral support – academic arguments will often be read as political rather than critical (whether those are synonyms is, of course, another discussion). I refer to this as a problem of maintaining neutrality. To be sure, by neutrality I do not propose the existence of value-neutral positions. Research is never neutral (Law, 2006; Van Maanen, 1988). However, in the eyes of most practitioners, neutrality and objectivity are important factors. Attempts to appear relevant can thus easily be interpreted as 'biased' or 'politically motivated' and, as the story above shows, this may influence one's relationship with the field. Similarly to the other difficulties, there are no easy solutions. As described above, the solution that I chose was to engage more substantially with the field by giving talks, hosting workshops, and participating in discussions, as a way of positioning myself as a friend rather than an adversary. This, however, may lead to yet another problem, namely the problem of maintaining some kind of critical distance.

## *Maintaining distance*

Early in my fieldwork, I decided that it might be a good idea to observe board meetings as a way of gaining access to some of the tensions that existed in The Alternative. In my experience, board

meetings are usually quite boring and they often drag out for hours on end. Except for the latter, his was not at all the case in The Alternative. The meetings that I attended were always fun and the board members kept a warm-hearted attitude throughout the eight hours that the meetings usually lasted. After only a couple of meetings, I was almost considered a member – not that I participated actively in the meetings, but it happened on more than one occasion that I was mistakenly handed a paper note for voting on an issue. That said, I was not completely inactive either. Some of the members developed a habit of asking me for advice on various issues, and towards the end of most meetings, someone would usually say something like: 'Let's just take five minutes where Emil tells us what we did right and what we did wrong'. I usually tried to avoid answering by saying things like: 'I think you kept a nice tone and discussed some important issues'. But at the end of the day, they expected more from me. Real tangible advice was what they were looking for.

Recently, the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) has witnessed intense debate around the notion of 'critical performativity', first advanced by Spicer et al. (2009) and then criticized extensively by a series of colleagues (e.g., Cabantous et al., 2016; Fleming & Banerjee, 2016; Knudsen, 2017; Spoelstra & Svensson, 2016). Briefly put, the debate concerns the extent to which critical scholars ought to intervene in debates about managerial practices by encouraging 'progressive forms of management' (Spicer et al., 2009: 537). While the proponents of critical performativity argue that critical scholars should indeed add an affirmative dimension to the predominantly negative approach that has characterized CMS for decades (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015), the opponents argue that critical scholars should avoid doing 'critical consultancy' and stick to their trade, which involves 'revealing, disclosing and illuminating the darkness of contemporary management practices, consumer society and capitalism without necessarily pointing out new solutions' (Spoelstra & Svensson, 2016: 75).

When the dust finally settled, more moderate discussions of critical performativity started to emerge, one being Parker and Parker's (2017) attempt to suggest the notion of 'agonism' as a viable middle ground between the antagonism of traditional CMS and the affirmative stance associated with the performativity agenda. I sympathize with this approach to critical scholarship,

not only because it resonates with the theoretical backbone of my dissertation, but also because I more or less intentionally followed a similar strategy throughout my fieldwork in The Alternative. The concept of agonism was originally developed by Mouffe (2005: 36) as an attempt to overcome the 'paradox of liberal democracy': how do we accept pluralism as an ontological condition while simultaneously recognizing that all political communities are constituted through us-and-them relations? Rather than striving for some kind of Habermasian consensus, her solution was to substitute the notion of antagonism (friend-enemy relations) with the notion of agonism (friend-adversary relations). In the world of agonistic politics, adversaries are fought, but their right to exist is never questioned (Mouffe, 2013).

When applying the notion of agonism to the discussion of critical scholarship, we get an approach that clearly allows for engagement and dialogue with organizations – but not all kind of organizations. As Parker and Parker (2017: 16–17) note, critical scholarship must be political and that inevitably means 'taking a position on allies and adversaries'. Hence, instead of 'searching for allies among disgruntled elites', the point is to engage with alternative organizations that 'challenge capitalism, or patriarchy, that are collectively owned, that refuse standard measures of profit and growth, that avoid environmental externalities, or that seek to organize in a way that challenges hierarchy'. In one way or another, all of these criteria apply to The Alternative, and in that sense, The Alternative could indeed be considered an 'alternative' organization worthy of critical engagement.

As such, from an agonistic perspective, my engagement with The Alternative could hardly be considered problematic. Furthermore, most of the activities that I engaged in – giving talks, hosting workshops, talking to the media – were also not problematic. However, as Parker and Parker likewise note, critical scholarship sometimes involves separating means and ends. Managerialism and hierarchies might be justifiable if only they lead to progressive ends. And this may be where some parts of my engagement with The Alternative become problematic. Returning to the critical piece I wrote for *Netudgaven*, one could argue that entering parliament was a necessary step for The Alternative to achieve the kind of political change they advocate. Elbæk frequently refers to the fashion designer, Vivienne Westwood, who once said that all kinds of

haute couture – no matter how bizarre – need buttons or a zipper. Otherwise, people will not recognize it as clothing. The same goes for politics, Elbæk claims. Without a political party, people will not recognize something as a proper political project (Husted, 2014).

Whether that is true or not is, of course, debatable. But it seems safe to say that this particular part of my engagement with The Alternative was more antagonistic than agonistic, and to some extent, I regret this. Not because it was a violation of the critical ethos of engaged scholarship, but because it had a negative impact on my access to certain parts of the field. Even though the vast majority of party members welcomed my critique and kept inviting me to participate in various events, the political leadership became less open and more skeptical about my research. Of course, this automatically provided me with some of that critical distance that can be hard to maintain when studying political organizations such as The Alternative, but it also brought along other difficulties associated with maintaining relevance and neutrality.

To me, studying in the eye of the storm means striking a balance between expertise, relevance, perceived neutrality, and critical distance in highly politicized environments – and that is definitely easier said than done. As shown above, the solution to one difficulty may quickly lead to other problems, and in the end, there is no hard and fast recipe for success. I have undoubtedly learned a lot from doing fieldwork in The Alternative, and I hope others can learn something from the stories provided here. Though it may seem tempting to stay in the eye of the storm where things are safe and quiet, it is only by allowing oneself to get carried away by the wind that one is moved physically as well as intellectually.

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# 4. Literature

## Control and commitment in political organization

Traditional notions of command and discipline as a means of keeping members "in line" have become less relevant. Coercion may not be entirely redundant, but in modern consumer-oriented societies, voluntary organizations such as parties need more subtle methods to bring their members into line in terms of conduct, style and message.

*Danny Rye (2015: 1053), Political parties and power*

What is the present study a case of? To what literature does it contribute? And, more importantly, what *is* the contribution of the following x-hundred pages? First of all, the overall research questions clearly implies that my study of The Alternative is somehow connected to the notion of commitment: *How do radical political parties such as The Alternative manage to maintain a universal appeal when going through a process of rapid particularization?* In fact, if one substitutes the words 'a universal appeal' with 'political commitment', the meaning of the question does not significantly change. That is, how do parties like The Alternative maintain political commitment in the face of particularization? However, when reading through the literature on commitment in organizations, one quickly realizes that questions of commitment are invariably linked to questions of control. As Salancik (1977: 62) puts it: 'commitment is a strikingly powerful and subtle form of coopting the individual to the point of view of the organization'.

Evidently, not all modes of control explicitly seek to 'coop' the individual to the organization's point of view. For instance, the Weberian approach to organizational control, which stresses the importance of creating uniform rules and maintaining these through hierarchical lines of command, has a less straight-forward relationship with organizational commitment (Ouchi, 1980). Even though the formal control mechanisms of bureaucracies might produce a vocational ethos that ties the individual to his or her 'office' (Du Gay, 2017), the intimate connection between control and commitment is usually more visible in relation to one particular kind of control; namely, normative control (Etzioni, 1961). As observed by Weiner (1982: 419):

The central element in most definitions of commitment – the acceptance of organizational expectations and values as guides to an individual's behavior, i.e., identification – represents a form of normative control over a person's actions.

Normative control is generally understood as a mode of control that works through the 'hearts and minds' of individuals by encouraging a specific sense of *self*, which is somehow aligned with the objectives of the organization (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Kunda, 1992). As such, normative control ventures beyond coercive control, technological control, bureaucratic control, or economic reward systems by seeking to control people's inner worlds (Pfeiffer, 2016). Within a normative framework, control and commitment thus becomes connected through a process of identification (Weiner, 1982). That is, the individual commits to an organization by identifying with a particular 'subject position' or 'member role', which then commits that individual to certain expectations and obligations (see also Fleming & Spicer, 2014).

One example of the intertwined nature of control and commitment is Kunda's (1992) well-known study of corporate culture in a high-tech corporation pseudonymously referred to as *Tech*. Here, the point is that the company's culture is based on a type of normative control that thrives on a lack of formal structures and a high degree of employee commitment. By inciting employees to take ownership of the organization and to take the lead in defining their own objectives, the company creates an ambiguous working environment where people labor tirelessly to satisfy a series of fundamentally insatiable demands. The employees, however, have no one to blame but themselves, since they are the ones defining their own objectives. The only thing *explicitly* demanded by the management is organizational commitment.

Inspired by Kunda's study, I began thinking about the kind of organizational control that permeates The Alternative. As we shall see (particularly in chapter 8), The Alternative and Tech share a number of characteristics such as a persistent focus on creativity and fun. That being said, the two cases are nonetheless distinct in several ways. For instance, while employees at Tech are expected to conform to a company culture that requires them to be highly competitive and to join 'the race to meet corporate standards of accomplishment' (Kunda, 1992: 222), members of The

Alternative are encouraged to be themselves and to explore their own ideas, but also to remain morally inclusive towards members with different views. This type of identity management resonates well with the notion of 'neo-normative control' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009), which is a variant of normative control that encourages authenticity and uniqueness rather than conformity and homogeneity. But how do these observations translate into a theoretical contribution of relevance to organization studies? Since we are dealing with a political party, the most obvious choice would be to frame the dissertation as a contribution to the literature on party organization.

## Political parties and organization studies

Considering the important role that parties play in contemporary society, strikingly little attention has been paid to these political behemoths within organization and management studies. A quick search through some of the most prestigious and well-read journals in the field shows that, save for a few notable exceptions (e.g., Karthikeyan et al., 2015; Kenny & Scriver, 2012; Moufahim et al., 2015), hardly any studies investigate the organizational dynamics of political parties.[7] Moreover, those studies that do, always base their analyses on external communication and secondary sources. For instance, Moufahim et al. (2015) use a wide range of newsletters, brochures, and press coverage to explore the rhetorical construction of organizational identity in a Flemish right-wing party. Similarly, Karthikeyan et al. (2015) use a series of election manifestos to conduct a historical analysis of identity claims across three British parties as a way of understanding how distinctiveness is performed in parliamentary politics.

These studies are certainly important, but they only tell one side of the story, namely the public account. By solely analyzing sources available to the general public, they miss potentially valuable insights that might be generated from studying the inner workings of political parties through ethnographic methods or interviews with members (Schatz, 2009). While plenty of scholars have provided insider accounts of other types of political organizations such as social movements and activist networks (e.g., Maeckelbergh, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2014; Reedy et al., 2016), political parties remain black-boxed. In other words, we not only lack empirical studies of political parties

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[7] Even more independent journals such as *ephemera* have only published one or two articles about the organizational dynamics of political parties (Almqvist, 2016; Ince, 2011).

in general, but particularly studies of the internal dynamics of these organizations. The only study that seems to meet these criteria is Michels' (1911) famous account of socialist parties and trade unions in the early twentieth century, which we will return to later.

| Journals | Articles containing the words 'political parties' or 'political party' | Articles focusing specifically on political parties | Articles focusing on the *internal* dynamics of political parties |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academy of Management Annals | 5 / 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Academy of Management Journal | 49 / 49 | 0 | 0 |
| Academy of Management Review | 49 / 49 | 0 | 0 |
| Administrative Science Quarterly | 18 / 11 | 0 | 0 |
| Journal of Management Studies | 45 / 45 | 1<br>Czarniawska (1986) | 0 |
| Human Relations | 28 / 19 | 1<br>Morell & Hartley (2006) | 0 |
| Organization Science | 20 / 14 | 1<br>Karthikeyan et al. (2015) | 0 |
| Organization Studies | 75 / 37 | 1<br>Moufahim et al. (2015) | 0 |
| Organization | 33 / 11 | 1<br>Kenny & Scriver (2012) | 0 |
| *In total* | 322 / 236 | 5 | 0 |

**Table 2**: Number of articles on political parties published in leading journals within organization and management studies.

Now, if a literature review is about spotting a 'surprising' gap in the accumulation of knowledge within a specific field of research, this review would be over by now. The trouble is that pointing to a lack of research is not very helpful in terms of situating and understanding the contributions of a study. Another approach to the genre of literature reviews is that of 'problematization', where the idea is to 'disrupt the reproduction and continuation of an institutionalized line of reasoning' by exposing assumptions that run through a certain field of research (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011: 32). However, since the literature on political parties within organization and management studies is close to non-existent, there are not many institutionalized assumptions to problematize. The method of problematization thus requires that the scope of this review is somehow expanded or redefined. Hence, instead of focusing squarely on political parties, I will expand the review to include other kinds of political organizations as well. But before we get this far, we first need to establish what is meant by 'political organization'.

## What is political organization?

As mentioned, I base my understanding of politics and political organization on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Here, politics is understood as the articulatory practice of building hegemonic projects by universalizing particularities. In other words, when a particular identity assumes the task of representing 'the absent fullness of the community', a political project is commenced (Laclau, 1997). Hence, political *organization* refers to the practice of creating and coordinating hegemonic projects. Political *organizations* are the provisional result of such efforts (Böhm, 2006). In that way, political organizations cannot be identified a priori. Political parties, social movements, and advocacy groups are obvious candidates, but not necessarily and not exclusively. In principle, all organizations can be considered political if only they participate in the process of constructing or challenging hegemonic projects (Spicer & Böhm, 2007).

However, rather than creating a sense of clarity, this broad conception of politics leaves us with a perhaps even bigger problem. How does one demarcate a field of research that may include everything and nothing? In other words, if all organizations are potentially political, how would one know what to look for? Would a study of multinational corporations engaged in systematic

lobbyism be considered a study of political organization? Would a study of a small cooperative's internal processes? Would a study of academic publishing? There is no way of telling in advance. One solution would be to adopt a more narrow conception of politics such as the one often found in political science, where politics is restricted to a matter of 'who gets what, when, how' (Lasswell, 1936), but that seems equally unsatisfying.

This bewilderment has led me to the conclusion that we need a way of talking about political organization that strikes a balance between the restricted view of politics, represented by mainstream political science, and the view that 'everything is political'. This is, of course, not to say that all forms of organizing are not potentially political (Parker et al., 2014a), but that we can learn something about the organization of politics as well as the politics of organization by studying organizations that meet the following criteria (see also Moufahim et al., 2015). Hence, for the purpose of this literature review, political organizations are defined as follows:

1) *Primarily political:* Political organizations are first and foremost concerned with pursuing political goals. Scott (1987) differentiates 'the organization' from other collectives on the basis that it is oriented towards specific goals in a way that a group of friends or a festival crowd is not. The specific goals of a political organization are primarily political. While some organizations such as Google or Coca Cola may exercise a profound influence on politics, this is not their primary purpose – at least not explicitly. This brings us to the second criterion.

2) *Explicitly political:* Political organizations are open about their pursuit of political goals. This means that organizations that claim to be politically neutral do not count as political organizations in this context. For instance, while the Brookings Institute has had an ongoing impact on American policymaking since the Great Depression, it persistently claims to be non-partisan and independent of political interests. The same goes for many other think tanks, newspapers, and charities. This sets them apart from the type of organizations included in this review.

3) ***Based on voluntary membership:*** Political organizations are membership organizations. Some organizations may be primarily and explicitly political but not based on active membership. For instance, certain types of pressure groups are open about their political agenda but rely on donations or signatures rather than memberships. Furthermore, as Wilson (1974: 235) notes, not all political organizations are based on voluntary memberships. For instance, certain industries require workers to become members of particular labor unions, regardless on them wanting to. These types of organizations are excluded from the review on grounds that will hopefully become apparent below.

Any attempt at ostensive definitions begs the question: Why these criteria? Once again, the answer goes back to the overall research question and the notion of commitment. Starting from the back, political organizations have to be membership-based in order to tell us something substantial about the dynamics of commitment. This is the case because 1) registering as a member of an organization most likely constitutes a heavier investment in terms of time, money, and identity than signing a petition or making a financial donation, and 2) because signatures and donations cannot be withdrawn. Usually, you cannot delete your signature from a petition or retract your financial contribution to a charity, but you can indeed resign your membership of a political party or withdraw from an activist network.

Furthermore, political organizations have to be both primarily and explicitly political. This has to do with the way members relate to the organization. People seldom apply for jobs at Google in order to pursue political goals, just as they rarely enroll in the local sports club on ideological grounds. As we saw in chapter 2, naming and affect are two highly interrelated processes that cannot be separated, not even analytically (Laclau, 2005: 101). When it comes to matters of identification and commitment, the dominant description of an organization is of utmost importance. It may be that multinational corporations are some of the largest players in politics, but until we call them by their right 'name', their status as an object of political identification remains insignificant. The intimate connection between politics and identity is the reason why this literature review only considers organizations that are primarily and explicitly political. As Reedy et al. (2016: 1553) note with a reference to alternative organizations: 'in such groups, identity,

organizing and politics become a purposeful set of integrated processes (…) thus organizing *is* politics *is* identity'.

All these distinctions are not meant to exclude studies of organizations that are not 'truly' political or not political enough. Their only purpose is to demarcate a field of research that might serve to inform my study of The Alternative and, hopefully, vice versa. It should be noted that only studies of particular relevance for organization studies are included in the review; that is, studies that directly target organization studies, or studies within other disciplines that have had a significant impact on the field of organization studies. Furthermore, the review in no way pretends to be exhaustive. Instead of spotting yet another gap in the literature, the review is meant to highlight and problematize certain tendencies within the study of political organization and to position my study of The Alternative accordingly. I begin by examining two classic examples of the literature on power and control in political organization in an effort to draw out the contours of the field.[8] The two examples are: Michels' (1911) study of political parties and trade unions and Follett's (1918) account of group organizations.

# Review of the literature

Most reviews of the literature on political organization include a reference to the German sociologist, Robert Michels, whose work has become a shared point of reference for scholars interested in the organizational dynamics of social movements and political parties (e.g., Rye, 2015; Davis et al., 2005; Wilson, 1974). This might be the case, not only because his writings have had a significant influence on the common understanding of politics and organization, but also because they coincided with the birth of organization theory as a separate discipline (Tolbert & Hiatt, 2009). The link between Michels' writings and classic organization theory is perhaps most visibly displayed through the influence of his mentor, Max Weber, whose intellectual presence is

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[8] In what follows, I use the words 'power' and 'control' more or less interchangeably. This is not because I personally consider them synonyms – at least not always – but because the literature often does. To me, power signifies the omnipresent and non-derivative ability to 'make a difference' in the constitution of identities (Dyrberg, 1997: 89), whereas control is a more tangible concept that involves what Fleming and Spicer (2014: 241) call 'direct mobilization of power' (i.e., coercive control) as well as more subtle and self-imposed forms of disciplining (i.e., normative control).

clearly felt throughout Michels' (1911) most well-known book, *Political Parties*, not least in relation to the notions of power and control.

At first sight, *Political Parties* appears to constitute a devastating critique of socialist parties and trade unions in continental Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, socialist parties were massive organizations with millions of members and even more sympathizers, and the internal structure of the parties reflected this. In order to operate most efficiently, the parties were structured as formal bureaucracies with authoritative leadership positions and clear lines of command. Though thoroughly dedicated to democratic ideals and principles of common rule, the parties seemed to mirror the oligarchic societal structures they were meant to abolish; and while these structures were always said to be provisional, they somehow never went away. Michels' explanation for this paradox is that, as soon as any kind of 'subversive' party gains maturity, it becomes dependent on the state and acquires an interest in preserving the established system (Michels, 1911: 368). Hence, instead of trying to overthrow the powers that be, the party's attention settles on the aggregation of members and the consolidation of political power.

Rather than a means to achieve certain goals, the organization suddenly becomes an end in itself. Michels (1911: 11) refer to this as 'the problem of democracy', since it applies not only to socialist parties and trade unions but to all kinds of organizations that pursue 'definite ends'. As Dean (2016: 171) explains: 'even groups with aspirations to anarchism, all ultimately take on a whole slew of oligarchic characteristics. Rule by the few is unavoidable'. At the root of this problem, Michels locates what he calls 'the nature of organization' (Michels, 1911: 11). More specifically, he points to the indispensability of political leadership as the primary source of oligarchic tendencies in modern democracies: Leaders are necessary for the masses to unite, but once the leaders have emerged from the masses, they become authoritative and self-preserving. This, however, is not necessarily a fault on the part of particular leaders but an inherent problem of political organization as such. In that way, Michels arrives at his much-cited conclusion: 'It is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors (…) Who says organization, says oligarchy' (ibid.: 401). Or, as he puts it elsewhere in the book: 'Political organization leads to power. But power is always conservative' (ibid: 368).

Only seven years after the publication of *Political Parties*, the American political scientist Mary Parker Follett authored another important book on political organization called *The New State*. Though Follett more or less shared Michels' discontent with political parties and trade unions, she did not agree with his pessimistic view of democracy in general, which had led Michels to regard himself as one of the 'scientific opponents of democracy' (Scaff, 1981: 1281). In fact, *The New State* is primarily dedicated to rediscovering democracy as something radically different from the dominant view of common rule, where balloting represents the only real mode of public participation. As she claims on the book's very first page, perhaps with a slight reference to Michels: 'We talk about the evils of democracy. We have not yet tried democracy' (Follett, 1918: 3). Hence, while Michels refrained from offering solutions to the ills of party-based democracy, as expressed through his famous 'iron law of oligarchy', Follett sat out to revive democracy through one particular mode of association, namely group organization.

*The New State* is not so much an empirical study of particular collectives, as it is a passionate defense of group organization as such. Though references are made to a few existing groups within her own geographical proximity such as Boston Community Centre and Boston School Centre, the text remains predominantly theoretical. From the very beginning, Follett denounces the version of democracy that has dominated Western thought for centuries; namely, representative government, or what she calls 'crowd government'. The problem of crowd government, she asserts, is that it operates through suggestion and imitation, as proposed by the crowd psychologists of her time (e.g., Le Bon, 1896). In other words, politicians lead and the masses follow – and in that process, the individual is lost. However, the solution is not a return to some kind of particularistic individualism, in which the logic of every-man-for-his-own reigns supreme. According to Follett, democracy can only be revived by encouraging people to join forces in different kinds of neighborhood groups and occupational groups, and by allowing these groups direct influence on political processes (Follett, 1918: 192).

Follett's point is that the diversity of the group will permeate the individual to the point where he or she develops a 'conscious responsibility' for society as a whole. Group organization is thus to be

seen as something different from not only representative government but also from direct democracy, where majority voting remains the only means of expression. In the group, individuals are allowed to exchange arguments in the absence of hierarchies while simultaneously developing a sensitivity towards each other; and that is ultimately how the individual is 'found' and democracy revived (ibid.: 6). Follett is often described as 'prophetic' in relation to her thoughts on group organization and politics, in the sense that she anticipated many of the thoughts contained in theories of deliberative democracy and also more widely in relation to her thoughts on organizational control (Ansell, 2009). As Parker (1984) notes, Follett believed firmly in the virtues of self-control, shared control, and notions of 'power with' rather than 'power over', which are concepts that would enter mainstream organization science only several decades later. Her work on group organization is no exception. One of the vital components of group organization, she asserts, is exactly the absence of domination and coercive control:

> I am free for two reasons: (1) I am not dominated by the whole because I am the whole;
> (2) I am not dominated by "others" because we have the genuine social process only
> when I do not control others and they do not control me, but all intermingle to produce
> the collective thought and the collective will. (Follett, 1918: 70)

In groups, people exercise a large degree of self-control because the 'self-and-other fallacy' is replaced by the recognition that everyone's interests are 'inextricably interwoven', and when everyone begins envisioning 'themselves as one Self', notions of coercion and domination become obsolete (ibid: 81–84). Or, as she puts it elsewhere: 'together we control *ourselves*' (Follett, 1924: 187). This leads us to another interesting aspect of Follett's theory of group organization, namely her thoughts on the relationship between diversity and unity. While she, as mentioned, holds roughly the same view of political parties as Michels (e.g., that hierarchies are inevitable, differences are suppressed), she firmly believed that group organizations were able to foster an entirely different mode of political association. That is, one in which horizontal co-creation is possible and where diversity is seen as something to be cultivated rather than abolished:

> Unity, not uniformity, must be our aim. We attain unity only through variety. Differences
> must be integrated, not annihilated, not absorbed. (…) Heterogeneity, not homogeneity,

I repeat, makes unity (…) Give me your difference, welcome my difference, unify all difference in the larger whole – such is the law of growth (ibid: 39–40)

Follett's description of group organizations as collectives that thrive on heterogeneity and self-control are in stark contrast to Michels' (1911: 371) account of the political party as a bureaucratic machine that 'reacts with all the authority at its disposal against revolutionary currents which exist within its own organization'. With Follett, we thus seem to find Michels' opposite, both in terms of their views on democracy, but also regarding questions of control in political organization. This brings us back to the purpose of the literature review. While Michels' analysis centers on hierarchical organizations such as political parties and labor unions, Follett examines non-hierarchical organizations such as neighborhood groups and occupational groups. Moreover, while Michels describes control (or power) as a conservative force closely related to coercion and domination, Follett identifies a much more subtle form of control represented by words such as 'intermingling' and 'permeation' that fit well with the description of normative control provided above (e.g., Kunda, 1992). In what follows, I will use these two accounts – both written during the earliest years of organization theory – as a point of departure for reviewing more recent texts on control in political organization. In conclusion, I will add a third classic text, namely Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1972) study of 'utopian' communities, as a way of connecting discussions of control to the question of commitment in political organization.

## *The legacy of Michels*

While it is widely recognized today that Michels' account of political parties is in short supply of analytical validity and paints an overly pessimistic image of formal political organization (Hands, 1971), it nonetheless had a tremendous impact on political scientists as well as organization theorists at the time. Not only did many studies of political organization set out to confirm his iron law of oligarchy, even more studies used Michels' theory as a yardstick for measuring levels of elite control in both political and non-political settings. Naturally, not everyone agreed with his cynical views on democracy and organization. In fact, most researchers strove hard to expose the limits to the iron law (Tolbert & Hiatt, 2009). However, his intellectual presence remains clearly felt in studies of political organization throughout large parts of the twentieth century.

One prominent example of Michels' legacy is Lipset et al.'s (1956) study of internal democracy in the International Typographical Union (ITU), which itself has become a classic within organization theory and industrial sociology. Even though the ITU was clearly a hierarchical organization with stable leadership positions and clear lines of command, the study cannot be characterized as an account of oligarchy. This is the case because the ITU was organized around a sophisticated two-party system where leaders were replaced on a regular basis and where members enjoyed a large degree of self-government. As such, *Union Democracy* (as the study is called) is not mentioned here because it verifies Michels' thesis but because it contains some interesting thoughts on the common approach to studying trade unions and similar organizations in the wake of Michels' account of political parties:

> Since Michels first wrote, many books and articles have been written about oligarchy in voluntary organizations, but almost invariably they have documented the operation of his iron law in another set of circumstances. They have shown how control of the organizational machinery, combined with membership passivity, operates to perpetuate oligarchic control. (Lipset et al., 1956: 5)

The study of ITU represents a break with Michels' thesis, in the sense that the iron law of oligarchy is refuted by way of empirical analysis. Curiously, however, this did not mean that researchers stopped relating to his thesis and turned their attention elsewhere. Particularly in studies of unionism, the iron law continued to signify a gold standard to be confirmed (e.g., Gulowsen, 1985) or rejected (e.g., Ursell et al., 1981). To some extent, this seems reasonable, since Michels' own study also targeted trade unions and not only political parties. However, if we consider studies of other types of political organizations, the pattern remains the same. Even in studies of formalized social movements and NGOs, Michels' thesis is continuously introduced as the authoritative account of internal democracy in political organizations. As Tolbert and Hiatt (2009: 179) argue, echoing Lipset et al. (1956) more than 40 years earlier:

> Over the years, this model [Michels' model of oligarchy] has served as a key point of departure for scholars interested in studying various forms of democratically oriented

organizations, from trade unions to producer cooperatives to social movements. Much of this work has aimed at identifying the limits to the iron law – that is, the conditions that may mitigate the drift towards oligarchic control.

One example is Staggenborg's (1988) oft-cited study of professionalization and formalization in the pro-choice movement. While Staggenborg's argument is that it is indeed possible to maintain democratic procedures in formalized social movements (in fact, even more so than in informal movements), she still invokes Michels' theory of oligarchy as a backdrop for identifying the level of elite control in the organization: 'I dispute the conclusion that formalized SMOs necessarily become oligarchical', she argues, 'because they follow routinized procedures that make it more difficult for individual leaders to attain disproportionate power' (Staggenborg, 1988: 604). Another example is Osterman's (2006) account of the Southwest Industrial Area Foundation, which is a network of schools and churches advocating better health policies, among other things. Similarly to Staggenborg, Osterman shows that oligarchy can be overcome by cultivating certain organizational practices. However, instead of focusing on certain 'routinized procedures', Osterman argues that an organizational culture of contestation and agency is key to preventing elite control and membership passivity from arising (for more examples, see Gamson, 1975; Jenkins, 1977; Messinger, 1955; Piven & Cloward, 1979; Rucht, 1999; Voss & Sherman, 2000; Zald & Denton, 1963).

These studies are all highly relevant for this dissertation because they examine processes of formalization and professionalization that closely resemble The Alternative's process of entering parliament. The problem is that they, along with Michels' thesis, follow a particular conception of organizational control; one that sees control as a coercive force pertaining to 'the direct mobilization of power' (Fleming & Spicer, 2014: 241). In other words, studies that take *Political Parties* as their main point of departure often view control as something that is done to someone, not as something that is at least partially self-imposed. For instance, while Osterman (2006) focuses on culture and agency, which are phenomena not typically associated with coercion, he nonetheless views control as something that clearly *belongs* to the people at the top of the hierarchy (e.g., the leadership 'dominates decision making' and has 'control over knowledge,

resources, and communication' (ibid: 633)). This essentially means that control is viewed as a zero-sum game and, thus, as something that can be minimized or eliminated (Brown, 1989).

Hence, while these studies help us understand the process that The Alternative is going through and the way in which oligarchies might be overcome, they have a hard time accounting for the modes of organizational control that permeate the party. In fact, if the control-as-coercion perspective was applied to The Alternative, it would be difficult to identify instances where control is actually exercised. At least, one would miss those enactments of control that seem to have the most profound effects on members of the party. To remedy this shortcoming, let us abandon Michels for a while and turn our attention to the conception of control found in Follett's work on group organization. Here, we find a much more sophisticated understanding of control that allows us to grasp some of the subtler ways in which control is performed in The Alternative.

## *The revival of Follett*

Follett did not have the same impact on the study of political organization as Michels did. Instead, she turned her attention to the burgeoning field of management studies and became one of the first critics of Taylorism (Ansell, 2009). Perhaps for that reason, her work has primarily been picked up by researchers studying economic organizations and has been somewhat neglected by those studying political organizations. While some scholars do relate explicitly to the work of Follett (e.g., Polletta, 2002; Maeckelbergh, 2009), most revive her thoughts more implicitly – or perhaps even unknowingly. As mentioned above, the gist in Follett's work on group organization is that such collectives operate in the absence of not only hierarchies but also coercive forms of control. Instead, groups rely on a mode of self-control manifested in an internalized responsibility for fellow group members and society as a whole, combined with the recognition that heterogeneity is a productive as well as creative force.

Now, while Michels' account of oligarchy is widely regarded as too pessimistic and analytically invalid, Follett's account of group organization is often considered overly idealistic (Mattson, 1998). However, while several scholars initially embarked on a quest to test Michels' theory in different empirical settings, decades would pass before someone thought of exploring the limits to

democratic participation in non-hierarchical groups. One of the earliest examples of this literature is Rothschild-Whitt's (1979) work on 'collectivist organizations', which are work organizations that also have explicit political agendas. These organizations are generally characterized as 'contrabureaucratic', in the sense that they rely on a different type of authority than most other organizations. For instance, while bureaucracies typically operate according to what Weber (1922) called a *formal*-rational base of authority, collectivist organizations rely on *value*-rational bases of authority. As Rothschild-Whitt (1979: 513) puts it:

> Collectivist organizations generally refuse to legitimate the use of centralized authority *or* standardized rules to achieve social control. Instead they rely upon personalistic and moralistic appeals to provide the primary means of control.

She refers to these means of control as 'normative compliance systems' in order to emphasize the way in which moralistic appeals are used to keep members in line. What makes the study of collectivist organizations interesting to this dissertation is not only the fact that it identifies normative control mechanisms in non-hierarchical groups, but also because it forges a connection between control and commitment in political organizations. As Rothschild-Whitt (1979: 515) notes, besides being an effective means of generating complicity, normative control mechanisms likewise create a 'high level of moral commitment', which ensure that individual members stay with the organization despite low salaries and poor working conditions (ibid: 515). However, according to Rothschild-Whitt, normative control mechanisms only work in relatively homogenous environments; that is, in organizations where members generally share the same worldview. As she argues:

> Where people are expected to participate in major decisions (and this means *everyone* in a collective and high-level managers in bureaucracies) consensus is crucial, and people who are likely to challenge basic assumptions are avoided. (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979: 514, italics in original)

The assumption that normative control mechanisms require homogeneity is challenged by more recent literature. One example is Polletta's (2002) historical analysis of seven social movements in

twentieth-century America. Beginning with the democratic experiments of the 1920s labor movement, she traces the genealogy of participatory democracy through the 1960s civil rights movement to the Direct Action Network that grew out of the so-called 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999. Though there are important differences between these movements, they were all characterized by decentralized modes of coordination, non-hierarchical leadership structures, and consensus-based decision-making processes. In terms of control mechanisms, the movements had formalized rules but were predominantly governed by certain 'normative underpinnings', or what she calls an 'etiquette of deliberation' (Polletta, 2002: 16). In the absence of bureaucratic or coercive control mechanisms, such underpinnings created a high level of trust and mutual respect between the individual members, which ultimately served the purpose of 'pressing participants to recognize the legitimacy of other people's reasoning' (ibid: 9).

One of Polletta's primary objectives is thus to show that participatory democracy in social movements is not predicated on homogeneity and uniformity, but may equally thrive in more diverse groups – and in that way, her study could be viewed as an effort to supply some of the empirical support that is lacking in Follett's account of group organization. Another equally well-cited study that shares the same ambition is Maeckelbergh's (2009) insider account of the Alterglobalization movement. However, in contrast to Rothschild-Whitt (and to some extent also Polletta), Maeckelbergh holds an entirely different view on consensus. Instead of viewing it as the cornerstone of participatory democracy and non-hierarchical organization, she views it as a means of suppressing and silencing marginalized voices. As she puts it: 'In a world of diversity, consensus is oppression' (Maeckelbergh, 2009: 99). In the Alterglobalization movement, the persistent focus on consensus that characterized earlier movements is thus substituted with a focus on conflict – or, rather, a type of consensus-based decision-making that does not require unanimity. As such, disagreement is seen as a creative force that pushes the movement forward, not as a stumbling block that obstructs the smooth operation of the organization.

Maeckelbergh's emphasis on horizontality, diversity, and conflict brings us surprisingly close to Follett's account of group organization. This becomes particularly clear if we turn our attention to the conceptions of power and control that run through Maeckelbergh's account of the

Alterglobalization movement. Based on her experiences in the movement, she designates three forms of power: 1) power as centralized hierarchy, 2) power as decentralized hierarchy, and 3) power as decentralized non-hierarchy. The first type of power roughly corresponds to a Weberian notion of control, where authority is exercised through command-obedience relationships. Movement actors usually associate this type of power with large corporations and state institutions. The second type of power is more akin to a Foucauldian understanding of power as something that exists in the capillaries of society and serves to sustain different discriminatory practices. Unlike these two forms of power, the third is a more constructive form of power that enables people to take control of their own lives, individually as well as collectively.

Maeckelbergh (2009: 115) refer to this type of power as 'prefigurative power', in order to emphasize creative aspects of building new relationships that exist free of domination. The task of movement actors is thus to limit and confront the two former types of power so as to allow prefigurative power to flourish. Central to prefigurative power is the notion of 'autogestion', meaning self-management. However, according to Maeckelbergh (2009: 121), autogestion is not about disciplining oneself and conforming to a particular culture, but about determining 'every aspect of our lives'. Autogestion involves creating spaces where people can 'pursue their own aims' without compromising other's ability to realize their own personal objectives. As one movement actor puts it: 'Everyone has to find their own way to express themselves, but without getting in the way of others' (ibid: 131). With the notion of autogestion, we thus end up almost exactly where Follett left us approximately a century ago: In group organizations, where horizontality and heterogeneity are the key organizing principles, classic control mechanisms are replaced with more subtle modes of control that encourage people to realize themselves and not infringe on other people's ability to do so – together we control *ourselves*.

Since Maeckelbergh's study of the Alterglobalization movement, several scholars have followed the path identified by her and others. Particularly noteworthy is Sutherland et al.'s (2014) work on leaderless grassroots groups (see also Western, 2014), Swann's (2016) work on anarchist cybernetics (see also Swann & Stoborod, 2014), and Parker et al.'s (2014b) work on alternative organizations (see also Land & King, 2014). In relation to the latter, Reedy et al. (2016) has further

developed the notion of 'individuation' as a countermeasure to asocial conceptions of individualization (everyman for himself) that are sometimes associated with control mechanisms that encourage heterogeneity and uniqueness (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). In contrast, individuation signifies a mode of organization where individuals are able to pursue their own goals in collaboration with others.

## *The relevance of Kanter*

We have now seen two opposing ways of approaching the study of power and control in political organization, and each approach helps us understand the contributions of this dissertation. While the Michels-inspired approach turns our attention to the dangers of oligarchy and the unequal power relationships that quickly arises from formalization and professionalization, the Follett-inspired approach directs our analytic gaze to the more subtle and self-imposed modes of control that permeate political parties such as The Alternative. To my knowledge, only one study has previously attempted to combine the two approaches – in other words, to supplement the focus on hierarchical political organizations with an understanding of normative modes of control – and that is Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1972) study of 'utopian' communities.[9]

Unlike Michels' account of political parties and Follett's work on group organizations, Kanter's study of 'utopian' communities is not explicitly a study of organizational power and/or control. Rather, it is a study of commitment mechanisms in thirty religious, politico-economic, and psychosocial groups in nineteenth-century America. Even though the different communities examined by Kanter were primarily concerned with building microcosms that, first and foremost, served their own members, many of them also had an impact on the wider society. One example is the *Shaker* communities that had a profound influence on issues of gender equality and the whole suffrage movement. Other groups such as *Modern Times* and *Utopia* were greatly inspired by socialist and anarchist ideals and, thus, more explicitly political. Some of these communities only lasted a few years, while others still exist today. The difference between the successes of the groups, Kanter (1972: 64) argues, lies in their approach to building commitment.

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[9] That said, studies of normative control in NGOs and charities do exist (e.g., Pfeiffer, 2016), but none of these organizations seem to meet the criteria for political organization stated in the beginning of this chapter.

Kanter delineates six commitment mechanisms that, in different ways, illustrate the intertwined nature of control and commitment: sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, mortification, and transcendence (ibid: 75). Taken together, they show that commitment building in utopian communities depends on a sophisticated combination of authoritative leadership and democratic participation. This is what Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) refer to as 'cages in tandem': a mixture of bureaucratic control and socio-ideological control. As such, the control mechanisms that Kanter identifies are rather different from the ones Michels observes. While the parties in Michels' (1911) account ensured commitment by striking down with authority on members who failed to stay in line, the utopian communities in Kanter's account built commitment by ensuring a high degree of cultural conformity. In fact, the socio-ideological part of the six commitment mechanisms could easily be characterized as a type of normative control:

> Because members choose to join and choose to remain, conformity with the community is based on commitment – on the individual's own desire to obey its rules – rather than on force or coercion. Members are controlled by the entire membership or by members they respect within the community rather than by outside agents or political forces. (Kanter, 1972: 2)

One example of this mode of control is the commitment mechanism that Kanter calls 'communion'. The point of communion is that all successful communities managed to construct a particular 'we-feeling' in the group. There were different ways of ensuring this, Kanter argues. One was to recruit members with relatively homogenous backgrounds; another was to use rituals and ceremonies in the name of fostering unity and 'oneness'. A third example of normative control is the commitment mechanism called 'de-individuation', which is a subset of what Kanter calls 'mortification'. Here, the point is similar to that of communion. For instance, by requiring uniform clothing styles and by minimizing opportunities for privacy, successful communities were able to remove the individual's sense of isolation and uniqueness. In other words: 'They change his identity so as to anchor it in things that are communal rather than personal' (ibid: 110).

In that way, Kanter's communities likewise differ from Follett's group organizations in that the latter seem to find unity in difference rather than uniformity. Furthermore, while all of the

successful communities in Kanter's study operated according to a comprehensive ideology that guided 'every bit of daily life' through meticulously detailed routines, Follett's groups tolerated 'all kinds of variabilities' – something that Kanter identifies as a recipe for failure (ibid: 121). The combination of authoritative leadership structures and normative control mechanisms thus places Kanter's communities in the middle of a continuum running from Michels' parties to Follett's groups. At Michels' end of the continuum, hierarchical structures are combined with bureaucratic and sometimes even coercive forms of control. At Follett's end, non-hierarchical structures are combined with a normative form of control than emphasizes diversity and difference.

The relevance of Kanter's study for this dissertation is twofold. First, it helps fill a gap in the literature on political organization by focusing on normative control in formalized and hierarchical organizations. This dissertation could be seen as an effort to extend these insights to the study of political parties. Secondly, it vividly illustrates how control and commitment often constitute a Janus head in political organization. As the quote above suggests, members of the utopian communities were controlled by 'the entire membership' and by their own desire to obey the rules of the communities. At the same time, however, the most enduring communities were also 'the most centralized and the most tightly controlled' (ibid: 129). This means that, although members freely chose to follow the rules of the communities, these rules were often invented and policed by a strong leader. This is not at all the case in Follett's group organizations. Here, members commit to the group because they realize that their interests are interwoven with others' and because they view the group as one composite 'self'. Nothing stops people from leaving the group, and no one tries to prevent them from doing so.

In Follett's account of group organization, control thus follows from commitment: One joins the group out of self-interest but remains due to a newfound responsibility for the group and for society as a whole. This fits well with Wiener's (1982) definition of normative commitment as an internalized pressure to do what is 'right' by staying with the organization and conforming to its objectives. In Michels' account of political parties, the opposite is the case: One joins the party on ideological grounds (or perhaps class-affiliation) and is kept in line by the authoritative command of an oligarchic elite. Thus, commitment is ensured by maintaining party discipline through modes

of bureaucratic and coercive control. In other words, commitment follows from control. In Kanter's case, control and commitment are intertwined to the extent where it is difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends. As the following papers hopefully show, this is to a large extent also the case in The Alternative.

## Gaps and problems

The difference between the Michels-inspired approach and the Follett-inspired approach points to an interesting tendency in the study of control and commitment in political organization: *the social structure of the organizations almost always mirror the control and commitment mechanisms identified and examined in the studies*. Whenever hierarchical political organizations are examined such as political parties and trade unions control is seen as bureaucratic or coercive, which often means that questions of commitment are left unanswered (for an exception, see Osterman, 2006). Whenever horizontally structured political organizations are examined such as social movements and activist networks control is seen as normative or self-imposed, which often means that questions of commitment are at the center of the analysis.

While a few studies examine coercive control mechanisms in non-hierarchical groups such as Freeman's (1972) important essay on the tyranny of structurelessness, hardly any studies examine the dynamics of normative control in hierarchical political organizations – Kanter (1972) being the exception. It thus seems as if there is a tendency to equate structure with control. And while one might speculate that this is true for all kinds of (non-political) organizations, this is not the case. As Ouchi (1977) has shown, structure and control are indeed related phenomena, but the two are far from isomorphic. In fact, the literature is replete with examples of normative control in economic organizations that are hierarchically structured (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Kunda, 1992). Hence, the tendency seems to apply only – or at least primarily – to the study of political organization.

To me, this constitutes more than a simple gap in the literature; it also represents an 'institutionalized line of reasoning' in need of problematization (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011: 32).

This is the case for two reasons. First, the isomorphic bond between control and structure makes it difficult to account for the ways in which commitment is built in hierarchical political organizations. Osterman (2006), for instance, had to supplement his study of oligarchic tendencies in a formalized social movement with a focus on 'culture' in order to investigate how membership commitment was sustained. Secondly, as this chapter's epigraph suggests, modern consumer-oriented societies have made coercive control mechanisms more or less redundant. In Michels' day and age, political parties could safely count on support from particular constituencies, which meant that 'traditional notions of command and discipline' had little effect on membership commitment, but with the dissolution of class consciousness and the end of history, parties today need 'more subtle methods to bring their members into line in terms of conduct, style and message' (Rye, 2015: 1053). By maintaining a focus on coercion and oligarchy, we risk missing those enactments of organizational control that have the most profound influence on party members, both in terms of keeping them in line and keeping them on board.

From participating in the game of academic publishing the last few years, I have learned that it is important to clarify the contributions of a given text upfront. Though I wholeheartedly agree with Kärreman (2016: n.p.) that organization scholars should stop 'jockeying for positions in various hyper-specialized debates' and focus more on 'the object under study on its own merits', I do believe that there is a place for sober generalizations. Taken together, this dissertation has two overall contributions: one empirical and one theoretical. The empirical contribution consists in applying the lens of organization theory to party politics in an effort to understand the internal dynamics of one particular party. Hopefully, this provides us with an opportunity to learn something about the organization of politics as well as the politics of organization. For instance, in paper four (chapter 8), I suggest that we can learn something about value-based organizing in general by studying the articulation of organizational values in a political context. Similar arguments are made in chapters 6 and 7.

The theoretical contribution of the dissertation consists of combining and extending the work of Michels' (1911), Follett (1918), and Kanter (1972) – as well as those influenced by them – in an effort to conceptualize the mode of control that permeates parties such as The Alternative. In the

concluding chapter, this is done by introducing the notion of 'neo-normative' control and by discussing the political dimensions of this kind of organizational control. Here, the main argument is that, in party politics where cultural conformity and party discipline often stifle attempts to imagine alternative futures, neo-normative control might be a way of keeping open the 'spaces of imagination' (see chapter 6) that allows people to reinvent themselves as well as the party (Wright et al., 2013). Hence, in a political context, the sinister motives that are often associated with neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) are potentially outweighed by the liberating effects that follow from a managerial focus on heterogeneity and difference – at least as long as this does not lead to individualization and fragmentation but to morally inclusive forms of 'individuation' that emphasize the realization of personal objectives via the collective (Reedy et al., 2016).

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# 5. First paper

The Alternative to Occupy? Radical politics between protest and parliament

*Emil Husted and Allan Dreyer Hansen*

## Abstract

In this paper, we compare the political anatomy of two distinct enactments of (leftist) radical politics: Occupy Wall Street, a large social movement in the United States, and The Alternative, a recently elected political party in Denmark. Based on Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization of 'the universal' and 'the particular', we show how the institutionalization of radical politics (as carried out by The Alternative) entails a move from universality towards particularity. This move, however, comes with the risk of cutting off supporters who no longer feel represented by the project. We refer to this problem as *the problem of particularization*. In conclusion, we use the analysis to propose a conceptual distinction between radical movements and radical parties: While the former is constituted by a potentially infinite chain of equivalent grievances, the latter is constituted by a prioritized set of differential demands. While both are important, we argue that they must remain distinct in order to preserve the universal spirit of contemporary radical politics.

## Acknowledgements

# Introduction

> Crowds are forcing the Left to return again to questions of organization, endurance and scale. Through what political forms might we advance? For many of us, the party is emerging as the site of an answer.

> Jodi Dean (2016: 4), *Crowds and party*

On September 17, 2011, scores of protesters responded to a call from the Canadian magazine, *Adbusters*, by pouring into New York's financial district to join the occupation of Wall Street, the so-called 'financial Gomorrah of America' (Adbusters, 2011b). The occupation, which quickly became known as Occupy Wall Street (OWS), was said to mark a shift in revolutionary tactics, in which a swarm of people would repeat one single demand. Though without settling on such a demand, the OWS protesters quickly descended on the nearby Zuccotti Park to create a miniature version of direct democracy based on active participation and consensus-based decision-making (Welty et al., 2013). For months, however, the struggle over demands waged, with one group arguing that the movement should present the established system with a list of tangible demands, and an anti-demand group arguing otherwise (Gitlin, 2012). Ultimately, OWS completely abandoned the pursuit of demands. The diversity of the movement's participants and the principle of 'modified consensus' at general assemblies made it virtually impossible for the movement to settle on particular objectives (Kang, 2012). Accordingly, OWS ended up as an irreconcilable crowd without any kind of positive articulation of political demands.

Even though several prominent scholars have celebrated the movement's aversion to parliamentary politics as a way of de-legitimizing the established system (e.g., Butler, 2012; Graeber, 2012; Hardt & Negri, 2011; Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012), OWS has received equally harsh criticism for its unwillingness to engage with existing political institutions. For instance, as Deseriis and Dean (2012: n.p.) argue: 'the movement has to dispel the illusion that all proposals and visions are equivalent as long as they are democratically discussed, and begin to set priorities to a truly transformative and visionary politics.' Similarly, Roberts (2012) argues that one reason why OWS 'failed' to disrupt the neoliberal status quo was its inability to issue concrete demands and its

reluctance to forge strategic alliances with established groups or politicians. Building on similar assumptions, Epstein (2012) makes a distinction between what she calls 'resistance' and 'social change', with OWS belonging to the former category, which is concerned with drama and spectacle, while the latter involves actually thinking about 'how we get from where we are to the society that we want' (Epstein, 2012: 81–82). To many observers – as wells as participants – OWS thus failed the progressive agenda because of its minimal impact at the level of 'realpolitik'.

On September 17, exactly two years later, the former minister of culture in Denmark, Uffe Elbæk, left the Social-Liberal Party in order to launch a new political project called The Alternative. The stated purpose of The Alternative was to challenge the unsustainable program of neoliberalism and the pro-growth agenda by representing and promoting social, economic, and environmental alternatives to the current state of affairs. Besides this grand objective, however, The Alternative started out with no political program whatsoever. All they had was a manifesto and six core values (The Alternative, 2016). With inspiration from the open-source community, the program was later developed through so-called 'Political Laboratories' in which anyone could participate, regardless of political convictions (The Alternative, 2014). During the national elections in June 2015, The Alternative entered the Danish Parliament with almost five percent of the votes. As such, both in terms of processual arrangements and the initial lack of particular demands, The Alternative could be viewed as an attempt to institutionalize the spirit of movements like OWS.

In this paper, we compare the political anatomy of OWS and The Alternative and argue that they should be viewed as two distinct enactments of contemporary radical politics. While OWS is viewed as an example of 'critique as withdrawal', The Alternative is characterized as an example of 'critique as engagement' (Mouffe, 2009).[10] Accordingly, we suggest that, at least on a conceptual level, The Alternative could be seen as a continuation of OWS' project; as a project that began where OWS ended by presenting the established system with a detailed list of political demands. Drawing on the vocabulary of Ernesto Laclau (1996a; 1996b; 2001), we conceptualize The

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[10] In this categorization, we follow Laclau and Mouffe's notion of politics as articulations, which entails forging connections with different demands and groups (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 105). It is, of course, only in this light, and not in the light of, for instance, Hardt and Negri's (2004) notion of the multitude as separate identities and points of resistance that OWS appears as an instance of withdrawal.

Alternative's transformation from a loosely defined movement to a well-defined political party as a move from a position of universality towards a position of particularity. In this case, the institutionalization of radical politics thus entails a particularization of The Alternative's political project, which ultimately sparks a greater need for political management in order for the party to maintain its universal appeal and, by implication, its radical identity. In conclusion, we use this conceptualization to propose a distinction between what we call 'radical movements' and 'radical parties': While the former is constituted by a potentially infinite chain of equivalent grievances, the latter is constituted by a prioritized set of differential demands.

The paper is structured as follows. We start by briefly reviewing the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985; 1987). Here, special attention will be paid to explaining Laclau's (1996a; 1996b) conceptualization of the unbridgeable chasm between 'the universal' and 'the particular', which constitutes the backbone of the paper's theoretical framework. Building on those insights, we proceed to discuss the nature of radical politics today.[11] A key argument here will be that the word 'radical' implies negativity and otherness, which makes it particularly difficult to advance positive articulations of radical politics. We will refer to this difficulty as *the problem of particularization.* After this theoretical exercise, we continue with a section on the methodological considerations guiding the forthcoming analysis. This leads us to the actual analysis of OWS and The Alternative, in which we tease out the difficulties of institutionalizing radical politics through parliament. This analysis is dovetailed by a concluding discussion of radical movements and radical parties. Building on key insights from the examination of OWS and The Alternative, we will attempt to distinguish between those two types of organizations. This distinction allows us to argue that both movements and parties are of great importance to contemporary radical politics, as long as they remain discrete parts of the 'mosaic left' (Urban, 2009). Finally, we propose possible avenues for further research.

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[11] It should be noted that while this paper solely deals with leftist radical politics, the argument conveyed throughout the text equally applies to other enactments of radical politics. So when we later speak of a 'mosaic left', one could just as well talk about a 'mosaic right'.

# Discourse theory and radical politics

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory was initially developed as an attempt to advance the socialist agenda by providing the academic Left with new thinking tools that would exceed the explanatory power of classical Marxist theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). By replacing the economic determinism of Marxist thinking with a post-structuralist focus on pluralism and contingency, Laclau and Mouffe sat out to create a theory that was capable of explaining the crisis of traditional leftist politics and the concomitant proliferation of 'new social movements' from the late 1960s and onwards. Even though this theoretical venture started with some of especially Laclau's earlier writings (e.g., Laclau, 1977), the theory rose to prominence with the publication of the seminal work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Not only did this book spark intense debate amongst leftist scholars and practitioners about the true nature of socialist politics, it also helped pave the way for a new understanding of democracy, and hence, a new conception of politics altogether.

Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971), Laclau and Mouffe place the concept of hegemony at the heart of political analysis. Instead of merely associating hegemony with leadership and superiority (as is often the case in mainstream political science), they appropriate the concept to explain how political projects generally emerge and become dominant. To Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is understood as the articulatory practice of expanding a discourse – or a series of discourses – into what Gramsci called a 'national-popular collective will' (Gramsci, 1971: 125). Hegemony is achieved, they argue, when unity is established in a concrete social formation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 7), and in that way, the concept of hegemony becomes closely related to another slippery concept in political science, namely the notion of ideology (Laclau, 1997). In practice, a discourse becomes hegemonic by provisionally fixing the meaning of the social through the articulation of a signifying system, which is structured around sufficiently empty signifiers (also referred to as 'nodal points' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 112)). Put briefly, empty signifiers are signifiers that lack a signified. Instead of pointing to something positive within a signifying system, empty signifiers point to the outside of the system and, by implication, to the very limits of the system: Its so-called 'radical otherness' (Laclau, 1996b: 52). Accordingly, the strictly positive character of that which is signified by empty signifiers is what Laclau terms the 'systematicity of

the system', meaning that elusive universal beyond the actual particularity of the elements involved (Laclau, 1994: 169).

A good example of an empty signifier is the word 'sustainability', which has recently become a frequent buzzword in leftist politics and which plays a central part in the political project of The Alternative in particular. Even though most people feel they know what the word means, it always escapes attempts to define it in any consensual way. This is the case because the term does not point to anything particular within a signifying system. It holds little positive meaning and cannot be substituted for more specific terms like, for instance, 'degrowth' or 'veganism'. Instead, 'sustainability' is the empty signifier giving sense to the signifying system in its totality. In this way, the emptiness of 'sustainability' points to the very limits of the system and to that which lies beyond the system, namely the ungraspable calamities of climate change. Of course, this inherent emptiness allows for a lot of window-dressing on the part of politicians and decision-makers, but it likewise provides environmentalists with the possibility of articulating various progressive initiatives within a shared frame of reference (see Brown, 2016; Levy et al., 2016). Hence, contrary to most common understandings, the concept of empty signifiers is not used by Laclau as a pejorative label for a destitute kind of politics, but rather as a defining feature of politics altogether.

As Laclau (1994) notes, empty signifiers are important to politics for several reasons. For one, empty signifiers are able to mobilize and represent a wide range of political identities, precisely because they do not signify anything particular. By not signifying (and thus prioritizing) particularities, empty signifiers are able to structure the identities of a signifying system in equivalential chains. An equivalential chain is a chain of political identities that have surrendered some of what initially made them differential in order to unite against a common adversary (i.e. the system's constitutive outside). As such, while the equivalential chain provides the individual identities with stability and solidarity, it likewise curbs their autonomy (Laclau, 2005: 129). This is why Laclau refers to empty signifiers as signifiers of 'the pure cancellation of all difference' (Laclau, 1994: 170). Secondly, empty signifiers are important to politics because they help build antagonistic relations towards opposing forces. As both Laclau and Mouffe have shown, the

production of social antagonisms is a prerequisite for all political projects, as the fantasy of a completely reconciled society remains unachievable (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 122; Mouffe, 2005). As we shall see, both OWS and The Alternative are founded on the erection of antagonistic frontiers demarcating themselves from a radical otherness. In both cases, it is 'the establishment' that is excluded from the system, which enables the projects to mobilize an almost infinite chain of counter-hegemonic identities.

## *The universal and the particular*

Hegemony is thus not only the name of a political logic but also the name of a process that brings us from the undecidable terrain of discursivity (the ontological level) to the decidable level of discourse (the ontic level) by provisionally fixing the otherwise contingent character of the social (Torfing, 1999: 102). Another way of conceiving this hegemonic process is through the asymmetrical relationship between what Laclau calls 'the universal' and 'the particular' (Laclau 1996a; 1996b). Usually when political projects emerge and become hegemonic, they undergo a process of universalization in which a particular struggle is detached from its local context and transformed into a universal project capable of representing a host of political identities (Laclau, 2001). A recent example of this might be the transformation of the Pirate Party from a Swedish protest party concerned with copyright laws and Internet freedom to an international party concerned with a wide variety of political struggles (Miegel & Olsson, 2008). In that way, the Pirate Party assumes the task of representing something much bigger than a particular struggle about copyright laws in Sweden, which is ultimately what led to the project becoming universal.

As such, particular identities (or struggles or demands) are differential, in the sense that they can be clearly separated from other particularities. As such, all social groups that are structured around specific interests can be characterized as particular identities (Laclau, 2001: 6). On the other hand, universal identities are former particular identities that have surrendered what initially made them differential in order to represent what Laclau calls the 'absent fullness of the community' (Laclau, 1997: 304). Whenever an identity assumes the task of representing the community in its entirety, it becomes universal and, hence, hegemonic. The hegemonic process is thus constituted by a 'dialectic' relationship (without *Aufhebung*) between the universal and the

particular as two unbridgeable levels of the social. The reason why the chasm between universality and particularity is unbridgeable is related to the plurality of the social and the impossibility of reaching a fully reconciled society. In fact, the preservation of this chasm is a fundamental trait of democracy. The moment when the universal becomes commensurable with a certain particularity is the moment we enter the world of totalitarianism (Laclau, 2001: 12).

By definition, the universal is an unachievable beyond, which can only be manifested by an empty signifier. Accordingly, the universal identity must itself lack positive content, as the attribution of positive content to a universal identity inevitably entails a prioritization of some kind of particularity (Laclau, 2001: 10). The dialectic relationship between the ongoing production of emptiness, closely associated with the universal, and the specificity of the particular will be paramount to our forthcoming analysis. Here, we shall see how OWS was forced to abandon their initial quest for particularity and adopt a highly universal identity, and how The Alternative – contrary to OWS – began as a highly universal project but ended up with the perhaps most particular political program of all parties in the Danish parliament. These opposing transformations are what distinguish the two organizations and, ultimately, what constitutes the difference between radical *movements* and radical *parties*. However, before we get ahead of the argument, let us first consider the nature of contemporary radical politics.

## *From identity politics to radical politics*

With the rise of the Alterglobalization movement, famously initiated during the Battle of Seattle in 1999, a new type of radical politics seems to have emerged (Maeckelbergh, 2009; Taylor, 2013). Previously, the label of radical politics was reserved for the many 'new' social movements that transpired during the latter part of the 20th century, such as second wave feminism and the African-American civil rights movement (Newman, 2007: 174). These movements are often associated with the term 'identity politics' because they advocated freedom and recognition for clearly designated constituencies. In other words, rather than trying to represent 'the people' as a whole, they struggled for the recognition of oppressed identities by seeking to transform the dominant conception of specific groups of people (Young, 1990).

Drawing on a Laclauian vocabulary, one could argue that the new social movements were chiefly concerned with the assertion of particular identities within a broader discourse of postmodernity, in which the grand narratives of modernity had been replaced by an incommensurable sea of differences (Laclau, 1985: 41). Instead of building hegemonic projects through the articulation of universalistic ideas, the goal of identity politics was simply to secure the recognition of yet another particular identity. However, as Newman (2007) makes clear in his book *Unstable Universalities*, radical politics after the Alterglobalization movement has another agenda. Rather than fighting for the rights of so many differences, contemporary radical politics has revived the Left's interest in universalities. As explained by Laclau's former supervisor, Eric Hobsbawm (1996: 43):

> The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for all human beings. However we interpret the words, it isn't liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn't equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only.

Contrary to the particularistic objectives of identity politics, contemporary radical politics assumes the task of representing the pure being of 'the people' (as a whole) by negating that which threatens its very existence (Laclau, 2006). The difference between identity politics and what we call contemporary radical politics can thus be summarized as a difference between abundance and lack (Tønder & Thomassen, 2005). While the former seeks to offer recognition to an abundance of particularities, the latter operates with a constitutive lack as its only point of unity. As previously alluded to, this lack is caused by the emptiness of universality and the associated cancellation of particular differences (Laclau, 1996a). It is precisely the lack of positive content, and the shared opposition towards established 'positives', that unifies political organizations like the Alterglobalization movement (Newman, 2007). And as we shall see, this also applies to OWS and the initial stage of The Alternative.

Radical politics, conceived as involving the production of emptiness through the articulation of empty signifiers, may thus be conceptualized as politics based on negativity and otherness. Of course, this does not mean that there is nothing positive or meaningful about radical politics. It

merely means that the *defining* feature of radical politics is negativity towards 'the establishment'. This kind of negativity does, however, characterize a wide range of political forms like, for instance, populism (Laclau, 2005). As such, The Alternative might appear as a populist party, and the early dominance of equivalential logics as well as the undeniably decisive role played by its leader, Uffe Elbæk, arguably points in that direction. However, one of the defining features of populism is the explicit articulation of 'the people' as a figure being threatened by an adversary but also as having the potential to overcome this threat. In the case of The Alternative, 'the people' does not play a dominant role (at least not explicitly). Likewise, despite Elbæk's central position, the organization of The Alternative points strongly in the opposite direction. The so-called Political Laboratories, in which everyone is invited to shape the party's policies, suggest that it is neither a populist nor a leader's party.

Our conception of radical politics has a series of consequences for political organizations that, like OWS and The Alternative, consider themselves radical. Perhaps the most important implication for this paper concerns the problem of institutionalizing radical politics through the parliament. This is the case because, in the context of radical politics, the move from protest to parliament entails a move from a position of universality towards a position of particularity.[12] This transformation is caused by the need to respond to the logic of the established system, which requires a positive articulation of political demands. The task of attributing positive content to an otherwise universal identity is difficult for two reasons: First, it cuts short the equivalential chain, which essentially means that the scope of representation is significantly narrowed. Secondly, it differentiates and isolates demands that were previously united in opposition to a common adversary. The most pertinent consequence of these two processes is that the move from universality towards particularity risks cutting off supporters who no longer feel represented by the project. In other words, the more particular a political project gets, the harder it gets to claim to represent 'the people' as a whole (Laclau, 2005: 89). In what follows, we will refer to this as the *problem of particularization*.

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[12] In the context of identity politics, the opposite would most likely be the case. Since identity politics is concerned with the assertion of isolated particularities, the entry into parliament would most likely entail a universalization of the political project, not a further particularization. This was, for instance, the case for the Pirate Party.

# A brief note on methods

Even though the forthcoming analysis revolves around the empirical story of two 'critical cases' (Flyvbjerg, 2006), the gist of this paper is thoroughly theoretical. That is, the main purpose of the paper is to raise and unfold a general problem inherent to all radical political projects that seek to particularize an otherwise universal identity. Thus, the purpose of the paper is not to ponder the empirical complexity of either case or to investigate the problem of particularization across a representative sample of political organizations. Instead, the point is to strategically appropriate two illustrative cases as a way of allowing for a logical deduction of the type: 'If this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases' (ibid: 230). Naturally, this does not render methodological considerations obsolete, which is why we below shed some light on the way in which data has been collected and analyzed for the purpose of the present paper.

First of all, it should be noted that this paper is part of a larger study of The Alternative's transformation from movement to party carried out by the first author. The empirical foundation of the larger study consists of well over 1000 pages of written material, 34 semi-structured interviews, and almost 200 hours of participant observation, all of which was collected and conducted during 18 months, from May 2014 to October 2015. Hence, even though the present paper relies on only a handful of documents, the remaining bulk of data has naturally helped us arrive at the points that are conveyed throughout the text. For instance, when we, towards the end of the analysis, suggest that The Alternative has managed to maintain a degree of universality despite the party's sudden claim to particularity, this argument is supported by more data than what is explicitly presented here (most notably observations and interviews with different members of The Alternative). Unfortunately, limitations of space prevent us from unfolding the richness of that data here.

Now, turning to the data that is examined in this paper, the following analysis consists of a close reading of a few central documents. These documents have all played a crucial role in defining the political projects of OWS and The Alternative, and they continue to shape the way supporters relate to both organizations. In the case of OWS, two documents are examined: the first is *Adbusters Magazine's* initial call to 'occupy Wall Street', manifested in a now iconic poster and an

associated email (Adbusters, 2011a; 2011b). The second is *The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City*, which serves as the movement's first official statement (Occupy, 2011). In the case of The Alternative, we rely on a total of seven documents, including the party's manifesto (The Alternative, 2013b) and two versions of the political program (The Alternative, 2014; 2015b). The reason for this unevenness of data has to do with the paper's main objective. As mentioned, besides splitting the difference between radical movements and radical parties, the paper's chief goal is to empirically demonstrate what we call *the problem of particularization*, which is a problem faced by The Alternative and evaded by OWS. As such, the analysis of OWS, while certainly an interesting case in and of itself, primarily serves to set the stage for the introduction of The Alternative.

Analytically, we approached all of the documents through Laclau's conceptualization of the universal and the particular, which meant that we sat out to explore whether these documents point to particularities within the two organizations, or whether they, instead, point to some kind of radical otherness. In practice, we identified particularity as the positive articulation of specific political objectives. This meant that whenever the documents contained actual policy proposals or suggestions for demands, we interpreted this as signs of particularity. In contrast, whenever the documents only contained negative claims about some externality, or when they predominantly revolved around empty signifiers, we interpreted this as a sign of universality.

## Analysis: Institutionalizing radical politics

Before proceeding to the analysis, it should be noted that there are important differences between the Danish and American forms of government. For instance, while the Danish system is built on proportional representation, which tends to favor multi-partism, the American system is built on plurality voting, which (according to Duverger's law) tends to favor a two-party system. Besides this, the electoral threshold in Denmark stands at a mere 2 percent, making it comparatively easier for extra-parliamentarian groups in Denmark to enter parliament. As such, one might argue that OWS and The Alternative are part of two somewhat incommensurable realities. And indeed, this would have been the case, had we set out to explain *why* The Alternative engages with the state and *why* OWS did not. This is, however, not the purpose of the

forthcoming analysis. As stated in the introduction, the purpose is to tease out the theoretical implications of institutionalizing radical politics. We will do so by first recounting the story of OWS, and the movement's aversion to parliamentary politics, as a way of setting the stage for the introduction of The Alternative. The way the two organizations move between protest and parliament, universality and particularity, will ultimately assist us in characterizing OWS and The Alternative as two distinct enactments of radical politics: One that withdraws from the state and one that engages with the state and, consequently, the problem of particularization.

## *Occupy Wall Street: 'A movement without demands'*

Even though the Occupy movement was a product of many people's shared ambitions to bring the spirit of the Arab Spring and the Spanish Indignados to America (Kroll, 2011), most observers trace the birth of OWS back to a poster issued by *Adbusters Magazine* in July 2011. The poster shows a ballerina dancing atop Wall Street's famous statue of a charging bull. Right above the ballerina, a text reads: 'What is our one demand?' (Adbusters, 2011a). Accompanying the poster was an email written as a 'tactical briefing' to all those 'redeemers, rebels and radicals out there'. Besides encouraging its receivers to flood Wall Street on September 17, the email likewise suggested that a shift in revolutionary tactics was underway. Instead of attacking the system 'like a pack of wolfs', which presumably was the tactic of the Alterglobalization movement, the occupation of Wall Street would be more like a swarm of people repeating one easily comprehensible demand. In fact, the email even contained a suggestion for one such demand, namely the appointment of a 'presidential commission to separate money from politics' (Adbusters, 2011b).

As such, OWS began as an attempt to create a highly particularized movement, initially only concerned with articulating one single demand. However, once the first protesters assembled in Zuccotti Park, just north of Wall Street, it quickly dawned on everyone that settling on one specific objective would be more than difficult. While some participants debated whether OWS should focus on 'ending corporate personhood' or 'getting money out of politics' (Kang, 2013: 59), the movement's anarchist wing advocated a complete withdrawal from the state and, hence, an anti-demand approach to radical politics (Graeber, 2013). Zeroing in on one demand became even harder when OWS adopted a 90% threshold at general assemblies (what was called 'modified

consensus'), which made it virtually impossible for participants to resolve any issue related to the question of demands. So, instead of presenting the established system with one tangible demand – or even a list of demands – the movement decided to refrain from advancing positive articulations of political objectives. In that way, OWS officially abandoned the pursuit of particularity and adopted a highly universal identity represented by the well-known meme, 'we are the 99 percent' (van Gelder, 2011).

At a general assembly on September 29, the movement's participants voted in favor of adopting a document entitled *The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City* (Occupy, 2011). In the absence of positive articulations, the declaration contained a long list of negatively framed grievances targeted at an unspecified actor called 'they'. In total, the declaration lists no less than 21 accusations regarding a wide range of issues. For instance, while the first grievance addresses the topic of illegal foreclosures, the third concerns gender and race inequality at the workplace, and while the fifth grievance concerns animal welfare, the twelfth points to issues of press freedom infringements. At the very end of the list, a footnote reads: 'These grievances are not all-inclusive' (Occupy, 2011). Two things about this declaration are immediately interesting to this paper. The first has to do with the seemingly infinite sequence of grievances. From a Laclauian point of view, this sequence is easily interpreted as an 'equivalential chain'. As explained in the theory section, an equivalential chain is a series of non-prioritized identities united against a common adversary, thereby obtaining a high degree of universality (Laclau, 2005: 77). In accordance with the definition of equivalence, none of the listed grievances are prioritized or hierarchically ordered, and they all share the same overriding dissatisfaction with 'they'. This leads us to the second point of interest in OWS' declaration, namely the erection of an antagonistic frontier between 'the people' (represented by OWS) and 'they'. It takes little knowledge of OWS to realize who they are. 'They' is, of course, the name of the movement's logical counterpart, the wealthiest one percent of the population, who function as the constitutive outside of the 99 percent (van Gelder, 2011).

The equivalential chain, and the associated splitting of the social into two opposing camps – the people and its Other – is a key feature of all universal political projects and, thus, a central part of

any radical politics (Laclau, 2006; Newman, 2007). As such, *The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City* helps establish the universal character of OWS' political project by ultimately cancelling all particularity through the articulation of 'the 99 percent' as an empty and radically inclusive signifier (Maharawal, 2013). Towards the end of 2011, OWS revived the discussion of demands by issuing an official statement against the 'Stop Online Piracy Act' (Kang, 2014: 80), but by then the movement had already sealed its legacy as 'a movement without demands' (Diseriis & Dean, 2011). Due to the lack of positive articulations, OWS continued to grow wider in scope, and when the movement later substituted its physical presence for purely online endeavors, the proliferation of grievances exploded (Husted, 2015).[13]

It is an ongoing debate whether OWS had any impact on 'realpolitik'. While some argue that the recent US presidential nominations were notably influenced by the overall message of OWS (Levitin, 2015), the main conclusion seems to be that, besides a few unauthorized co-optations by politicians like Al Gore and Nancy Pelosi, the movement has had little 'assessable impact' on parliamentary politics (Malone & Fredericks, 2013). The general agreement about the lack of impact has earned OWS a reasonable amount of criticism from observers and participants alike (e.g., Chomsky, 2012; Epstein, 2012; Perlstein, 2012). In fact, some even argue that OWS 'failed' because of its unwillingness – or inability – to issue concrete demands and its reluctance to forge strategic alliances with parts of the established system (Ostroy, 2012; Roberts, 2012).[14] One of the more avid critics, Jodi Dean, has gone to great lengths to show why the movement's anarchist-inspired aversion to parliamentary politics was, in fact, a misguided attempt to preserve the egalitarian ethos of the initial occupation (Deseriis & Dean, 2011; Dean, 2012a; Dean, 2012b). In her most recent book, Dean (2016) makes the argument that crowds, such as the one constituting OWS, are inherently non-political until they abandon 'horizontalism' as an organizing principle and

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[13] Research on OWS within media studies suggests that social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, played a crucial role in allowing the movement to survive, expand, and renew itself after the eviction from Zuccotti Park (e.g., Castells, 2012; Juris, 2012). However, as Bennett (2012) points out, the growing impact of digital media on contemporary politics has likewise helped spawn a more personalized approach to political participation in which individuals are mobilized around 'personal action frames' rather than collective identities. This may be one reason why the OWS crowd remained fundamentally irreconcilable.

[14] Even the former editor of *Adbusters Magazine* and OWS co-founder, Micah White (2016), describes the movement as a 'constructed failure' because of its inability to achieve social change by engaging actively with the established system.

begin to set priorities by articulating a clear political orientation. In other words, until the chain of equivalences is turned into a prioritized chain of differences, the crowd cannot claim to have a politics. As she puts it:

> The politics of the beautiful moment is no politics at all. Politics combines the opening with direction, with the insertion of the crowd disruption into a sequence or process that pushes one way rather than another. There is no politics until a meaning is announced and the struggle over this meaning begins. (Dean, 2016: 125)

According to Dean, one way to make the crowd political is for it to crystallize into a political party that is capable of preserving the 'egalitarian discharge', while simultaneously providing the crowd with a sense of direction. Only by doing so will the crowd move from being an opportunity for politics to becoming an actual political project (Dean, 2016: 206). Even though Dean firmly believes that the Communist Party is best suited for assuming the task of institutionalizing the spirit of movements like OWS, she nonetheless suggests that any kind of (leftist) 'movement party' will do. That is, a party that replaces the worn-out notion of a vanguard party with a party that provides a sense of political orientation while keeping open the space in which the crowd can picture itself as 'the people' (Dean, 2016: 229). In Laclauian terms, a movement party is thus a party that somehow manages to articulate particular objectives while maintaining some kind of universality. Coincidentally, since the rise and fall of OWS, a whole wave of such parties has swept across Europe: From SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain, to Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and LIVRE in Portugal. For the remainder of this analysis, we will explore the case of yet another movement party, namely a newly elected party in Denmark called The Alternative.

## *The Alternative: From movement to (movement) party*

In many ways, The Alternative began where OWS ended: With an almost infinite chain of equivalent grievances. In other words, while OWS ended up as a movement without demands, The Alternative began as such. At a press conference in November 2013, the former minister of culture in Denmark, Uffe Elbæk, and the head of a large umbrella organization for public sector workers, Josephine Fock, announced that they would be launching a new political project called The

Alternative. The guiding idea behind The Alternative, they proclaimed, was to represent and promote social, economic, and environmental alternatives to the current state of affairs. However, to most people's surprise, Elbæk and Fock did not present any political program: 'We don't have a grand party bible on the shelf', they told the press. Instead, they announced that the program would be developed during the following six months through a series of publically accessible Political Laboratories. Through these laboratories, the goal was to arrive at concrete solutions to the most profound problems facing contemporary society and to figure out how to transform Denmark into 'the place that we all dream of – a good society for everyone' (The Alternative, 2013a).

Though no political program was presented at the press conference, Elbæk and Fock did provide some sense of direction by drawing attention to The Alternative's manifesto (The Alternative, 2013b) and its six core values (The Alternative, 2013c). Especially the manifesto, which, in the absence of concrete policy proposals, quickly became a main source of attraction for many supporters, is structured in much the same way as OWS' declaration. Even though it does not contain an equivalent sequence of grievance *per se*, the manifesto clearly testifies to the initial universality of The Alternative's political project. Instead of listing a series of grievances and emphasizing that these grievances are not all-inclusive, The Alternative's manifesto begins with the encouraging statement: 'There is always an alternative', and it ends with the following lines:

> The Alternative is for you. Who can tell that something has been set in motion. Who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old. Another way of looking at democracy, growth, work, responsibility and quality of life. That is The Alternative.

Throughout the text, The Alternative is described as 'a hope', 'a dream', and as 'a yearning' for sense and meaning. It is also described as a 'shout out' against cynicism and as a 'countermeasure' to the various crises facing the world and its future generations (The Alternative, 2013b). Just like OWS' declaration, The Alternative's manifesto subscribes to the logic of equivalence for two reasons. First of all, it lends itself to multiple interpretations of what it actually means to be alternative. By proclaiming that there is always an alternative, and by stressing that The Alternative is for anyone who can feel that 'something new' is about to replace 'something old',

the manifesto allows an incredibly wide range of (counter-hegemonic) identities to identify with The Alternative. In that way, The Alternative assumes the task of representing all those who feel a need for change, and in doing so, 'The Alternative' automatically becomes a universal identity and, hence, an empty signifier without any explicit claim to particularity.

Secondly, the manifesto establishes an antagonistic frontier between The Alternative and its constitutive outside. As mentioned in the theory section, empty signifiers are important to politics because they manifest a divide of the social into two opposing camps: 'the people' and its Other (Laclau, 1994; Laclau, 2006). In the manifesto, this is done in a more subtle way than in OWS' declaration, where this division is quite clearly expressed. However, by positioning The Alternative as a countermeasure to the old way of perceiving 'democracy, growth, responsibility and quality of life', a frontier is erected between 'the new', as represented by The Alternative, and 'the old', as represented by the establishment. As such, even though the language of 'the people' vs 'the establishment' is never explicitly appropriated, the universality of The Alternative's project is thoroughly solidified by the manifesto's dialectic rhetoric of new and old, which – intentionally or not – quickly translates into a dialectic of us and them. This constitutive negativity towards the establishment is further emphasized elsewhere in the manifesto where the need to 'take back ownership of the economy and of democratic decisions' is articulated (The Alternative, 2013b).

Through the manifesto, it becomes clear how The Alternative began as an incredibly universal project with no particular objectives; and this, combined with the lack of institutional representation, is the main reason why we conceive of The Alternative in its initial stage as a radical movement.[15] However, as Elbæk and Fock promised at the press conference, a political program was to be expected. Hence, in the early weeks of 2014, more than 20 Political Laboratories were organized, and through these events, more than 700 people participated in the process of crafting Denmark's first 'open-source' political program (The Alternative, 2016). In late

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[15] What we mean by this is that, in the beginning, a *movement logic* was dominant in the Alternative. It is thus important to note that our conception of a movement differs from more traditional ones. While, for instance, Tilly and Wood (2012: 4) define a (social) movement as a synthesis of campaigns, repertoires, and so-called 'WUNC displays', we conceptualize the *logic* of a (radical) movement as the grouping of loosely organized identities, tied together in equivalential chains and united against a common adversary. Hence, it matters less whether a movement has a certain size or whether its participants are committed or not. In relation to the present paper, the logic that structures the group is more important.

May, the program was accepted at the party's first general assembly and then presented to the public. At that point, the program contained a series of proposals revolving around six core policy areas (The Alternative, 2014). However, The Alternative's political program was far from finished. During the remainder of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, more Political Laboratories were organized and more proposals were added to the program. Besides organizing laboratories and staging various happenings, however, members of The Alternative spent most of their time collecting signatures in order to become eligible to run for parliament. On March 3, 2015, they succeeded in reaching the threshold of 20,260 signatures, which allowed The Alternative to register as an official contender for seats in the Danish Parliament. Not only did this mark the formal transformation from movement to party, it likewise made The Alternative's members much more focused on the upcoming elections: Campaign strategies were prepared, key policy areas were selected and, most importantly, more proposals were added to the program (The Alternative, 2015a).

At the national elections in June 2015, The Alternative earned an unexpected 4.8 percent of the votes, which translated into nine seats in the Danish parliament. At that point, the political program had grown significantly, and it now contained 64 pages of highly specific policy proposals (The Alternative, 2015b). In fact, this easily made The Alternative's political program the most detailed program across all nine parties in the Danish parliament. Not only is The Alternative's program now the longest and most detailed program in parliament, it likewise contains a range of very elaborate and sometimes rather controversial proposals such as offering unconditional basic income to unemployed citizens (proposal 4.3.1), legalizing assisted euthanasia (proposal 9.7.4), and releasing bisonoxes into state-owned forests as a way of enhancing biodiversity (proposal 3.3.1). As such, it no longer makes sense to speak of The Alternative as a universal project. In fact, more than any other party, The Alternative positions itself as a highly particularized project; and in doing so, it thus abandons the task of representing the pure being of 'the people' as a whole. Paraphrasing Hobsbawm (1996), one could argue that The Alternative is no longer for everyone.

This process of particularization poses a problem for The Alternative because it invariably entails a narrowing of the scope of representation. Today, The Alternative is no longer defined solely

through its opposition towards the establishment, which essentially means that the equivalential chain has been cut short, and that the logic of (positive/particular) differences becomes dominant (Laclau, 2005: 72). But how then might we still characterize The Alternative as a *radical* party? Does the loss of universality not automatically cancel the party's radical identity? In the case of The Alternative, the answer seems to be: *no*. First of all, one would assume that particularization entailed a decrease in registered memberships. It seems logical to assume that once the party goes from representing 'the people' to representing a particular constituency, a certain amount of identities would cease to identify with the overall project. However, this has in no way been the case. In fact, The Alternative has sextupled its membership base in only one year (Juul, 2016). Furthermore, in terms of opinion polls, the party has likewise increased its numbers: From 0.2 percent four months prior to the elections to 7.8 percent at the time of writing (Berlingske, 2016). Secondly, through one and a half years of qualitative data collection conducted by the first author, it has become clear that those members who could be expected to feel marginalized by and large remain supporters of The Alternative's political project, regardless of political disagreements. As one member put it during a discussion on a Facebook page associated with The Alternative:

> I don't need to agree with the party's policy in that many areas to believe in the project. The most important thing for me is that it's a product of pure democratic debate without dogmatism. To me, it's a strength that we maintain a curious disagreement all the way through the party, and that we don't lock ourselves into political programs.

It thus seems as if The Alternative has somehow managed to maintain a degree of universality while going through a process of particularization; a universality that allows the equivalential chain to expand despite the party's sudden claim to particularity. As such, The Alternative seems to meet the requirements for a so-called 'movement party' (Dean, 2016: 229). However, further research is needed in order to explore how and why that is made possible: Are we witnessing a simple case of 'impure' representation (Laclau, 2005: 155) in which identity flows, not from represented to representative, but also the other way around? Or has The Alternative, in fact, managed to postpone or displace the problem of particularization by somehow masking the existence of a gap between the universal and the particular?

# Conclusion: Of movements and parties

When political projects, such as The Alternative in Denmark or Podemos in Spain, channel the energy of popular mobilizations into the parliamentary system, they engage with the state in much the same way that many scholars have prescribed (e.g., Dean, 2016; Mouffe, 2009; White, 2016). This engagement, however, comes at a cost. By substituting negativity and otherness for a positive articulation of political objectives, they replace the logic of equivalence with a logic of difference in which political demands are clearly separated and hierarchically prioritized (i.e. by selecting key campaign issues). This means that they effectively remove the 'counter' from an otherwise counter-hegemonic project, and in doing so, they risk compromising their radical identity. As such, political parties like The Alternative cannot be conceived as alternatives to movements like OWS but as a necessary supplement. We thus disagree with those who claim that OWS was a failure because of its inability to pose demands. There is clearly something valuable in maintaining a universal stance against the hegemony of dominant discourses such as neoliberalism and the pro-growth agenda. That being said, we do agree with the critique leveled against the movement's unwillingness to forge strategic alliances with parts of the established system. As Mouffe (2009: 237) explains:

> It's a 'war of positions' that needs to be launched, often across a range of sites, involving the coming together of a range of interests. This can only be done by establishing links between social movements, political parties and trade unions, for example. The aim is to create common bond and collective will, engaging with a wide range of sites, and often institutions, with the aim of transforming them. This, in my view, is how we should conceive the nature of radical politics.

Following that argument, the task for contemporary radical politics is neither to fully withdraw from nor to fully engage with the state. The task is, in our view, to forge links and alliances between various parts of what Urban (2009) has called the 'mosaic left'. That is, a left that consists of multiple entities that share a common goal but operate at different levels and according to different logics. For instance, while political parties are forced to engage in realpolitik through highly particularized negotiations and compromises with opposing parties, interest lobbies, and

the media, movements are free to operate at a much more universal level by advocating and prefiguring alternative futures that transcend the oftentimes paralyzing cul-de-sac of parliamentary politics. Building on that conclusion, we thus propose a conceptual distinction between 'radical movements' and 'radical parties'. While the former is constituted by a potentially infinite chain of equivalent grievances (as was the case with OWS and the initial stage of The Alternative), the latter is constituted by a prioritized set of differential demands (as is the case with The Alternative today). This distinction allows us to view both movements and parties as vital parts of contemporary radical politics, as long as they remain discrete entities and refrain from collapsing into one single organizational form. Failing to maintain that distinction would most likely mean the end of universality.

However, as mentioned above, despite the recent transformation from movement to party, The Alternative has somehow managed to maintain a degree of universality in the face of rapid particularization. How and why that is the case remains to be fully explored. The most straightforward answer seems to be that The Alternative has found a way to bridge the otherwise unbridgeable gap between the universal and the particular. But, as explained in the theory section, that is simply not possible. At least in democratic societies, the chasm between universality and particularity must be kept open, as the conflation of the two levels would entail an immediate regression into the world of totalitarianism. Another explanation might be that young opposition parties such as The Alternative are less affected by the demand for particularization – at least as long as they maintain an oppositional stance and refrain from passing bills and striking compromises. This has, however, not been The Alternative's strategy. In fact, through the notion of a 'new political culture', which has been one of the party's trademark ideas, The Alternative has made it a virtue to collaborate with opposing parties and to enter productive negotiations despite political differences.

This leads us to the conclusion that The Alternative, rather than bridging and/or avoiding the gap, has found a way to mask or displace the very existence of a gap, which ultimately prevents it from collapsing into one organizational form. Further research is needed to explore how this is done in practice: What political strategies, organizational practices, or managerial technologies have assisted The Alternative in maintaining the ongoing production emptiness that is so vital to radical

politics, while simultaneously engaging with the state? And more importantly perhaps, what political and organizational consequences does this have for all those radical parties that are currently flourishing across the European continent?

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# 6. Second paper

## Spaces of open-source politics: Physical and digital conditions for political organization

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## Abstract

The recent proliferation of Web 2.0 applications and their role in contemporary political life have inspired the coining of the term 'open-source politics'. This article analyzes how open-source politics is organized in the case of a radical political party in Denmark called The Alternative. Inspired by the literature on organizational space, the analysis explores how different organizational spaces configure the party's process of policymaking, thereby adding to our understanding of the relationship between organizational space and political organization. We analyze three different spaces constructed by The Alternative as techniques for practicing open-source politics and observe that physical and digital spaces create an oscillation between openness and closure. In turn, this oscillation produces a dialectical relationship between practices of imagination and affirmation. Curiously, it seems that physical spaces open up the political process, while digital spaces close it down by fixing meaning. Accordingly, we argue that open-source politics should not be equated with online politics but may be highly dependent on physical spaces. Furthermore, digital spaces may provide both closure and disconnection between a party's universal body and its particular body. In conclusion, however, we propose that such a disconnection might be a precondition for success when institutionalizing radical politics, as it allows parties like The Alternative to maintain their universal appeal.

## Acknowledgements

# Introduction

> It takes a world to create a locality, and an imagined world to transform ourselves in place. Perhaps this is one way that (counter)hegemony is enacted.
>
> J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006: 4), *A postcapitalist politics*

The recent proliferation of Web 2.0 applications and their role in contemporary political life have inspired the coining of the term 'open-source politics' (Hindman, 2007; Karpf, 2011). Originally, the open-source concept emerged in the area of computer software development but has since been transported into other domains such as science (Koepsell, 2010), journalism (Lewis and Usher, 2013), architecture (Ratti & Claudel, 2015), and even law enforcement (Trottier, 2015). Online activist groups such as MoveOn.org first introduced the concept to politics, but it was former US Senator of Vermont, Howard Dean, who initially applied it to party politics (Kreiss, 2011). At its most basic level, open-source is defined as 'something that can be modified because its design is publicly available' (Opensource.com, 2015). In political organization, this means that the public is allowed to influence future and existing policies by participating in both planning and implementation processes (Sifry, 2004). As such, the notion of open-source politics signifies a break with traditional structures of representation inherent to liberal democracies as it dramatically reverses the political supply chain. Instead of limiting the role of the citizen to a simple *consumer* of politics, she or he is turned into a *supplier* of politics. Of course, this does not mean that we are witnessing the end of political representation but that a more participatory and less 'mediated' kind of party politics is emerging (Tormey, 2015: 83).

As such, the notion of open-source contains a 'kernel of radicalism' in that it problematizes the privatization of knowledge (Berry, 2008: 192). This, however, should not lead us to assume that open-source politics is necessarily a post-capitalist practice. As argued by a series of observers, the open-source movement was initially driven by profit-related incentives (Stallman, 2002), relies heavily on free labor (Terranova, 2004), and has its roots in capitalist conceptions of property (Klang, 2005). After all, the term 'open-source' was invented by software entrepreneurs to attract investors who resented the notion of 'free software' (Von Hippel & Von Krogh, 2003). However, the open-source process moves away from its capitalist origins when it is viewed as an end in itself

rather than just a means to achieve certain ends (Weber, 2004: 56). Also, as Berry (2008: 193) notes, the best way to support the vibrancy of an open-source community is by 'acknowledging the precarious nature of its reliance on the market and exploring its democratic potentials through experimentation instead with state organizations'. In this way, the collaborative and nonproprietary ethos that runs through open-source politics could potentially be of great importance to the vision of a post-capitalist society (Mason, 2015: 120).

In Denmark, a radical political party called *The Alternative* has engaged with open-source politics by constructing their entire political program through publicly accessible bottom-up processes. The Alternative was founded in 2013 as a movement against the unsustainable program of neoliberalism and an 'old political culture' characterized by spin and tactics. After 1.5 years, it was registered as an official candidate in the national elections, and in June 2015, The Alternative entered the Danish Parliament with almost 5 percent of the votes, which translated into nine seats in parliament. The hasty entry into parliament particularized and professionalized The Alternative's political project significantly. Hence, in order not to marginalize all those supporters who disliked the party's new identity, The Alternative needed to find ways of coping with the swift transition to parliamentary politics. In this article, we argue that The Alternative's organization of open-source politics can be seen as a technology serving a dual purpose: It is part of a post-capitalist politics intended to bring 'the people' closer to the parliament, and it helps The Alternative cope with the organizational transformation from movement to party.

In order to analyze The Alternative's organization of open-source politics, we draw inspiration from the literature on organizational space (Clegg & Kornberger, 2006; Dale & Burrell, 2008; Taylor & Spicer, 2007). This literature has provided valuable insights into many organizational phenomena, but the specific relationship between organizational space and political organization remains underexplored. This may be a consequence of the static conception of space that has dominated political thought for decades (Foucault, 1980; Lefebvre, 1976; Massey, 1992). In contrast, we adopt a more dynamic notion of space, which allows us to view organizational space not only as the *outcome of* politics but also as the *condition for* politics. In doing so, we investigate how different organizational spaces afford different practices in the case of open-source politics

within The Alternative. Here, to 'afford' (Gibson, 1986) means that the various features of a given space and the social context in which this space is embedded invite a certain use (Fayard & Weeks, 2014: 247). Crucially, this is only an invitation. Other actions are always possible, depending on people's perception of the space in question. It thus becomes an empirical question how the organization of space and the use of that space produce specific forms of political action. As we shall see, only some spaces fix meaning, while others invite political imagination and change.

The Alternative has constructed three kinds of physical and digital spaces in order to conduct open-source politics. Through an empirical investigation, we observe how these spaces are used to oscillate between openness and closure and how this oscillation produces a dialectical relationship between the associated practices of imagination and affirmation. Perhaps surprisingly, it seems that physical spaces open up the process, while digital spaces close it down by fixing meaning. Accordingly, we argue that open-source politics should not be equated with online politics but may be highly dependent on physical spaces. Also, contrary to a commonly held view in media studies (e.g., Bruns, 2008), sociology (e.g., Castells, 2009), and the e-government literature (e.g., Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; Dunleavy et al., 2006), we argue that digital spaces do not always open up political processes but may provide both closure and disconnection between a party's universal body and its particular body. In conclusion, however, we propose that such a disconnection might be a precondition for success when institutionalizing radical politics, as it allows parties such as The Alternative to maintain their universal appeal.

This article is structured as follows. First, we present the case of The Alternative's transformation from movement to party and pose the following questions: *How does open-source politics help political organizations such as The Alternative cope with the transition from movement to party? And how are physical and digital spaces used in the construction of open-source politics?* The presentation of The Alternative is followed by a review of the literature on organizational space, with a focus on the spatiality of political organization. After the 'Methods' section, the analysis describes three different spaces constructed by The Alternative as techniques for practicing open-source politics. In conclusion, we point to the specificities of the various techniques and provide

reflections on the implications of our analysis for organization studies of post-capitalist politics in general and open-source politics in particular.

## The Alternative: Open-source politics in practice

In September 2013, the former minister of culture in Denmark, Uffe Elbæk, left the Social Liberal Party to launch a new political project called The Alternative. To the astonishment of most political observers, The Alternative started out with no political program whatsoever, having only a manifesto and six core values (courage, generosity, transparency, humility, humor, and empathy). With inspiration from the open-source community, the program was developed later through so-called Political Laboratories in which both members and non-members could participate (The Alternative, 2014a). The manifesto, which quickly became a main source of attraction for supporters, opens with the promising statement, 'There is always an alternative', and it ends with the following lines:

> The Alternative is for you. For you who can tell that something has been set in motion. For you who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old. Another way of looking at democracy, growth, work, responsibility and the quality of life. This is The Alternative. (The Alternative, 2013b)

The manifesto's broad appeal, and the idea of producing a political program from the bottom-up, allowed an incredibly wide range of people to read their own personal preferences into The Alternative. This obviously provided The Alternative with important momentum but made it equally difficult for the party to particularize its project without simultaneously losing support. With every proposal added to the political program, particular meaning was assigned to an otherwise universal identity. This problem was further accentuated by the party's recent entry into parliament, where mundane day-to-day politics seemed to specify the meaning of The Alternative even further. At the time of writing, The Alternative has been in parliament for almost a year. The political program is now no less than 64 pages and contains more than 80 highly specific policy proposals. Despite this, and contrary to what most observers expected, support for

The Alternative has continued to grow. Measured through membership statistics and opinion polls, the party is more popular now than ever before.

The remarkable success of The Alternative suggests that the party has found a way of coping with the rapid transition from movement to party. At least, it has found a way of maintaining support from all those who initially thought 'the alternative' was going to be something different from what The Alternative turned out to be. This assumption is supported not only by membership statistics and opinion polls but also by 1.5 years of qualitative fieldwork, which has revealed that most of those who could be expected to feel marginalized by the increasingly fixed character of The Alternative remain dedicated supporters (Husted & Hansen, 2017). Liberalists and socialists alike continue to find representation in a party that one would be hard pressed to identify with any of these labels. While there are arguably multiple explanations as to how this has been possible, as we shall see, one explanation is related to the party's spatial organization of open-source politics.

Formally, The Alternative is divided into two parallel sections: an administrative section dealing with organizational matters and headed by the board, and a political section dealing with policy matters and headed by the political leadership (the members of parliament (MPs)). Each section has its own secretariat with a dozen staff members, and each section has its own headquarters. Furthermore, while the administrative section is accountable to the party's members through internal elections, the political section is accountable to the voters through national and regional elections (The Alternative, 2016). The process of open-source politics, which is at the center of this article, is closely associated with the political section of The Alternative. This, however, does not mean that it is not of concern for the administrative section. For instance, the people planning and facilitating Political Laboratories are usually associated with the party's administrative section and often experienced organizational developers. These people are known as 'facilitators'. Also, the majority of people participating in so-called Political Forum meetings are board representatives.

Internally, The Alternative's organization of open-source politics is conceived as a more or less linear process comprising activities in at least three different spaces. The life of a policy proposal

begins in a *Political Laboratory* (space 1), which is a public workshop for anyone interested in a certain topic. Immediately after, a group of volunteers embarks on the task of textualizing the outcome of the laboratory in order to post a written policy proposal on The Alternative's online platform, *Dialogue* (space 2). Here, the proposal is further discussed by both members and non-members. After three weeks on Dialogue, the proposal moves into the third space, called *Political Forum* (space 3). Here, board representatives and the political leadership—approximately 40 people in total—meet to discuss whether the proposal should be included in The Alternative's political program. This marks the finalization of the proposal. In keeping with the spirit of open-source politics, the task of Political Forum is merely to decide whether or not a proposal should be accepted. However, as we shall see, the forum frequently adds new ideas to the proposals and modifies them substantially. Below, we review the literature on organizational space with a specific focus on political organization in order to establish a foundation for understanding how these different types of spaces condition open-source politics.

## Organizational space and political organization

In recent decades, the literature on organizational space has expanded significantly (Halford, 2004; Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Especially since the pronouncement of the 'spatial turn' in social theory (Soja, 1989) and since the English translation of Lefebvre's (1991) seminal work on the production of space, organization and management scholars have appropriated the concept of space to analyze a wide range of organizational phenomena such as control (Dale, 2005), hierarchies (Zhang & Spicer, 2014), trust (Nilsson & Mattes, 2015), learning (Englehardt & Simmons, 2002), work spirit (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006), entrepreneurship (Hjorth, 2004), legitimacy (De Vaujany & Vaast, 2014), change (Carr & Hancock, 2006), and subjectivity (Halford & Leonard, 2006). A common argument in these texts is that different spatial configurations promote certain organizational practices and constrain others. As Baldry (1999: 536) puts it, 'Environments provide cues for behaviour'. This has led to studies focusing on the relationship between physical features of the environment and organizational behavior—a view of space that Taylor and Spicer (2007) call 'space as distance'.

However, as argued by a series of social constructivist scholars (e.g., Clegg & Kornberger, 2006; Dale & Burrell, 2008; Hernes, 2004), the studies that apply the distance-oriented view tend to privilege what Lefebvre (1991) calls 'perceived' space and ignore what he calls 'conceived' and 'lived' spaces. On one hand, conceived space concerns formalized mental representations of space, as expressed through maps and literature. On the other hand, lived space concerns the local experiences of social actors that escape the hegemony of 'the conceived' by providing counter-discourses to the taken-for-granted ways of knowing spaces (Lefebvre, 1991: 10). This framing of lived space as spaces that cannot be represented *as such* has sparked an interest within organization studies in exploring various spaces of resistance (Kokkinidis, 2014; Munro & Jordan, 2013; Thanem, 2012) and encouraged new ways of accounting for the spatiality of organizing. For instance, drawing on Sloterdijk's theory of spheres, Borch (2010) urges scholars to attend to the affective dimension of so-called organizational atmospheres when studying spatial configurations of organizations. Similarly, Beyes and Steyaert (2012: 50) propose abandoning spatial heuristics and instead using all the senses to envelop oneself in the event of spacing. The main inspiration from this strand of literature is the call to examine enactments of lived space, where space might be a site of political change.

Following this line of reasoning, space should not be viewed as something fixed and in-temporal (Foucault, 1980; Massey, 1992; Thrift, 1996) but as procedural and continuously performed by those inhabiting it (Dale & Burrell, 2008: 109). This runs counter to the dominant conceptions of organizational space, where the focus is still representational and not on the 'becoming of space' (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012: 47). If we look to bodies of work that link space and the political, we also find conceptions of space as representing determination and closure. For instance, in Laclau's (1990: 68) political theory, this is the case because space is conceptualized as time's immediate counterpart and because *time* is conceived as the form of politics and change, while *space* is seen as inherently apolitical.

Although Laclau's notion of space is limited to instances where meaning is fixed, which means that not all physical spaces are 'spatial', we agree with Massey (1992) that the distinction between time and space makes little sense and leaves us ill-equipped to grasp the constitutive effects of

spatial configurations. In her view, time and space are not each other's opposites but are instead inseparable (Massey, 1992: 76). Contrary to the stasis view of space, this implies that spaces are inherently ambiguous, which means that they neither ensure nor hinder freedom (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004: 1103) or, by extension, political change. In terms of political organization, we may identify spaces that are strategically constructed to cultivate certain political identities or novel political ideas, but it remains an empirical question how space becomes part of political organization. This implies that space is not only the outcome of politics but also the condition for politics (Massey, 2005).

This view is reflected in the relatively small body of research that explores political organization from a space-sensitive point of view. One example is Wilton and Cranford (2002), who argue that social movements should be seen as sophisticated spatial actors that often succeed in disrupting the taken-for-granted by employing tactics of 'spatial transgression'. Similarly, Ku (2012) shows how conservation campaigners in Hong Kong managed to reappropriate two ferry piers as spaces of oppositional discourse. Both studies can be considered part of a growing literature on the spatial tactics of social movements that demonstrate how movement actors skillfully engage in what Ku (2012: 18) calls 'place remaking from below'. While this literature has expanded with the rise of recent square protests and the Occupy movement (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013), gaps in our knowledge of organizational space and political organization still remain. For one, while most of these studies have implications for the study of organizational space, hardly any of the above-mentioned texts target organization studies directly (for exceptions, see Kokkinidis, 2014; Munro & Jordan, 2013; Thanem, 2012). Instead, their primary audiences are geographers and political scientists. Apart from this, the majority of space-sensitive studies of political organizations explore extra-institutional organizations such as social movements and activist networks. To our knowledge, no studies have hitherto considered the question of organizational space within political parties. This is the research gap that this article seeks to cover.

As mentioned previously, The Alternative employs both physical and digital spaces in their organization of open-source politics. In our understanding, digital or virtual spaces cannot be demarcated from physical space in advance (Bryant, 2001; Cohen, 2007; Kivinen, 2006). This

follows from our rejection of the previously mentioned conception of 'space as distance'. We follow Fayard (2012) in arguing that while digital space might be conceived as a different kind of space, it nonetheless shares all the properties of physical space. This conceptualization of space is not about identifying x/y/z coordinates but about investigating how material entanglements, social practices, and narratives create spaces (Fayard, 2012: 178). Accordingly, this article's distinction between the digital and the physical has been an empirical question rather than an a priori distinction between two inherently different concepts.

Although we approached the various types of spaces in a symmetrical way, without assigning them specific qualities from the outset, the empirical analysis showed that they afforded different kinds of practices. We identified how open-source politics produces a dialectical relationship between *practices of imagination* and *practices of affirmation* and how these practices are tied to different spaces. While the term 'imagination' refers to the creative exercise of envisioning that which does not yet exist (Castoriadis, 1987), the term 'affirmation' refers to the exact opposite practice, namely, the repetitive exercise of solidifying that which already exists. Accordingly, the practice of imagination is closely related to openness and unfixity (Latimer & Skeggs, 2011), while closure implies a provisional fixing of meaning (Komporozos-Athanasiou & Fotaki, 2015).

Hence, whenever spaces are constructed as open, there is room for imagination. Whenever they are constructed as closed, there is only room for affirmation of an already fixed meaning, and there is no room for 'non-rational' experiences that are tied to the affective dimensions (Shouse, 2005) of space. Here, 'openness' should not be confused with accessibility. Open spaces are not necessarily accessible to a large number of people (although accessibility is, of course, an important aspect of open-source politics). Instead, openness signifies a lack of determination at the level of meaning. This is why open spaces invite imagination and provide conditions for change, while closed spaces do not. The conceptual pairs of openness/closure and imagination/affirmation are drawn into the discussion to shed light on the organizational implications of open-source politics within The Alternative.

# Methods

To understand how open-source politics works as a managerial technology in practice, we rely on a qualitative case study. We consider The Alternative a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) because we assume that relatively few organizations engage in the organization of open-source politics through a varied use of spaces and that we can learn something about an emerging phenomenon by studying precisely this party. We also believe that it is a topical case because of the observable transformation from movement to party, which is marked by struggles to maintain a universal appeal—a transformation arguably shared by similar radical parties. Given the political landscape and the technological possibilities of our time, such transformations may become even more widespread in the years to come.

The empirical material for this article stems from relevant observations and interviews from a larger study of The Alternative's organizational transformation. Of almost 200 hours of observations, 34 interviews, and well over 1000 pages of written material, we have chosen to draw more directly on ethnographic observations from six Political Laboratories and three Political Forum meetings and on 15 semi-structured interviews. This material was selected after we chose to focus on the dynamics of openness and closure. A thorough reading of the entire empirical material allowed us to select all the relevant sources of data for analysis.

Both the laboratories and the forum meetings took place from January 2015 to November 2015, and they concerned a wide range of political themes such as taxation, education, and asylum policy. Especially, the first author participated actively in all six laboratories and in all three forum meetings (though not actively in the latter). This meant that besides observing and recording the events, we took part in the discussions and exercises that occurred at the laboratories. The primary motivation for doing so was to experience firsthand how open-source politics is enacted within The Alternative and to envelop ourselves in 'the event of spacing' (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012: 50). According to Jorgensen (1989: 15), the aim of participant observation is to 'uncover, make accessible, and reveal the meanings (realities) people use to make sense out of their daily lives'. Contrary to some ethnographers, we did not analyze the material with the hope of arriving at a

true understanding of a reality 'out there' but rather to be able to thoroughly describe the narratives, practices, and materiality of the spaces of open-source politics.

The other part of the empirical material is 34 semi-structured interviews. These interviews lasted approximately an hour and were coded by both authors for the analysis of this article. While 15 of the interviews focused specifically on the organization of open-source politics within The Alternative, the remaining 19 dealt more broadly with the respondents' individual perceptions of The Alternative as an organization and themselves as members of that organization. The respondents of the former type were recruited through the method of purposeful sampling, in which the researcher selects so-called information-rich cases (Patton, 1990: 169): in our case, people who worked with planning and facilitating Political Laboratories and Political Forums. The idea behind this sampling rationale was not only to get information about The Alternative's motivation for engaging with open-source politics but also to understand why the facilitators tried to construct the different spaces in certain ways and what they hoped to achieve. The documents used in the analysis consist of both publicly available texts, such as the party program and the manifesto, and more internal texts such as a PowerPoint presentation on how to conduct Political Laboratories.[16]

The analytical focus on the tension between openness and closure was developed on the basis of our observations. We could observe some very different policymaking practices in different empirical settings. For instance, the point about physical spaces 'opening up' or affording more political imagination than digital spaces was first observed at Political Laboratories and through online observations on the Dialogue platform. We went back to both interviews and observations and analyzed them by reading transcripts and field notes in an effort to identify recurring patterns and similarities across the two types of data. We noticed every time processes seemed to 'open up' and every time they seemed to 'close down'. After an initial coding phase, we conducted more observations and interviews until we decided that we had enough material to describe three different types of space. The analysis treats each space in turn, highlighting the rationales for

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[16] The interviews as well as most of the documents have been translated into English by the authors. All interview quotes have been approved by the respondents.

establishing each space, the techniques employed to shape them in a particular way, and the types of practices that can be observed in them.

# Analysis: Spaces of openness and closure

The novelty of The Alternative's political project rests firmly with the party's bottom-up process of policymaking. As mentioned above, the process begins with a Political Laboratory (space 1). It then moves through the party's digital platform, Dialogue (space 2). After three weeks, it enters the Political Forum (space 3), which is a designated space for board representatives and the political leadership to discuss the quality of submitted proposals. The process ends with the policy proposal being either added to The Alternative's official political program or rejected. This is the process that we and The Alternative (2014a: 2) refer to as open-source politics. The Alternative's organization of open-source politics is usually portrayed as a linear process moving from openness toward closure, with the Political Laboratories representing openness and ambiguity and the party program representing closure and fixity. However, as will become apparent, the process is not linear. Instead, it oscillates back and forth between openness and closure, which is an observation that allows us to reflect on the relationship between organizational spaces and their implications for open-source politics.

## *Space 1: Political Laboratories*

Perhaps the most original part of The Alternative's organization of open-source politics is called Political Laboratories. This is the first space constructed to create politics from below. Political Laboratories can be defined as themed workshops open to the wider public. In the words of The Alternative (2015b: 2):

> A political laboratory is the space we offer each other to investigate and interrogate a political topic/question. The laboratory is also the space for developing the politics of the Alternative—both locally and nationally. This can be done in various ways, like in workshops, seminars, meetings, interviews, online dialogue ... The most important thing is to establish a space where we create new political conversations and thereby develop new political ideas.

There are few formal requirements for how to conduct Political Laboratories. Instead, the idea is to encourage ordinary citizens to take the lead in developing The Alternative's policies. Political Laboratories may, therefore, assume any shape, take place at any time, and involve any kind of activity. For instance, one of the laboratories that we observed was organized by members of the political leadership, took place at a public school, and lasted a full afternoon; another was spontaneously organized by an ordinary member, took place at a bridge in central Copenhagen, and involved passersby responding to a single question (Figure 4).



**Figure 4**: Examples of Political Laboratories.

As such, anyone can create laboratories, and everyone is welcome to participate. In practice, this means that both members and non-members (and even members of opposing parties) are allowed to attend the laboratories and contribute to policymaking (The Alternative, 2015b). The Alternative's organization of open-source politics begins in this way as an extremely open process, both in terms of imagination and accessibility. It does not matter whether you propose paying taxes with artwork (Observation, POLA, 2015b) or abolishing the conventional school system (Observation, POLA, 2015a). Even the wildest of ideas are welcome. As explained by a member of the national team for Political Laboratories:

> Well, I think that there should be space for completely crazy ideas, where you just think
> to yourself: 'This can never be realized'. If there's no room for such ideas, we never get

145

anywhere ... This is what's so cool about ordinary people participating and not just people who speak the language of politicians: You are actually allowed to propose suggestions that are completely unrealistic (Respondent #18).

The motivation for this radical openness may be found in the rationale behind Political Laboratories, best captured by the frequently used slogan 'More People Know More' (The Alternative, 2014a: 2). According to The Alternative (2015b: 3), this means that the actual policies crystallizing out of Political Laboratories should be 'based on as many good arguments, perspectives and as much knowledge as possible'. In this way, the articulation of the slogan 'More People Know More' illustrates the link between The Alternative's process of policymaking and the general ethos of open-source communities (e.g., Raymond, 1999).

This rationale is supported by a range of techniques that afford particular practices during the laboratories. For instance, at the beginning of most Political Laboratories, participants are asked to circulate while sharing their hopes and visions on a particular topic. One respondent called these exercises 'energizers' and argued that they create a nice atmosphere that allows everyone a chance to express themselves (Respondent #4). Similar practices such as coordinated greeting sessions (Observation, POLA, 2015b) and collective high-fiving (Observation, POLA, 2015c) likewise support the narrative of openness and inclusivity. Since high-five exercises are not the norm in policymaking, we interpret such bodily exercises as elements in the attempt to broaden the scope of what policymaking might be. In traditional political theory, 'the political' has primarily been understood as a domain where deliberative practices constitute the basis of reaching consensus through exchange of arguments bound by logical rules (Mouffe, 2005). For good reasons, policymaking has been tied in this way to the mind, to reason, and to rationality. Acknowledging and even encouraging the use of the body, emotions, and more 'irrational' behaviors can thus be seen as an opening of the policymaking process.

This ties in with a general trend in organizations toward play (Andersen, 2009), learning through experiments (Clegg et al., 2005), and 'doing before thinking' (Mintzberg & Westley, 2001). This trend runs parallel to the affective turn in social theory, which helps us understand how 'non-rational' experiences have effects on individuals and groups. The affective turn has also influenced

organization studies (see, for example, Fotaki et al., 2017). It suggests that social analysis should transcend the dichotomies between mind/body and reason/emotions. As Shouse (2005: n.p.) notes, 'What is perceived as emotional is in fact both political and structural, and what we perceive as free from feelings, like politics and reason, are filled with precisely these elements'. In The Alternative, we observe a use of bodily and emotional experiences in the organization of politics, and the empirical material shows that the physical space, material objects, and the body's place among them are interpreted as important elements in creating a specific kind of political dialogue and engagement. This is illustrated by a facilitator of Political Laboratories who reflects on how common understanding is created in this type of space:

> It is very tangible ... that there is room to stand in a circle and look into each other's eyes. There is room to sit around a table and work together and look into each other's eyes. There is room for putting things up on the wall; for using the walls, too. There is tactility. That really means a lot. There are post-its, there are pens. (Respondent #23)

This quote highlights the importance of the body in space. It is not uncommon for participants to comment more on the techniques and the form rather than on the outcome of the laboratories and to link the space created here with a renewed political engagement and energy. Another participant in one of the laboratories evaluated it by noting how she 'got so much out of these humorous and engaged discussions' (Observation, POLA, 2015c).

While techniques like this for engaging the body are important in opening the policymaking process, deliberation is not abandoned. This is illustrated by another important technique, namely, the so-called debate principles (The Alternative, 2014b)[17]. The principles contain six almost Habermasian rules of engagement for political debate within The Alternative. For instance, one principle states, 'We will listen more than we speak, and we will meet our political opponents on their own ground'. Similarly, another principle reads, 'We will be curious about each and every

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[17] The six debate principles are: 1) We will openly discuss both the advantages and the disadvantages of a certain argument or line of action. 2) We will listen more than we speak, and we will meet our political opponents on their own ground. 3) We will emphasize the core set of values that guide our arguments. 4) We will acknowledge when we have no answer to a question or when we make mistakes. 5) We will be curious about each and every person with whom we are debating. 6) We will argue openly and factually as to how The Alternative's political vision can be realized.

person with whom we are debating'. During the laboratories, participants are almost always encouraged to pay close attention to the principles as a way of ensuring healthy and productive dialogue. Moreover, during the laboratories we observed, the principles were always embedded in the material surroundings. According to a frequent facilitator of Political Laboratories, material representations of the principles are of utmost importance:

> When I prepared my first laboratory, I wrote them [the principles] down on flip-overs. You know, large pieces of paper that were put up in the room. When we were done, I took them down again and coiled them up nicely so that I could bring them to my second and third laboratories. I think it's extremely important to have both the principles and our values put up in the room so than you can point to them during political laboratories. (Respondent #12)

At Political Laboratories, the slogan of 'More People Know More' is embedded in this way both in a series of bodily practices and in a mesh of material entanglements. The concern with form over content, shared by facilitators and participants alike, contributes to the ambiguous (understood as unpredictable) nature of Political Laboratories, as it directs the focus away from the task of developing policy proposals. By the end of a laboratory session, no one knows what the outcome will be and how (or even if) that outcome will translate into policy. The ambiguity of the space also arises from the much-used techniques of pairing or grouping people while letting them deliberate by themselves. Individuals and groups can spend much time in the laboratory without going in the same direction or building on one another's ideas. Again, the organizers' focus is on opening up various avenues, not paving the same path.

Summing up, the first space of The Alternative's organization of open-source politics is easily characterized as a space of openness and ambiguity. This picture seems to change, however, once we move to the second space, namely, the party's digital platform, Dialogue.

## Space 2: The Dialogue platform

Even though Political Laboratories do not *always* crystallize into actual policy proposals, they often do. This usually happens when a self-styled working group, consisting of whoever volunteers, embarks on the task of textualizing the outcome of the laboratory. In order to submit a policy proposal to Political Forum, the group needs to complete a template and post it on The Alternative's (2015a) digital platform, Dialogue. At the platform, both members and non-members are allowed three weeks to discuss the policy proposal in detail. At this point, however, the proposal is already provisionally fixed. It cannot be edited, and it cannot be blocked. This means that the discussions taking place on Dialogue are primarily meant to aid the members of Political Forum in making a decision on whether or not to accept the proposal for the political program. As a respondent noted, this frequently causes frustration among the people discussing on Dialogue:

> It's an attempt to prepare the members of the Political Forum through all the inputs that are made. It's not an attempt to change it [the proposal]. And that's difficult, because as soon as people see something like that ... In fact, what we primarily see is people wanting to add something. They say: 'That's fine, but what about this and that'.
> (Respondent #6)

The rationale that guides Dialogue as an organizational space is thus not the same as the one guiding the Political Laboratories. While the slogan of 'More People Know More' helps configure the laboratories as radically open spaces where anything might happen, Dialogue is guided by a logic of quality improvement in the sense that it has been constructed in a particular way to avoid the addition of endless particular demands. As the respondent above explains, users are not allowed to add or retract anything from the proposals. Instead, their comments are meant to help members of the Political Forum make informed decisions about the quality of submitted proposals. This brings us to the question of what happens in practice in this space. In an observation of a proposal on tax policy uploaded to Dialogue, we could follow how a conversation was started by a facilitator of Political Laboratories. The proposal was well written and several pages long. Below the proposal, comments emerged. The first comment was posted on the same day and simply acknowledged the digital forum for being a nice place to develop politics. After four more days, another person added three posts with specific additional suggestions on

different tax topics. After yet another day, a new user asked who drafted the proposal. After this, the 'conversation' more or less ended. It is worth noting that posts were not commented upon and that questions were not answered. In total, the proposal attracted 10 comments. After 11 days, there were no more comments or questions. However, some critical comments, such as the ones below, showed disappointment with the debate:

> Unfortunately, the debate is very slow here. Maybe it is because a proposal cannot be changed, only accepted or rejected?

> I believe you are right, that if the proposal can just be accepted or rejected, that kills the debate. At least for me. Although I try to make people participate in the debate. (Observation, Dialogue, 2015)

This resonates with the assessment by a facilitator of Political Laboratories. She pointed out that there is a huge difference in the kinds of practices afforded by the physical space at the laboratories and the kinds of practices afforded by the digital space created to qualify the proposals:

> I don't spend any time there [at Dialogue]. And I don't have any interest in it because that's not what I believe in. I don't believe in conversations like that … People say that language is an action, but there is so much more to my language than just words. There is also the performative, the physical presence … At the laboratories we made, people were so eager, like 'wow, how can we participate further, what is going to happen now, how can we …'. And I went, 'we continue the discussions at Dialogue', and we have also made a Facebook page that we hoped worked differently than Dialogue. And nobody uses any of them. (Respondent #23)

It seems that the digital space narrows the room for imagination and hence the number of particular demands. As such, the idea of quality improvement is thoroughly embedded in Dialogue's digital infrastructure and produces particular practices accordingly.

The Dialogue platform is built on an open-source system called *Discourse*, which again is modeled on the celebrated Q&A website *Stack Overflow*. This system is celebrated for its way of nudging users toward behaving according to the purpose of the platform. Dialogue does so by awarding badges—and hence privileges—to users who help improve the quality of the online debate. For instance, Dialogue awards badges to users who read the About section. It also awards badges to users who read other people's posts, especially if they also spend some time doing maintenance work (e.g. by moderating ongoing debates). Badges are furthermore awarded to users who receive large amounts of likes and to users who post particularly popular links. By accumulating badges, users are able to advance in so-called trust levels, and with every trust level, more privileges are granted. Newcomers start out as 'ordinary users', but by earning badges, they may soon rise to become 'regulars' and, eventually, 'leaders'. Contrary to 'regulars' and 'leaders', 'ordinary users' cannot send private messages to other users or post more than one image. 'Leaders' are able to edit all posts, close down topics, and much more (Observation, Dialogue, 2015).

On Dialogue, users are constantly encouraged to consider the quality of their posts and comments. For instance, as stated in the platform's About section, 'If you are unsure that your contribution actually contributes to the debate, then take some time to consider what it is you want to say, and then try again later'. Furthermore, when a user first replies to a post, a small textbox appears with a similar message, 'Does your reply improve the conversation?' (Observation, Dialogue, 2015). As one of the architects behind Dialogue explains, such messages are meant to support the platform's ongoing focus on quality improvement by discouraging users from posting too long and obstructive comments:

> It's clear to me that, online, you need mechanisms that kind of stop people in one way
> or the other. I actually think a lot about restrictions on speech rather than freedom of
> speech. It's at least one of the purposes ... or at least one of the means that such
> platforms need to use. You can't have a user just writing 100 pages. They need to be
> restricted, such utterances. (Respondent #20)

Contrary to the radical openness and ambiguity of the Political Laboratories, the techniques employed to manage the Dialogue platform are geared toward quality improvement. Even though

Dialogue may be used for other purposes in relation to The Alternative's official organization of open-source politics, it provides both closure and fixity by eliminating users' ability to directly influence submitted policy proposals. This runs counter to the assumptions of much of the literature on the role of digital media in politics (e.g., Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; Bruns, 2008; Castells, 2009; Dunleavy et al., 2006). Here, especially Web 2.0 applications have been celebrated as affording more open political processes, but as we see in this case, we need to look at how technological features and people's use in practice produce very particular political processes—in this case, processes that participants consider closed and unproductive and choose not to engage in. Curiously, however, the process seems to reopen once a policy proposal leaves Dialogue and enters the third and final space, Political Forum.

## *Space 3: Political Forum*

As already mentioned, the Political Forum is a designated space for the political leadership and board representatives to discuss the quality of submitted policy proposals. This means that contrary to the two former spaces, this third space is not accessible to everyone. Only around 40 people are allowed access. The Political Forum convenes approximately every other month to discuss two to five proposals. Formally, the forum may respond to submitted proposals in three ways: (1) by rejecting the proposal and returning it to the proposer, (2) by accepting the proposal with minor revisions, and (3) by appointing a working group to rewrite the proposal in a way that makes it acceptable for the political program (The Alternative, 2015b: 10). Even though facilitators repeatedly encourage the forum to choose option 1 or 2, option 3 is most frequently selected. As a facilitator of Political Forum meetings puts it:

> Almost all proposals are accepted with a group getting a mandate to finish writing it.
> And that's the thing; do we ever get a product that is good enough to be accepted as it
> is? ... All those people that are part of Political Forum are policy geeks that just want to
> delve into a proposal and continue developing it. And that's where we say: If you want
> to take part in developing a proposal, then you need to participate in the Political
> Laboratories. Then you need to join one step earlier. You can't develop proposals here.
> Here, you actually just need to ratify ... or maybe not just ratify, but figure out if it
> matches our values and if it makes sense strategically (Respondent #18).

As this quote illustrates, the process of policymaking is more or less spontaneously reopened by members of the Political Forum, although this goes against the facilitators' persistent recommendations.[18] This extension of the intended purpose of Political Forum was also articulated by a forum member at a meeting in November 2015. During a heated discussion on asylum policy, a participant leaned over and whispered indiscreetly to the person next to him: 'Actually, this is not a discussion club, but a ratification club. But that is just not possible'. At the same meeting, another participant expressed the same concern, this time in plenum: 'What we have been doing for the last one and a half hours is problematic. We are sitting here creating politics. There is a fine line, and that line has been crossed' (Observation, POFO, 2015c).

Even though the rationale for the Political Forum is one of ratification or quality check, the techniques that help configure the forum as an organizational space bear a striking resemblance to the techniques used to create the Political Laboratories. This is perhaps best illustrated through the exercises that usually occur during both forum meetings and laboratories. For instance, at the beginning of a Political Forum meeting in August 2015, the participants were asked to move around and greet each other, in much the same way as occurs in Political Laboratories (Observation, POFO, 2015b). Similarly, at the beginning of another forum meeting in January 2015, participants were asked to hold hands while humming a sound. After a while, participants were then asked to imitate their neighbor's sound, which eventually resulted in everyone humming the same sound (Observation, POFO, 2015a).

As with the bodily exercises discussed earlier, we interpret this as an attempt to use 'affect' as an element in policymaking. Affect is more than feelings or emotions; scholars of the affective turn in social science describe it as 'a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential' (Shouse, 2005: n.p.). Affect has also been described as the body's way of preparing itself for action using 'a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language' (Massumi, cited in Shouse, 2005: n.p.). Music—or in our case, humming—'provides an example of

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[18] According to The Alternative's statutes, the Political Forum is officially permitted to further develop policy proposals. As such, the forum members do not violate any rules or regulations in doing so. This does, however, run counter to what is stated at the party's website (see The Alternative (2015b)), and what is consistently articulated by facilitators.

how the intensity of the impingement of sensations on the body can "mean" more to people than meaning itself' (Shouse, 2005: n.p.). The use of music or humming is thus not about conveying fixed meaning but about 'moving' people. Based on this thinking, we may interpret not only the greetings but also the humming exercise as imposing a sense of openness and inclusivity on an otherwise closed space. Why would such exercises be necessary if the only purpose of Political Forum was to close the process by voting on whether or not to accept submitted policy proposals?

Just as in Political Laboratories, these practices are intertwined with material arrangements. One example is the colorful post-it notes that are used in both spaces during brainstorming exercises. At the laboratories, the notes are used when participants are asked to form groups and generate ideas for future policies. Similarly, at forum meetings, the participants are often asked to form groups and write down suggestions for how to improve the submitted proposals. However, as observed during a forum meeting in August 2015, many of the post-it notes contained genuinely new ideas that, if realized, would alter the submitted proposals dramatically. As mentioned, the Political Forum frequently responds to a submitted proposal by appointing a working group to rewrite the proposal with these new ideas taken into consideration, and in this way, the process of developing policy proposals eludes its provisional fixing.

As such, the only elements that truly distinguish Political *Forums* from Political *Laboratories* as organizational spaces are their levels of accessibility and their rationales. While everyone is welcome at the laboratories, only a privileged few are allowed access to the forum meetings. In addition, while Political Laboratories are driven by the rationale of 'More People Know More', the Political Forum meetings are established on the basis of a rationale of ratification (as articulated by the facilitators). In the end, however, this rationale is trumped by a series of techniques and material entanglements that seem to produce an unintended reopening of the process of policymaking.

# Discussion: Dialectics in open-source politics

The final stage in The Alternative's organization of open-source politics is the political program. Once the Political Forum has voted in favor of a policy proposal, which often happens after a

working group has rewritten it, the proposal is added to the political program. Thus, the political program marks the final fixing of the process. In the analysis above, we observed how The Alternative's organization of open-source politics oscillates back and forth between openness and closure. It is not a linear process running from openness toward closure but moves through three spaces and terminates with the political program, as illustrated by Figure 5. In what follows, we discuss the organizational repercussions of this process by highlighting three dialectical relationships that seem to configure The Alternative's organization of open-source politics.
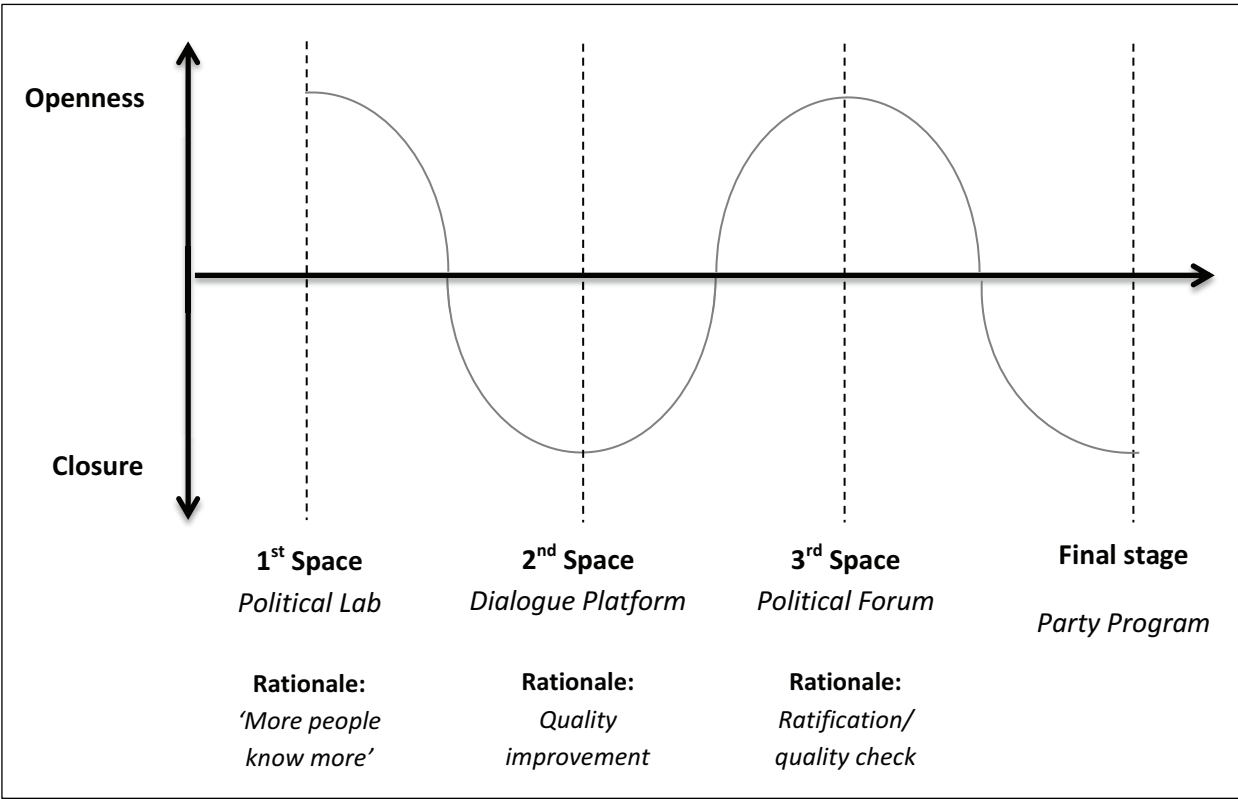


**Figure 5:** The Alternative's organization of open-source politics from a space-sensitive perspective.

## *Between imagination and affirmation*

As shown in the analysis, the Political Laboratories constitute a space of openness and ambiguity where no attempt is made to fix meaning by privileging some ideas and marginalizing others. As one respondent explained, the intention is to provide a space where 'completely unrealistic' ideas

are welcome. Through a series of techniques and a mesh of material entanglements, the rationale of 'More People Know More' is sought realized in the laboratories. One could thus argue that the laboratories provide ample conditions for 'political imagination' (Castoriadis, 1997: 55).

Recently, the literature on imagination as a politically relevant concept has blossomed within organization studies (De Cock et al., 2013; Komporozos-Athanasiou & Fotaki, 2015). This is because imagination is seen as a key ingredient for organizations to envision new pathways and challenge dominant modes of representation and being (Wright et al., 2013). The concept of imagination is usually traced back to Castoriadis, who devoted much of his writings to exploring how something 'new' comes into being in an always already instituted society (De Cock, 2013). This happens when human beings use their immanent capacity for evoking images—or 'imaginary significations'—of things yet to come (Castoriadis, 1987: 146). Conceived as a practice, imagination might be understood as the creative exercise by individuals and collectives of evoking that which does not yet exist.

In the analysis, we described how the facilitators of Political Laboratories used a number of techniques to engage individuals and groups in generating ideas (e.g., by establishing debate principles and organizing the space to trigger interactions among participants) and to create an atmosphere of recognition of even the most unconventional ideas (again, the debate principles as well as bodily exercises). These techniques are all intended to keep the discussions open, which is something that lies at the heart of imaginative practices. Imagination has been described as containing a break with the closure of meaning (Komporozos-Athanasiou & Fotaki, 2015: 328). As such, imagination could be seen as an inherently political activity. As Karagiannis and Wagner (2012: 14) argue, 'one may see the work of imagination as that which constitutes politics under conditions of autonomy'. Accordingly, the practice of imagination is afforded by spaces that provide autonomy, which allows people to resist the imposition of heteronomy by breaking with the closure of meaning. It requires little effort to see how the Political Laboratories constitute exactly such a space.

In contrast, the Dialogue platform is much more concerned with improving the quality of already fixed proposals. This is done through a somewhat restricting code of conduct, which is embedded in the technological affordances of the platform. As we showed in the analysis, the platform is technically geared to hinder long and obstructive comments (through pop-up boxes and guidelines) and to privilege users that contribute in very specific ways. These techniques help constitute Dialogue as a space of closure and fixity. Hence, one could argue that Dialogue only provides conditions for affirming an already fixed meaning since users are deprived of the ability to contribute directly to the submitted proposals. There are few incentives for engaging in imaginative practices because it appears that comments are neither encouraged nor used for anything. And as we saw in the analysis, this effectively kills discussions. Looking at the entire process of policymaking, the proposals created in the political laboratory are basically only affirmed in the digital space.

Curiously, however, the closure of meaning is once again broken in the Political Forum. This is done through a series of techniques that closely resemble those of the laboratories: energizing exercises, brainstorming activities, post-it notes, and so on. In that way, it becomes evident how The Alternative's organization of open-source politics oscillates between openness and closure and how that oscillation produces a dialectical relationship between the practices of imagination and affirmation.

## *Between digital and physical space*

These observations about the relationship between imagination (understood as the practice of evoking something new) and affirmation (understood as the practices of solidifying something already fixed) point to an important observation in relation to the spatiality of political organization: The physical spaces, represented by the Political Laboratories and the Political Forum, provide ample opportunities for political imagination. In contrast, the digital space, represented by Dialogue, effectively removes that possibility by reducing the interactions on the platform to a matter of quality improvement. In other words, while the physical spaces provide *conditions* for politics, the digital space solidifies the *outcome* of politics.

This finding runs counter to one commonly held view of digital media in politics. Here, digital media (and especially Web 2.0 applications) are seen as providing ordinary citizens with the possibility of participating in the horizontal mass construction of politics (Bekkers and Homburg, 2005; Castells, 2009; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Hardt & Negri, 2011; Shirky, 2009). The networked character and the permeable boundaries of these applications allegedly blur the distinction between producers and consumers to a point where every user is transformed into a 'produser' of politics (Bruns, 2008). For instance, as argued by Castells (2009), the diffusion of the Internet has helped strengthen people's capacity to act autonomously, which in turn has allowed the 'creative audience' to instigate social change much more efficiently than prior to the rise of what he calls 'technologies of freedom' (Castells, 2009: 414).

However, despite Dialogue's networked infrastructure and permeable boundaries, it does not grant ordinary citizens the autonomy to become active participants in the co-creation of The Alternative's political program. Instead, it offers participants a chance to express their views and debate policy proposals without any direct impact. This is, to a large extent, a consequence of the platform's constraining affordances rather than an inherent vice of digital media and the Internet as such. As explained by a respondent working with digital developments in The Alternative, the Dialogue platform 'nudges' people to avoid posting too long and obstructive comments by awarding badges to users who conform to the purpose of the platform. In this way, Dialogue is built to afford 'restrictions on speech' rather than 'freedom of speech'. The Alternative's digital platform hence functions more as a device for improving and legitimizing policy proposals than as a device for actually including citizens in the creative exercise of co-creating politics.

This finding contributes to the literature on open-source politics by highlighting the importance of physical spaces in the organization of bottom-up policymaking. Traditionally, this literature has been characterized by a soft technological determinism, manifested in a somewhat myopic focus on digital media and the democratic potential of the Internet (e.g., Hindman, 2007; Karpf, 2011; Kreiss, 2011). For instance, as Sifry (2004: n.p.) notes, 'New tools and practices born on the Internet have reached critical mass, enabling ordinary people to participate in processes that used to be closed to them'. However, as this article has shown, it is not necessarily the Internet-based

tools that open up previously closed processes but instead tools and practices born in the physical world. This is the case not just because physical spaces—at least in the case of The Alternative—invite political imagination and change but also because the physical congregation of people creates an opportunity for using affect to broaden the scope of what policymaking might be (see also Dean, 2016: 220–222). In other words, open-source politics cannot be equated with online politics but should be seen as a practice comprising activities in both digital and physical spaces.

## *Between universality and particularity*

Drawing on the vocabulary of Laclau (1996a, 1996b, 2001), one could describe The Alternative's transformation from movement to party as a move from universality toward particularity. For Laclau, all social groups that are structured around specific political interests can be understood as particularities. They become universalized, however, once they assume the task of representing the larger community by partially surrendering what initially made them particular (Laclau, 1996a). When political projects become hegemonic, they usually undergo the above-mentioned process of universalization (Laclau, 2001) in which a particular identity is decontextualized and turned into a more or less 'empty signifier', that is, a signifier without a signified (Laclau, 1994). For instance, consider the detachment of the social democratic project from the working-class struggle—or more recently, the detachment of the Pirate Parties from issues of Internet freedom and copyright laws (Miegel & Olsson, 2008).

However, The Alternative (and similar parties like Podemos in Spain) seems to go through the exact opposite process: Instead of universalizing their political project, they particularize it by seeking to institutionalize an otherwise universal identity. In other words, once The Alternative abandoned its status as a 'movement without demands' and began crafting a detailed political program, they entered the process of particularization. This, however, created a problem because particularization invariably narrows the scope of representation (Laclau, 2005: 89). Elsewhere, this problem has been referred to as *the problem of particularization* (Husted and Hansen, 2017). But why does The Alternative's (2013b) ambition of representing 'anyone who can feel that something new is about to replace something old' not collapse under the pressure of particularization? As

159

already indicated, the party's spatial organization of open-source politics might help us answer that question.

The closing down and subsequent reopening of the process of policymaking reveal an interesting finding that has significant consequences for The Alternative as a political organization. Aside from breaking with the intention of moving linearly from openness toward closure, the winding process could be seen as breaking The Alternative in two. This breakup is illuminated by this article's space-sensitive perspective: While the first two spaces (Political Laboratories and the Dialogue platform) belong to The Alternative as a *movement*, the latter space (Political Forum) and the party program belong to The Alternative as a *party*, and while anyone is allowed to participate in the movement, only a handful of people are allowed access to the party's process of policymaking. From an organizational point of view, the transformation from movement to party thus seems to split The Alternative into two types of loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976): one that operates at the level of particularity (the party) and one that remains universal (the movement).

As such, both movement and party have their own process of policymaking. While the movement's process begins with a laboratory and ends with the Dialogue platform, the party's process begins with a Political Forum meeting and ends with the political program. In this way, both the universal and the particular part of The Alternative contain spaces of openness and closure that afford the associated practices of imagination and affirmation. Of course, this does not mean that there is no link between The Alternative as a movement and The Alternative as a party. After all, it is usually the movement actors who decide which policy area to develop, and many of the ideas that surface during laboratories will make it into the political program.

## Conclusion

These observations lead us back to this article's main research question: How does open-source politics help political organizations like The Alternative cope with the transition from movement to party? The most straightforward answer to this question seems to be that The Alternative has somehow found a way to bridge the otherwise unbridgeable chasm between the universal and the

particular. However, as shown above, another answer presents itself. By tying the process of policymaking to three different kinds of organizational spaces, The Alternative's version of open-source politics oscillates back and forth between openness and closure, as illustrated by Figure 5. This oscillation then produces a dialectical relationship between the practices of imagination and affirmation—and this is what, ultimately, seems to split The Alternative into two loosely coupled systems operating at two different levels.

This finding contributes to our understanding of radical political parties and the organizational repercussions of entering parliament. In order not to lose their universal appeal, radical political parties must (partially) decouple their universal body from their particular body. This partial decoupling provides the MPs with room for maneuver in terms of seeking influence at the level of realpolitik. At the same time, it allows the movement actors room for maneuver in terms of imagining different radical futures beyond the scope of realpolitik. While there may be multiple ways of staging such a decoupling, we nonetheless argue that some kind of decoupling is vital for radical political parties that seek to maintain a universal appeal. The case of The Alternative's spatial organization of open-source politics is but one example of this.

A series of implications for studies of political organization follow from this. First, the case of The Alternative shows that bottom-up processes can be far more ambiguous and non-linear than they usually appear to be. A space-sensitive perspective helps illuminate how different organizational spaces afford different practices and how that ambiguity might have serious consequences for the organization(s) involved. In this analysis, space becomes an important organizational object in the decoupling process described above. Also, this article's focus on the dialectical relationship between physical and digital spaces reveals how physical spaces tend to provide much better conditions for political imagination—and politics in general—than digital spaces (see Husted, 2015, for a similar argument in relation to the Occupy movement). This insight did not arise from preconceptions about physical and digital spaces but was a significant empirical finding of the study—one that we think political movements organizing from below should pay more attention to.

Finally, the organizational decoupling between The Alternative's universal and its particular body suggests that the sole purpose of open-source politics may *not* be actual policymaking. Instead, such bottom-up processes may be of equal (if not superior) importance to mobilization purposes. Far from being a drawback, this dual purpose is in keeping with the post-capitalist ambition of viewing open-source politics as both a means and an end (Weber, 2004: 56) and so is the collaborative and nonproprietary spirit that characterize bottom-up policymaking in general (Mason, 2015). As such, we do not claim that The Alternative is necessarily a post-capitalist project in itself but that the party's organization of open-source politics can be seen in this way. In fact, the very act of inviting people to evoke and share images of alternative futures may be as important to the progressive agenda as actually translating these images into particular policy proposals, as it allows people to transform themselves into subjects of a post-capitalist politics. And that is, as Gibson-Graham suggest in our epigraph, at least one way that counter-hegemony is enacted.

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166

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# 7. Third paper

## Mobilizing 'the Alternativist': On the management of subjectivity in a radical political party

*Emil Husted*

## Abstract

Recently, a new wave of left-wing political parties has emerged across Europe. These parties seek to challenge the hegemony of dominant discourses by introducing novel procedures for active participation, democratic deliberation, and bottom-up decision-making. One particle in this wave is *The Alternative*, a newly elected party in Denmark. In keeping with the spirit of bottom-up decision-making, The Alternative's entire political program has been developed through a series of publicly accessible workshops. Initially, this highly inclusive process provided The Alternative with important momentum, but made it equally difficult for the party to particularize its political project without simultaneously losing support. The Alternative thus needed to find ways of maintaining a universal appeal while going through a process of particularization. In this paper, I will explore how the 'problem of particularization' is resolved (or at least postponed) within The Alternative through the management of subjectivity. Drawing on both documents and interviews, I argue that what sustains the party's universal appeal is the ongoing mobilization of a collective subject called 'A New We' and an individual subject called 'the Alternativist'. While the former is described as a boundless collective open to anyone, the latter is characterized as a person who is inclusive, attentive, open-minded, curious, and selfless – but also incapable of demarcating the party in terms of political representation. Ultimately, this is what allows The Alternative's project to grow particular without losing its universal appeal.

## Acknowledgements

# Introduction

> When the hope for something else and better perishes, the alternative dies with it (…). However, belief is necessarily accompanied by doubt. Without doubt belief turns into conviction and blindness. Conversely, without belief doubts very easily develop into cynicism and dejection. The alternative thinker, writer, speaker and practitioner is one who is full of faith but far from faithful.
>
> *Stephanie Schreven, Sverre Spoelstra, & Peter Svensson (2008: 136), Alternatively*

With the rise of political parties like Podemos in Spain, Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, and The Alternative in Denmark, a new wave of left-wing politics is currently sweeping across Europe. Inspired by the global uprisings of 2011-2012 (Mason, 2013), these parties seek to bridge the widening gap between 'the people' and the parliament by introducing novel procedures for active participation, democratic deliberation, and bottom-up decision-making. At least four features characterize the parties in this wave. First, they all crystallized out of some kind of movement-like organization. Secondly, they all claim to be 'transversal'; that is, they claim to transcend traditional political frontiers and seek to mobilize support from across the political spectrum. Thirdly, they all more or less explicitly position themselves in opposition to the political establishment ('La Casta') and the 'old political culture'. And finally, they all experiment with some kind of bottom-up approach to policymaking (Iglesias, 2015; Tronconi, 2016).

Consequently, the political objectives of these parties are rarely grounded in any pre-defined set of demands but are usually much more universal and abstract. As argued by Ferrero (2014: n.p.): 'It is the social movements – the less institutionalised, more open and eclectic groups – that dictate the political orientation of the parties'. In fact, what initially united these parties was little more than a common opposition to the hegemony of dominant discourses such as neoliberalism and patriarchy and the worn-out practices of the political establishment (Tormey, 2015: 113-123). In this sense, they could be described as radical (Newman, 2007), counter-hegemonic (Sullivan et al., 2011), or even populist (Laclau, 2005).

However, what makes this wave of political parties truly novel is not so much its counter-hegemonic 'logic of articulation' and populist propensities (Laclau, 2005). The novelty rests with the process through which these parties entered parliament. Traditionally, when political projects emerge and become popular, they do so by undergoing a process of universalization, in which a *particular* struggle is de-contextualized and turned into a *universal* struggle, capable of representing a chain of equivalent identities (Laclau, 2001). This is how political projects usually become hegemonic. One only needs to think of the detachment of the social democratic project from the working class struggle to picture this process. The aforementioned parties, however, seem to go through the exact opposite process: Instead of universalizing a particular struggle, they particularize a universal struggle by seeking to institutionalize radical politics through the parliament. This is indeed not an easy task, as the entry into parliament entails adding positive content to an otherwise negative identity. Hence, to prevent their radical identity from collapsing, and to prevent a potential loss of support, these parties need to employ a series of organizational coping strategies that I will refer to as 'management technologies'.

In this paper, I explore the management technology of subjectification in the case of The Alternative, a recently elected party in Denmark. Through an analysis of almost 200 documents and 34 interviews, I set out to examine the relationship between the party's managerial discourse, as articulated by the political leadership, and ordinary members' identification with those subject positions that are produced by this discourse. In what follows, I argue that what keeps The Alternative's radical identity from collapsing is the ongoing mobilization of a collective subject called 'A New We' and an individual subject referred to as 'the Alternativist'. While the collective subject is rhetorically framed as a boundless entity that is open to anyone, the individual subject is characterized as inclusive, attentive, open-minded, curious and selfless, which (besides being generally attractive characteristics) deprive the subject of its ability to particularize and demarcate the party in terms of political representation. Ultimately, this allows the actual policies of the party to grow particular, without The Alternative losing its universal appeal.

Theoretically, the paper strives to integrate the well-established literature on subjectification in organizations (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Bergström & Knights, 2006; Homer-Nadesan, 1996;

Knights & Willmott, 1989; Laine & Vaara, 2007) with the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985; 1987). The paper opens with a brief discussion of political identity in relation to radical politics. Here, the main point is that radical political parties are fueled by negativity and opposition, which means that they cannot conform to parliamentary politics without jeopardizing their radical identity. This discussion is dovetailed by an introduction to the notions of subjectification and identity work in organization studies. The case of The Alternative is then analyzed in order to understand how radical political parties employ subjectification as a management technology for maintaining its universal appeal and, hence, its radical identity. The paper ends by suggesting the notion of 'loose couplings' (Weick, 1976) as a useful way of understanding how The Alternative manages to appear universal and particular at the same time. Finally, the paper's contributions to the literature on subjectification and identity work are considered, as well as its implications for studies of radical political parties.

## Radical politics and the question of identity

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'radical' holds at least two meanings. One is related to the word 'root' (from the Latin word *radix*), which signifies something fundamental or essential. Another interpretation, however, proposes that being radical means to be independent of or to depart from what is considered mainstream or traditional. In that sense, being radical is not so much about getting to the root of something but about 'rooting out' (Pugh, 2009: 2). In other words, being radical means to position oneself outside established norms and institutions. It is this latter conception that guides the present paper. Throughout the paper, the word 'radical' is thus not used in any essentialist way as denoting something truly revolutionary but as an identity marker invoked by The Alternative as a way of positioning itself outside established norms and institutions. One example is the party's founding document, which states that The Alternative 'has the courage to imagine a radically different future' (The Alternative, 2013b: 1). Another example is the political program, in which the need for 'radical solutions', 'radical reforms', and 'radical transitions' are repeatedly expressed (The Alternative, 2014a). But what, then, does this kind of positioning mean for a political party that aspires to enter parliament?

According to Newman (2007), radical politics today must, first and foremost, be counter-hegemonic, in the sense of promoting universal ideals that run counter to dominant discourses such as neoliberalism and patriarchy. In terms of identity formation, this essentially means that radical politics must be based on negativity. As Laclau (2006: 652) notes, it is the '*negative* feature' that unites radical political projects, not some kind of positive essence. This, however, does not mean that there is nothing constructive or meaningful about radical politics. Instead, it implies that the defining feature of radical politics, rather than something positive, is a common opposition to the provisional hegemony of established 'positives' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 93). Accordingly, radical politics does not imply subjection to any one dominant discourse. On the contrary, the job for radical politics is to offer de-subjection from hegemonic discourses as a way of enacting and organizing collective resistance (Newman, 2007).

This conception of radical politics – as politics based on negativity – has significant consequences for the identity of organizations that, like The Alternative and similar parties, pride themselves on being radical. Most importantly, it means that such organizations have to continuously resist any process of particularization, since this implies a move towards positivity, meaning institutionalization (Lok & Willmott, 2014). The reason for this is perhaps best illustrated by Laclau's (1996) conceptualization of 'the universal' and 'the particular' as two dialectically opposing levels of the social that, on the one hand, are mutually constitutive, and on the other hand, fundamentally unbridgeable. While *particular* identities are characterized as being differential, in the sense that they can be clearly separated from other particular identities, *universal* identities are identities that have surrendered some of what initially made them particular in order to represent a chain of equivalent demands (Laclau, 2005). Those demands that enter the chain are equivalent, only because none of them are prioritized over the others. Hence, the task of representing an equivalential chain can only be carried out by an identity, which itself lacks positive content (Laclau, 2001).

The universal is thus a more or less empty place occupied by a so-called 'empty signifier'. According to Laclau (1994), an empty signifier is a signifier that lacks a signified. Instead of pointing to something positive within a system of signification (a difference), the empty signifier points to

the very limits of the system: A 'radical otherness', in Laclauian terms. As such, what is represented by an empty signifier is nothing but the pure negation of that which is excluded from the system itself. To emphasize this point, Laclau (1994: 170) refers to empty signifiers as 'signifiers of the pure cancellation of all difference', which means that the particularistic/differential relationship between the various elements in the equivalential chain is substituted for a universal relationship based on negativity.

Now, if we accept Laclau's (2005) and Newman's (2007) assertion that radical politics requires the production of empty signifiers to represent a host of equivalent demands, new light is immediately thrown on radical political parties' attempts to enter parliament. Why? Because the entry into parliament necessarily entails a particularization of the political project, which is caused by the need to respond to the logic of the established system. With every bill passed and every proposal advanced, particular meaning is assigned to an otherwise universal identity (Husted & Hansen, 2017). Accordingly, there is often a certain conservatism embedded in radical political movements (such as, for example, the Occupy movement), as the move from universality towards particularity entails a collapse of the negative identity, which then implicitly strips the movement of its ability to provide radical critique of that which it claims to exclude (Laclau, 1996). The logical conclusion seems to be that radical political parties either remain outside the realm of parliamentary politics or suffer particularization at the altar of realpolitik.

Nonetheless, this problem seems to offer little obstruction for The Alternative in their efforts to enter parliament. In the national elections in June 2015, the party earned almost five percent of the votes and entered the Danish parliament with nine seats. Since then, support for The Alternative in terms of memberships and opinion polls has continued to grow. This leads us to this paper's research questions: *How does the management technology of subjectification allow radical political parties such as The Alternative to maintain a universal appeal when going through a process of rapid particularization? And what implications does this have for the individual members' room for maneuver within The Alternative as a political organization?* To answer these questions, the paper will proceed to consider the notion of subjectification in organizations and how this notion translates into the language of Laclau and Mouffe.

# Subjectification in organizations

According to Foucault (1982b), subjectification refers to the process by which an individual is transformed into a subject. For instance, in his later writings, Foucault himself (1976) explored how individuals throughout the 18th and 19th century became increasingly tied to their own sexual orientation and how that process of subjectification installed in those individuals a particular mode of being. Consequently, the notion of the subject should here be understood as something fundamentally different from, yet interrelated with, the individual: While the latter refers to human beings of flesh and bones, the former refers to a position within language that is contingently and provisionally occupied by the individual (Foucault, 1982a). The subject is thus always a subject of language, and subjectivity should accordingly be understood as a process rather than a finalized achievement (Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994).

Building on this conception, Foucault (1982b: 781) argues that the notion of the subject holds two meanings: 'Subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge'. Both these meanings, Foucault argues, 'suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to' (ibid). Accordingly, subjectification should be understood as a two-way process, carried out in concert by the individual and its other. As Butler (1995) notes, becoming a subject depends equally on mastery and submission, meaning that subjectification strongly depends on the individual continuously performing its own subjectivity. Hence, the individual is far from deprived of agency in relation to the construction of its own subjectivity, even though this tends to be a common interpretation of the Foucaultian perspective in organization studies (Newton, 1998; Reed, 2000).

Despite the mutually constitutive process of subjectification, the notion of subjectivity is closely tied to questions of power, since the act of forming subjectivities constitutes a most powerful way of managing human conduct (Foucault, 1982b). Accordingly, subjectification is one of the most effective ways of exercising power in organizations (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). Not only because it offers management a remarkably inexpensive way of disciplining and controlling the organization's members (Barker & Cheney, 1994), but also because subjectification works through the hearts and

minds of these individuals (Kunda, 1992). This means that subjectification, as a subtle mode of power, is incredibly difficult to identify and criticize, as it so dramatically differs from more repressive modes of power such as coercion or domination (Fleming & Spicer, 2014: 244).

## *Identity work and overdetermination*

The majority of subjectification studies in organizational research have focused on subjectification as an indirect way of controlling individuals by encouraging specific conceptions of selfhood within the organization. Bergström and Knights (2006), for instance, explore how subjectification in recruitment processes can be a powerful tool for aligning potential employees with the culture of the organization. An important point here is, however, that subjectification in these processes depends on the candidate's acceptance of the managerial discourse, which leads the authors to conclude that subjectification is 'a complex condition and consequence of the mutually interdependent relations of agency and discourse, not a determinant of either' (Bergström & Knights, 2006: 370). Such observations about the relationship between agency and discourse have fostered a wide range of publications that investigate different enactments of 'identity work', which is often interpreted as a particular mode of resistance (Commisso, 2006; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Whitehead, 1998). In these cases, identity work 'refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Crucially, this means that individuals are allowed a certain room for maneuver within otherwise confining managerial discourses. Elaborating on this, Watson (2008: 130) argues:

> Individuals have to work 'with the grain' of existing and dominant discourses and subjectivities but, as they do this, they can exploit the variety of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, discourses and subjectivities in order to craft a self which is, to an extent, 'their own'. Individuals will, of course, vary in the extent to which they are relatively active or passive in these matters.

Translating these observations about identity work into Laclauian terminology, one could argue that what provides individuals with agency in terms of their own identity construction is what

Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 95) call the 'impossibility of society'. With this, Laclau and Mouffe refer to the anti-essentialist idea that no single discourse is able to fully determine something's or someone's identity. All meaningful elements are always already overdetermined by numerous competing language practices (Wittgenstein, 1953). For instance, what it means to be an academic cannot be fully represented by any one discourse. Instead, an excess of meaning always (over)determines 'the academic' as a subject. As argued by Holmer-Nadesan (1996), this discursive overdetermination is then exactly what provides the individual with space of action in an organizational setting. It is precisely the discourse's inability to fully determine the identity of any given element that marks the individual's freedom. In other words, the notion of discursive overdetermination provides the very precondition for identity work.

As we shall see, overdetermination plays an important role in The Alternative. This is the case, not just because it offers ordinary members the freedom to craft 'their own' sense of self, but because the party's managerial discourse implicitly embraces and accentuates the ambiguity that follows from overdetermination. By encouraging members to be highly inclusive, open-minded, attentive, curious and selfless, they turn ambiguity and indeterminacy into virtues to live by. Through 'the Alternativist', the party's political leadership thus manages to produce a subject that lacks the ability and desire to fully determine anything, let alone the party itself. This is what ultimately allows The Alternative to move from universality towards particularity, without abandoning its universal appeal, since the very meaning of The Alternative remains inherently ambiguous.

# Research design

## *The case of The Alternative*

On November 27, 2013, the former minister of culture in Denmark, Uffe Elbæk, and his colleague, Josephine Fock, summoned the press to announce the birth of a new social movement and political party called The Alternative. The main purpose of The Alternative, they proclaimed, was to work towards a sustainable transition and a so-called 'new political culture' in which edifying dialogue would replace tactics and spin. However, besides a manifesto and six core values, The Alternative had no political program (The Alternative, 2016). This radical emptiness allowed an

incredibly wide range of people to read their own personal preferences into The Alternative. In fact, the very idea of articulating an alternative to the current state of affairs initially seemed to mobilize anyone who felt a need for radical change.[19] Consider, for instance, the following passage from the party's manifesto (The Alternative 2013a):

> The Alternative is a political idea. About personal freedom, social dignity, and living, sustainable communities. A hope. A dream. A yearning. For meaning, sense and compassionate relationships. The Alternative is an answer to what is happening in the world today. All around us. With us. The Alternative is a shout out. Against cynicism, lack of generosity and the ticking off which prevails in our society […] The Alternative is for you. Who can tell that something has been set in motion. Who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old. Another way of looking at democracy, growth, work, responsibility and quality of life. That is The Alternative.

Such universal appeals initially provided The Alternative with important momentum, but made it equally difficult for the party to particularize its political project without simultaneously losing support. However, since The Alternative was launched only 18 months before the national elections, the party urgently needed a political program. Inspired by the open-source community, The Alternative thus embarked on a series of public workshops called 'Political Laboratories'. Through these workshops, more than 700 people participated in a highly inclusive bottom-up process that culminated with the publication of The Alternative's first political program, which was presented at the party's first annual meeting in late spring 2014 (The Alternative, 2014a).

On June 18, 2015, The Alternative ran for parliament. Thanks to a well-crafted campaign and hundreds of devoted volunteers, the party earned almost five percent of the votes, which allowed it to enter the Danish Parliament with nine seats. Since then, The Alternative has continued to develop the political program, while also engaging in day-to-day politics. For instance, shortly after its official entry into parliament, The Alternative helped pass a bill, sponsored by the right-wing

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[19] A survey conducted by The Alternative in 2014 suggested that the majority of the party's members (57.3%) had not previously been members of political parties. That being said, three quarters of the members used to vote for center-left parties, with the majority (28.8%) voting for the far-left party, *The Red-Green Alliance* (The Alternative, 2014g).

government, that grant tax deductions to people who renovate their private homes in sustainable ways. This process of particularization, in which a political movement based on universal opposition towards the establishment transforms into a political party with a detailed program, is what this paper sets out to explore.

## *Methodological considerations*

Empirically, the first two parts of the following analysis is based on a detailed reading of nearly 200 official documents written by The Alternative's political leadership during a period of 26 months from August 2013 to October 2015. This period was chosen because it covers the process in which The Alternative developed from a loosely defined movement and into a particularly well-defined political party. Chronologically, the empirical framework begins with the party's founding document (The Alternative, 2013b) and ends with a transcript of The Alternative's political spokesperson's opening speech in parliament, which was later published by a Danish newspaper (The Alternative, 2015a).[20]

Those documents that ended up as part of the paper's empirical framework were chosen by reading through the primary bulk of The Alternative's external communication such as newspaper articles, blog posts, and official documents. In total, these documents amounted to well over 1,000 pages. These pages were then subjected to thorough interpretation and coding so that those documents that did not make reference to collective or individual subjectivity were excluded. However, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue, subjectivity is not always defined through direct references to the subject in question. Subjectivity might likewise be produced through descriptions of the subject's environment, its values, or its constitutive Other. Accordingly, documents that produced such accounts were likewise included.

Analytically, discourse theory is concerned with exploring how discursive elements are tied together in systems of meaningful practices and how these systems then shape the identities of subjects and objects (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000: 3-4). Adopting that analytical ambition, I set

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[20] Documents written in Danish and all the interviews have been translated to English by the author. All translated interview quotes have been approved by the respondents.

out to explore what meaningful practices shape 'the Alternativist' and how those practices are negotiated and adopted by members of The Alternative. Inspired by Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005: 112) account of the Projective City's great man, I analyzed the documents by making a list of characteristics that The Alternative's political leadership associated with 'the Alternativist'. In doing so, I quickly realized that some practices such as the act of building bridges (rather than walls) and listening (rather than talking) were more central than others. These characteristics were then shortlisted and later included in the first two parts of the analysis.

The third part of the analysis is based on 34 semi-structured interviews with different members of The Alternative. Among these respondents, 7 were members of parliament or candidates in the 2015 national election, 8 were board members or employees at the political secretariat, and 19 where ordinary members. The quotes used in the final part of the analysis all belong to members of the latter category. Most respondents were recruited for the study through the method of 'snowballing', where the researcher lets one respondent to lead him/her to the next. This method allows the researcher to engage with multiple perspectives on the same problem, without necessarily trying to construct a fully representative account (Ekman, 2015: 126). In order to probe the respondents' identification with 'the Alternativist', I asked them different questions that revolved around their perception of The Alternative as an organization and themselves as members of that organization. This entailed asking them very basic questions such as: *What characterizes an Alternativist?*, but also more complicated questions such as: *Imagine you had to write an entry about The Alternative in a dictionary, how would it begin?* This allowed me to hone in on the different enactments of identity work that exist within The Alternative.

Like the documents, the interviews were coded and analyzed by first compiling all explicit references to 'the Alternativists' in one single document. Next, I added more implicit references as well as more general descriptions of The Alternative's organizational culture. From these coding exercises, several interesting themes quickly emerged. For instance, the notion of open-mindedness figured in almost all interviews: Being an 'Alternativist' is a matter of being open-minded. Similarly, the theme of inclusivity was more or less omnipresent: Anyone can be an Alternativist, as long as they believe in the need for radical change. These themes were then

shortlisted and turned into a coherent argument. Other themes were excluded from the analysis. One example is that of the party's six core values. The main reason for excluding this theme is that it has been dealt with extensively elsewhere (Husted, 2017), but also because it would extent the argument beyond the scope of this paper. Even though statements regarding the values do not figure explicitly in the forthcoming analysis, they nonetheless helped shape the argument that is conveyed throughout the rest of the paper.

## Analysis: Managing subjectivity in The Alternative

The paper's findings are divided into three sections. While the first section delineates The Alternatives' attempts to mobilize support by constituting a collective subject called 'A New We', the second section explores the party's attempts to subjectify members through the (often implicit) articulation of an individual subject called 'the Alternativist'. The third section delves into the members' own identification with both the collective and the individual subject positions.

### *Constituting 'A New We'*

Uzma Ahmed, one of The Alternative's leading candidates, initially coined the term 'A New We' as a way of describing her own stance on integration policy. Later, this stance was adopted by The Alternative, and 'A New We' is now used in the title of the party's official policy document on integration (The Alternative, 2015b). Even though the notion of 'A New We' primarily belongs to the areas of integration and immigration, the meaning associated with this collective subject has significant implications for the rest of The Alternative's activities. This is the case because the Alternative is founded on the idea of prefigurative politics, which means that the party seeks to reflect, at an organizational level, those changes that it is advocating at a societal level (Maeckelbergh, 2011). As stated in the party's founding document:

> The Alternative must be an example of the societal changes that we wish to see happening. Hence, it is important that The Alternative becomes a laboratory for the development of new organizational forms, managerial styles, decision-making processes, and transparent communication. (The Alternative, 2013b: 5)

183

Another example of prefiguration within the Alternative is the party's six 'debate principles', which are guidelines meant to aid party members when discussing politics. These principles include six almost Habermasian statements such as 'we will listen more than we speak' and 'we will emphasize the core set of values that guide our arguments' (The Alternative, 2013c). However, besides being helpful guidelines in a political debate, these principles likewise prefigure the society that The Alternative is advocating, as they reflect the vision of a 'new political culture' in which spin and tactics are replaced by more productive and open-minded dialogue.

Just like the debate principles, the notion of 'A New We' is not only the name of a political vision for future integration policies but could also be interpreted as an internal guideline for the construction of The Alternative as a collective subject. The main idea behind 'A New We' is to construct a new social identity that is defined in terms of 'dialogue rather than power' and that epitomizes everyone irrespective of race and beliefs (The Alternative, 2014b). It is an outcry against the dominant discourse on integration, where being Danish is something that is defined in terms of exclusion rather than inclusion. As argued by Uzma Ahmed in an article in which she for the first time introduces the notion of 'A New We':

> 'We', as in the Danes, are defined on the basis of a desire to exclude those who are not
> Danish enough. And those who are not part of the 'we' must prove that they work hard
> to show that they are good enough. (The Alternative, 2014c)

Like many other initiatives within The Alternative, the notion of 'A New We' is based on negativity and opposition. Again, this does not mean that it lacks a positive sound or that it is inherently reactionary, but that the meaning of 'A New We' is intimately tied to its constitutive outside (Laclau, 1994). The discourse of 'A New We' is, first and foremost, a reaction to the hegemonic discourse on integration and the exclusionary dynamics that follow from it. This oppositional stance is further emphasized towards the end of the above-mentioned article, where Ahmed reacts to a series of events in Denmark that she interprets as manifestations of the dominant discourse of exclusion:

This summer's strikes against our common 'we' has made it clear to me that the only way to move on is to define a new 'we'. This is a new we that provides us with the freedom and space to be curious and to picture ourselves in a new way. But let us start by accepting that what has been is no longer viable. I look forward to uniting heart-to-heart in the Alternative. (The Alternative, 2014c).

Throughout this article, the new 'we' is never defined in any positive terms. Instead, the dominant discourse of exclusion is continuously invoked as the constitutive outside of 'A New We'. This is a crucial point to keep in mind throughout the analysis. The construction of The Alternative's collective subject as the negative image of the discourse of exclusion inevitably positions the notion of 'A New We' within a discourse of inclusion. At least, it means that no one can be excluded from the collective *a priori*. Other leading members, such as the party's founder, Uffe Elbæk, frequently articulate this point. For instance, in a New Year's speech, recorded and broadcasted by a large Danish newspaper, Elbæk stresses the importance of abandoning the practices of exclusion, which allegedly has made people incapable of listening to one another:

We need to listen to each other; we need to see each other; we need to talk about what is important right now, and we need to make sure that there is room for everyone in the future that starts tomorrow […] I hope that we wake up from the idea that security means building walls. No, instead of building walls, we need to need to build bridges. We need to build bridges between each other, also in relation to politics. (The Alternative, 2015c)

The argument about building bridges, not walls, is likewise interesting to take note of. This is the case because the metaphor of 'the bridge' seems to recur in much of The Alternative's external communication (e.g. The Alternative, 2014d). In many ways, the guiding idea behind the metaphor is the same that drives the notion of 'A New We': Instead of basing communities on a discourse of exclusion, as represented by the metaphor of walls, we need to redirect our thinking towards a discourse of inclusion. This is further explicated by the party's desire to move away from the traditional political rhetoric of 'us and them' and towards a more embracing rhetoric of 'us and us' (Observation, 2015).

**Figure 6**: The Alternative's local office in downtown Copenhagen. On the left, a city limit sign saying '#ANewWe'.

The notion of 'A New We', which could be interpreted as an organizational ideal for The Alternative, can thus be described as a fully inclusive community that cannot be demarcated *a priori*. Through 'A New We', The Alternative is implicitly described as an organization that has no immediate boundaries, and there seems to be no obvious frontier that decides who is allowed to join the party and who is not. As stated in the party's manifesto, quoted above, The Alternative is for anyone who feels that something is changing. Being part of The Alternative is thus not so much a question of political conviction as it is a question of wanting to achieve progressive social change (The Alternative, 2014b). As explained by two leading candidates in a somewhat polemic piece entitled 'Who votes for the Alternative?':

> When someone mentions The Alternative, most people think of Uffe Elbæk – and then of dyscalculic vegetarians in Jesus sandals who sit in circles and sing songs about wind energy and incense sticks. But we are a complete palette of Danes […] Impossible to pigeonhole on a political red/blue spectrum – that is us.

And they continue:

We don't care who you previously voted for. Just feel and think whether you also want

to participate in making Denmark and the world a slightly more fantastic place – for

more people. You are welcome. (The Alternative, 2015d)

This conception of The Alternative as a party that is impossible to pigeonhole and thus capable of representing almost any oppositional identity is likewise reflected by the individual members. Across the 34 interviews conducted for this study, the vast majority of respondents answered that 'everyone' is welcome to join the party as long as they are open-minded and as long as they believe that the established system is broken and needs fixing. As one respondent put it:

We don't need to agree on everything. As long as you realize that the current system

doesn't work, and as long as you are willing to do something about it, then I guess that

you're an Alternativist. (Respondent #1).

This statement, which quite clearly reflects the most commonly held view amongst members of The Alternative, leads us to the second part of this paper's analysis. Having established the basic conception of the party, the analysis now turns to the construction of 'the Alternativist' as an individual subject. As we shall see, the notion of 'the Alternativist' is closely related to the collective subject of 'A New We': While the party itself is portrayed as a boundless entity, the notion of 'the Alternativist' is similarly constructed as a subject that embraces the logic of inclusion and refrains from marginalizing particular identities within the party.

## *Mobilizing 'the Alternativist'*

In a recently published newspaper article, Uffe Elbæk describes the pressing need for a so-called 'friendly revolution', which is as much a revolution of the mind as it is a societal revolution. The article could be read as a call-to-action for supporters of The Alternative, and it is structured around 25 propositions that are meant to pave the way for the revolution. Each proposition corresponds to a letter in the Danish alphabet. Proposition 24, which corresponds to the Danish letter Ø, is entitled 'Øer' (islands, in English) and it states:

Islands and bridges are connected. That's how it is in Denmark. But this is also the case in relation to people. Luckily, we are pretty good at building bridges in this country. However, in the world, but also at home, people are increasingly becoming preoccupied with building walls. Exercise your capacity for building bridges. This is what the future needs, now more than ever. (The Alternative, 2015a)

This proposition is interesting because it seeks to forge a connection between the previous discussion of 'A New We' and the idea of 'the Alternativist' as an individual subject. First, an argument is made about the necessity of building bridges between people of different origins and convictions. Second, an appeal is made to the reader about exercising his or her own capacity for building bridges. This is important because the idea of prioritizing bridge-building over wall-building is central to the characteristics of 'the Alternativist'. Throughout the party's external communication, this political subject is sought mobilized by appealing to its central characteristics and by implicitly linking these characteristics to the conception of The Alternative as an organization. The simultaneous mobilization of the collective and the individual subject is thus performed by framing the latter as a product of the former, in the sense that the one cannot be separated from the other. In that way, the political leadership avoids creating unwanted tensions and inconsistencies between the two subject positions, which seems to be an otherwise frequent consequence of the simultaneous mobilization of individual and collective subjectivities (e.g. Knights & McCabe, 2003).

That being said, one particular tension remains: While 'the Alternativist' is framed as anyone who thinks the system is broken and believes in the need for change, 'A New We' likewise includes people who do not necessarily think so. This tension is resolved partly through the method of 'decoupling', which will be examined in the paper's discussion, and partly by attributing certain characteristics, such as open-mindedness and inclusivity, to 'the Alternativist'. One example of the latter is the following quote, which is taken from another newspaper article written by Uffe Elbæk:

What we are experiencing right now is an omen of a cultural and value-based paradigm shift across generations, cultures and social status. We have started to notice each other.

We have started to develop a new kind of connectedness in relation to our common problems and in relation to our desire for the colorful and multifarious life. (The Alternative, 2014e)

The article that contains this quote is provocatively entitled: 'Dear Dane, have the courage to exit the hamster wheel'. Here, the metaphor of 'the hamster wheel' is invoked to describe the ongoing pursuit of material growth within the neoliberal economy, which once again illustrates how the counter-hegemonic identity of The Alternative is embedded in the construction of 'the Alternativist' as a political subject. It is, furthermore, important to notice how this and other articles, such as the one containing the 25 propositions, is addressing the reader directly, here in the shape of 'the Dane'. This rhetorical move plays an important role in the mobilization of the 'the Alternativist', as the strategy of addressing people directly has proven incredibly effective in processes of subjectification. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note, identity regulation through the direct reference to specific individuals is effective because it explicitly details the expectations towards people who occupy that particular social space.

Similar approaches to the mobilization of 'the Alternativist' can be detected throughout most parts of The Alternative's communication. For instance, in correspondence with the ongoing focus on cooperation and bridge-building (rather than competition and wall-building), much of The Alternative's communication is concerned with describing how the practice of listening rather than talking is a defining feature of 'the Alternativist'. This becomes clear through the previously mentioned debate principles. As the party notes in an introduction to the principle, an 'open and *attentive* debate constitutes the nerve of democracy' (The Alternative, 2013c, italics added). These principles are, however, not just fine words on paper. Rather, they are frequently referred to during Political Laboratories, speeches, TV-debates and other kinds of public communication. For instance, during Political Laboratories, the facilitators will often make reference to the principles as a way of getting people to listen to one another instead of just trying to win an argument. The debate principles are likewise mentioned in the party program, where it is stated that:

The Alternative's politicians will debate according to The Alternative's debate principles. We don't believe that politicians are all-knowing oracles who cannot admit that there is something they don't know, or that politicians can't recognize a good argument even though it's coming from a political opponent. (The Alternative, 2014a: 9)

The six debate principles are, however, not only concerned with the act of listening. For instance, the fifth principle holds that being curious towards political opponents is a virtue in political debates. Once again, it becomes clear how The Alternative's debate principles fit well with the party's vision of a new political culture, which is reflected in the organizational ideal of 'A New We'. Being curious towards political opponents resonates well with the desire for inclusive communities. Interestingly, through the party's external communication, this desire to be inclusive is often translated into a need to repress personal egos: One should be more concerned with 'we' than with 'me'. As the political leader, Uffe Elbæk, puts it in yet another newspaper article:

If the goal is to develop a new and far more dynamic and transparent political culture, then we as politicians and citizens need to unlearn […] a lot of things, which we today take for granted. For instance, we need to unlearn undesirable patterns of conflict and status. We also need to learn how to dare to keep the decision-making process open as long as possible. We need to unlearn our desire to fulfill our own egos […] while we learn how to think about the common good – together with our political opponents. (The Alternative, 2014f)

In summary, 'the Alternativist', as a political subject, can be described as a person who embraces diversity and keeps an open mind towards people with different beliefs. Instead of building walls in an effort to exclude others from the collective, 'the Alternativist' builds bridges between people. 'The Alternativist' is, furthermore, concerned with trying to minimize tensions, as undesirable patterns of conflict need to be unlearned. The way to do so, for 'the Alternativist', is through the act of listening, rather than talking, and by being curious towards political opponents. This desire to be highly inclusive and to embrace political opponents ultimately translates into a need to repress personal egos and a need to constantly think about the common good.

Hence, it seems fair to conclude that 'the Alternativist' is a person who could be described as incapable of demarcating The Alternative in terms of political representation, as such an act would run counter to the characterization of 'the Alternativist'. Instead, 'the Alternativist' holds on to the belief that 'there is always an alternative', to borrow a phrase from the party's manifesto (The Alternative, 2013a). By encouraging a conception of self that builds on inclusivity, attentiveness, open-mindedness, curiosity and selflessness, the political leadership renders The Alternative's members more or less incapable of excluding anyone from the collective, and thus, incapable of particularizing the party by defining it in positive terms. Returning to the notion of overdetermination, one could argue that The Alternative's leadership wholeheartedly embraces the ambiguity that follows from 'the impossibility of society' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 93) by forging a subject that completely abandons the pursuit of determination. Accordingly, 'the Alternativist' implicitly accepts that The Alternative as a political organization is cloaked in ambiguity and that the identity of the party should remain unfixed, and hence, universal.

The implications of such subjectification will be discussed in the paper's discussion, but before getting to that, we must attend to the members' own perceptions of self in order to explore how these members seek to craft a self which is – to some extent – their own (Watson, 2008).

## Negotiating 'the Alternativist'

For most of the members that were interviewed for this study, The Alternative seemed to constitute a peculiar, but nonetheless quite compelling, phenomenon. When asked about what initially attracted them to The Alternative, several respondents found it hard to articulate what political demands or ideological agendas exactly appealed to them when they first heard of the party. Some stated that 'it just felt right' (Respondent #11), while others claimed that The Alternative seemed to represent all that they are and always have been (Respondent #7). Some members were, however, also quite conscious about their shortage of words when describing why The Alternative attracted them. One respondent, who ultimately decided to write a letter to The Alternative when she first heard of the party, put it like this:

I wrote that I could not explain what it was, but that I was willing to do anything to participate. I wrote that I had never done any political work before, but that I wanted to be part of this in any way possible. (Respondent #3)

Another respondent described the same sense of hard-to-explain identification with The Alternative's political project like this:

I have been involved with The Alternative ever since the day Uffe launched the party at a press conference. I immediately wrote them an e-mail saying that I wanted to join. This was just something that I had been waiting for… or, it felt like I had been waiting for it, without actually knowing that it was coming. (Respondent #9)

This feeling of attraction could be interpreted as a sign of the affective investment that follows from this kind of political identification (Laclau, 2005: 110); an investment that is fueled by the individual's desire to transgress the unbridgeable distance between itself and that which represents it discursively (Laclau & Zac, 1994). Most of the respondents described The Alternative as a party that somehow managed to represent them as persons in a way that they had never experienced before. Even though several respondents had previously been politically inactive, they suddenly felt an urge to join The Alternative, as the party seemed capable of signifying all that they ever wanted politics to be. In fact, a handful of respondents (e.g. Respondent #4, #15 and #30) even explained that they, independently of each other, were considering starting their own political party when suddenly The Alternative arrived and 'stole' their idea:

I think a lot of people, like me, have considered starting their own party… and I actually spent quite some time pondering what this party might look like. But what happened was that I didn't have to create that party, because it was suddenly created for me. (Respondent #4)

Quite a bit of this immediate and unconditional identification with The Alternative might be explained not through the particular policies of the party, as the party had no political program at the time when most respondents decided to enroll, but through the sheer emptiness of The

Alternative as a political signifier. By basing the party on a series of universal ideals, such as the ambition of working towards a 'new political culture', a 'sustainable transition' and 'A New We', The Alternative allows an incredibly wide range of individuals to read their own personal preferences into the collective. This goes back to the notion of radical politics as a specific logic of articulation, in which an equivalential chain of demands are united through the representation of a sufficiently empty signifier (Laclau, 2005).

Interestingly, this reluctance to politically delimit the party is furthermore reflected in the descriptions that most respondents provided for this study. As respondent #1 explained in the quote displayed in the first part of the analysis: If one realizes that the established system is broken, and if one is willing to do something about it, then one could be considered an 'Alternativist'. Ultimately, this means that defining the party in terms of political representation becomes incredibly hard for the common member of The Alternative, and those who do try to define it frequently end up with definitions such as the one below:

> I know that The Alternative is a political party, but for me it's much more than that... it's much more like a movement. In fact, to me, it's a lifestyle, or a way of being in the world that so many people have been longing for. (Respondent #17)

Or as another respondent put it when asked to describe how a dictionary entry about The Alternative would begin:

> That, I really don't know... After the beginning, I would write that we were an answer to people's desire for all kinds of other things. [...] You could also write something harsher: There was an admission of failure; politics had reached the end of meaningfulness. In these conditions, we tried to create something new without knowing the answer. (Respondent #22)

As Torfing (1999) explains, such descriptions testify to the ambivalence that comes with trying to define, in positive terms, signifiers that lack a signified. To illustrate this, Torfing suggests the word 'democracy', which has always been notoriously hard for political scientists to define. This, he

argues, is due to the fact that democracy 'only exists as an objectified void created and maintained by the name which names it' (ibid: 50). Likewise, this seems to apply to The Alternative as a signifier, since the identity of the party can only be described by defining *what it is not*. This means that all positive definitions of the party appear as political constructions, which is why most attempts at defining The Alternative are framed negatively. An example of this is the party's manifesto, in which The Alternative is defined as outcry *against* cynicism and as a *countermeasure* to what is currently happening in the world (The Alternative, 2013a).

However, the question that this paper revolves around is how the party maintains this emptiness while going through a process of particularization. The argument so far has been that 'the Alternativist', as a political subject, is discursively framed by The Alternative's leadership as a person who is open-minded, embraces the idea of fully inclusive communities and, thus, refrains from demarcating the party in terms of political representation. As explained in the theory section, however, such attempts at subjectification rest firmly on the members actually embracing those subject positions that they are offered. While important moments of resistance were indeed detectable (I will return to these later), most respondents clearly embraced the subject position of 'the Alternativist'. For instance, when asked to describe the characteristics of 'the Alternativist', one respondent put it like this:

> I think that an Alternativist is someone who meets the world with an open mind. It's someone who easily laughs, but is clear in his opinion and is ready to act on it. It's someone who is ready to do something for others and happily sits down and listens to them. It is also a person who is not steadfast, and who doesn't know 100% what he wants and what the truth is. (Respondent #15)

In this quote, many of the themes from the first two sections of this analysis recur. For instance, the idea about listening to others seems almost lifted out of the party's debate principles (The Alternative, 2013c), while the notion of not being steadfast corresponds well with the 'undesirable patterns of conflict' that, according to Uffe Elbæk, need to be unlearned (The Alternative, 2014f).

Likewise, another respondent emphasized this idea of not being too firm about one's own convictions while describing The Alternative as a group:

> Well, we are a bunch of fundamentally tolerant people who have this open-minded approach to other people. This is also reflected in our political ideas… It is pretty damn hard to be narrow-minded, while being part of The Alternative. That, you quickly become tired of. (Respondent #1)

As these quotes illustrate, 'the Alternativist' is largely embraced by members of The Alternative. However, the last quote is particularly interesting in relation to this paper, as it suggests an almost normative dimension to the characteristics of 'the Alternativist'. As a member of The Alternative, the respondent explains, you quickly grow tired of being narrow-minded. Besides the descriptive nature of this statement, it could likewise be interpreted as a way of expressing the normative ideal that, when joining the party, one *should* not be narrow-minded. This is particularly interesting because it frames the kind of normative control (Kunda, 1992) that underpins the subjectification of 'the Alternativist'. By identifying with this subject, it could be argued that the common member of The Alternative deprives him or herself of the ability to particularize and demarcate the party.

However, the lack of ability to define and demarcate the party is not only constraining. In fact, it enables 'the Alternativist' to exercise his or her own political preferences within the boundaries of The Alternative as a political organization. These liberating effects are perhaps most visible in the way internal divisions are able to co-exist without causing conflict or marginalization. One example, which seems to recur in several interviews, is the internal division between the 'hippies' who, in the eyes of many members of The Alternative, are overly preoccupied with sustainability and ecological living and the other members. As one respondent explained:

> I'm not one of those eco-hippies. There are quite a few eco-hippies in The Alternative, and that is totally fine by me. I think that the thing about only eating 100 grams of meat a day is… well, it's fine by me. I like vegetables and all that, so I don't really provide any

resistance towards it. But it's one of those cases where I can't follow the logic. (Respondent #12)

Similar accounts were provided by other members such as respondent #19, who emphasized that those people within The Alternative that spend most of their time eating organic cakes and talking about feelings are on the fringe of what she considers 'alternative' (Respondent #19). In a similar vein, respondent #11 argued that the biggest challenge for The Alternative might be that the eco-hippies end up taking over the party (Respondent #11). These accounts are, however, always supplemented with a shared understanding that everyone is welcome in the party and that no one should be excluded.

The example of the 'eco-hippies' is illustrative of the way in which The Alternative's universal appeal is preserved. Even though several respondents distance themselves from the 'eco-hippies' as a way of negotiating what it means to be an 'Alternativist', such enactments of identity work never result in a stratification of identities. As already explained, this is because 'Alternativists' generally lack the ability (and probably also the desire) to install a hierarchical relationship between themselves and others. As a respondent noted: To say, 'I am alternative, you are not', is the antithesis of what it means to be alternative within The Alternative (Respondent #30). Thus, the fear of the 'eco-hippies' taking over should not be interpreted as a fear that is predicated on that particular identity ('I like vegetables and all that'), but as a fear of stratification as such (especially since nothing indicates that the eco-hippies are, in fact, 'taking over'). This is the case because the prioritization of some identities and demands over others would result in the immediate collapse of The Alternative's universal appeal. Hence, within The Alternative, all identities are considered equal and anyone who feels that 'something new is about to replace something old' is considered alternative (The Alternative 2013a). When asked about how one recognizes an 'Alternativist', one respondent put it like this:

> Who's an Alternativist? Well, at the most fundamental level, I would say that we all are. Then, of course, there will always be some hardcore business dude with grey hair that needs a bit more persuading. But then, in the end, I bet he too once had dreams and visions. (Respondent #17)

As shown in this third part of the analysis, most respondents embrace the notion of 'the Alternativist' as it is articulated by The Alternative's political leadership. Even though several respondents engaged in individual identity work by, for instance, distancing themselves from other members of the party, such as the so-called 'eco-hippies', they generally mirrored the official description of 'Alternativists' as people who are inclusive, attentive, open-minded, curious and selfless. These characteristics were similarly reflected in the respondents' individual perceptions of The Alternative as an organization capable of representing almost anyone politically – at least anyone with dreams and visions.


## Discussion: Towards decoupling

This paper's epigraph is borrowed from an *ephemera* editorial that ponders the virtues of alternative thinking and acting. Here, the closing argument is that the pursuit of alternatives always entails a productive curiosity towards 'the other' and, by implication, 'another'. This is what leads Schreven et al. (2008: 136) to conclude that the alternative thinker, writer, speaker and practitioner is full of faith but never faithful. In a sense, this could also have been this paper's conclusion. By encouraging a conception of self that builds on inclusivity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, curiosity and selflessness, The Alternative's political leadership produces a subject who is highly concerned with 'the other' but also incapable of determining the party itself, as this implies marginalizing 'another'. The immediate effects of this kind of subjectification were displayed on The Alternative's Facebook page, where a member posted the following comment in response to a policy proposal supported by The Alternative in parliament:

> I don't need to agree with the party's policy in that many areas to believe in the project. The most important thing for me is that it's a product of pure democratic debate without dogmatism. To me, it's a strength that we maintain a curious disagreement all the way through the party, and that we don't lock ourselves into political programs. (Facebook, 2015)

The members' almost unconditional identification with 'the Alternativist' offers some interesting insights into how radical political parties work. At a theoretical level, the attempt to move from a position of universality towards a position of particularity invariably entails a narrowing of political representation. This poses a problem, as it makes it difficult for The Alternative to particularize its political project without simultaneously losing support. At a practical level, however, this problem is resolved through the construction of a subject position that, in the end, deprives members of their capacity to demarcate the party in terms of political representation. In doing so, The Alternative avoids marginalizing an array of political identities, as the dividing lines between different factions within the party never turn into actual demarcations. Even though the 'eco-hippies' might be somewhat secluded within the Alternative, they are never actually excluded from the collective, as no true 'Alternativist' is in a position to do so. This is the case because the very act of marginalization runs counter to the characterization of 'the Alternativist' as a person who builds bridges rather than walls and who employs the rhetoric of 'us and us'. Hence, while the party continues to grow more particular by each proposal advanced in parliament, The Alternative maintains its universal appeal and radical identity.

The Alternative's success in maintaining a universal appeal despite particularization could easily be interpreted as a successful attempt at bridging the otherwise unbridgeable distance between 'the universal' and 'the particular'. However, as argued by Laclau (2001), this is theoretically not possible, as the collapse of the chasm between universality and particularity would coincide with the end of democracy and, by implication, politics. This indicates that The Alternative has somehow found a way to appear universal and particular at the same time, without actually realizing this conflation in practice. Given the above, the most plausible explanation is that The Alternative has managed to implement an informal and untold decoupling between its universal body (the movement) and its particular body (the party). While the party, represented by the political leadership, engages in all kinds of particularistic activities (such as, for instance, the tax deduction bill), the movement sustains its equivalential chain of popular demands by not prioritizing any particular demand over others (see Husted & Plesner, 2017).

Strategies of decoupling or 'loose coupling' (Weick, 1976) have traditionally been used in a variety of organizations as a means of responding to reforms. For instance, as Hernes (2005) notes, public sector organizations affected by the New Public Management regime have used such strategies to respond to the combined demands of accountability and efficiency without prioritizing one over the other. By loosening the structural coupling between its various parts, the organization is able to appear as if speaking with two tongues, thus provisionally avoiding fundamental change. As such, the loosening of couplings may be seen as an effective way of deparadoxing an otherwise paradoxical situation – as a way of avoiding paralysis (Charniawska, 2005). By partially decoupling the movement from the party, The Alternative manages to respond to the particularistic logic of parliament while preserving the universalist spirit of radical politics. In this way, the party avoids marginalizing supporters who disagree with the activities of the political leadership and the policies they advance in parliament, as the quote above implies.

The challenge for radical political movements wanting to engage with party politics is thus a matter of maintaining some kind of distance between movement and party, since collapsing into one organizational form would most likely cancel the movement's radical/universal identity (Husted & Hansen, 2017). However, as Hernes (2005) notes, decoupling or loose coupling is rarely a permanent solution. Over time, loose couplings tend to tighten, which inevitably leads to adaptation and reform. After the elections in 2015, support for The Alternative continued to grow for another year, peaking at 7.8 percent in spring 2016. Today, however, the opinion polls have once again fallen below 6 percent, which may be an indication that the party's universal appeal has diminished as a consequence of entering parliament. This suggests that radical political parties, such as The Alternative, need to find ways of maintaining a more permanent separation between movement and party, and further research is needed to investigate ways of doing this as well as the political and organizational consequences of such a strategy.

## Conclusion

The paper contributes to the literature on subjectification by showing how ambiguity can be used strategically in a political organization. As Eisenberg (1984: 231) argues, 'strategic ambiguity' can be an effective tool for generating 'unified diversity' because it supports the synchronous

'existence of multiple viewpoints in organizations' without this causing conflict or paralysis. While plenty of studies have provided empirical backing for this claim (e.g. Denis et al., 2011; Giroux, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009), few have transferred these observations to a political context. Through the case of The Alternative, we learn that ambiguity can be produced by inviting members to recognize themselves as inclusive, attentive, selfless, and curious people who lack the ability and desire to demarcate the party in terms of political representation. We also learn that this type of ambiguity can be used to advance specific political causes, because it allows The Alternative to pursue particularistic objectives without losing its universal appeal.

The paper likewise contributes to the literature on identity work in organizations by providing a fresh perspective on the way individuals relate to managerial discourse. By showing how affirmative identification rather than dis-identification or counter-identification can have liberating effects for the individuals involved. This is, of course, not an entirely novel observation (e.g. Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Knights & McCabe, 2003), but again, one that is rarely made in relation to studies of political organization. In particular, the case of The Alternative shows how the affective investment that follows from political identification (Laclau, 2005) can be maintained despite increased particularization by partially decoupling the party from the movement.

Furthermore, these findings have a series of implications for the study of radical political parties within organization studies and beyond. First of all, they imply that such parties should not be treated as one single entity but as two somewhat autonomous systems, operating according to two very different logics. Secondly, they demand an empirical sensitivity towards those technologies that make such a decoupling possible by, for instance, clouding its very existence. Finally, they require a willingness to conduct fieldwork at multiple sites, as valuable insights might be lost by engaging with merely one research site, such as the parliament.

However, important questions for further research arise from such conclusions. For instance, how is decoupling performed in practice? What managerial practices are employed to maintain a (loose) coupling between the movement part and the party part of radical political parties? If a decoupling between those two parts is needed in order to maintain a universal appeal, how then

is the organization kept from fracturing? Last, but certainly not least, how much particularization can radical political parties cope with before they implode? Will the decision to enter a coalition government, for instance, signal the end of universality? Such questions undoubtedly need answering if we are to fully comprehend the new wave of left-wing parties that currently seems to be leaving a lasting mark on contemporary European politics.

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# 8. Fourth paper

'Some have ideologies, we have values': The role of values in political organization

*Emil Husted*

## Abstract

The present paper seeks to revitalize the study of organizational values by analyzing the role of values in a political party in Denmark called *The Alternative*, a party that claims to be guided by values rather than ideology. Inspired by recent work in organizational psychology, I group The Alternative's values into two categories: vision values and humanity values. Through an empirical investigation based primarily on interviews and observations, I argue that The Alternative's vision values encourage ordinary members to take initiative in realizing their own political ideas, while the party's humanity values encourage them to also remain morally inclusive towards people with different and even opposing views. As such, the combination of vision and humanity values allows The Alternative to maintain political support from members who could otherwise be expected to feel marginalized by the emergence of dominant ideas within the party. One of the party's humanity values, *trust*, is highlighted as a particularly interesting value in terms of politics. Within The Alternative, trust serves the purpose of effectively removing the need for political decision-making and, by implication, political demarcation. This, I argue, is what allows The Alternative to maintain a universal appeal while also engaging in very particularistic activities, such as signing bills and striking compromises in parliament. The paper is concluded by highlighting possible contributions to the study of organizational values.

## Acknowledgements

# Introduction

Ideology never says, "I am ideological".

*Louis Althusser (1971: 175), Lenin and philosophy and other essays*

As emphasized by some of the most celebrated scholars within the realm of organization and management studies, values play a decisive role in organizational life (e.g., Barnard, 1938; Simon, 1945; Selznick, 1957). Particularly since the introduction of cognate concepts, such as culture and attitudes, the interest in organizational values has increased significantly (Hofstede, 1998). This has led to a series of studies exploring the relationship between values and numerous organizational phenomena such as strategic change (Carlisle & Baden-Fuller, 2004), organizational structure (Hinings et al., 1996), issues response (Bansal, 2003), output performance (Jurkiewiwicz & Giacalone, 2004), and social control (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). The ongoing concern with organizational values is, however, not only restricted to academia. Practitioners within various fields have likewise taken an interest in values. Hence, instead of managing by instructions or by objectives, many organizations today prefer to manage by values (Dolan & Garcia, 2001). As argued by Kraemer (2011: n.p.), a former CEO turned professor, in the columns of Forbes Magazine: 'The only true leadership is value-based leadership'.

Despite growing interest among scholars and practitioners alike, research on organizational values remains inconclusive. In fact, as Cha and Edmondson (2006: 58) note, 'research on values in organizations is in nascent stages'. This is partly due to the fact that no apparent agreement exists on what actually constitutes a value, let alone how it guides organizational practices. While most studies appropriate Rokeach's (1973: 5) definition of a value as 'an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence', others argue that this conception concerns only *human* values and not *organizational* values (Jaakson, 2010). Furthermore, while some argue that organizations causally reflect the intrinsic values of their members (O'Reilly et al., 1991), others see values as nothing but 'necessary illusions' that allow the organization to navigate a world in constant change (Thyssen, 2001). Such fundamental disagreements have curbed researchers' ability to move the study of organizational values forward (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013), resulting in a situation where new and more imaginative modes of inquiry are required in order to revitalize this important field of research (Agle & Caldwell, 1999), which has been dominated by quantitative survey-based studies for decades (Stavru, 2013).

One way of revitalizing the study of organizational values is by studying organizations that usually escape the analytic gaze of mainstream organization science, such as political parties and social movements, as a way of generating new insights and deeper understandings of the political dimension of such management technologies (Moufahim et al., 2015). A prime example of this research strategy is Michels' (1911) famous study of the oligarchic tendencies in political parties and trade unions in early twentieth-century Europe. By studying how political organizations, thoroughly committed to democratic ideals, slowly grew into bureaucratic machines and eventually succumbed to elite rule, he arrived at the much-cited conclusion that, 'Who says organization, says oligarchy' (Michels, 1911: 401). These valuable insights about the so-called 'iron law of oligarchy' have since been widely used, not only in political science and sociology but also in organization studies (Tolbert & Hiatt, 2009).

In this paper, I follow Michels' lead by exploring the role of organizational values in a young political party in Denmark called *The Alternative* as a way of generating new insights about the use of organizational values in general. The Alternative was founded in late 2013 as a reaction to the unsustainable program of neoliberalism and the 'old political culture' characterized by spin and tactics. Less than two years later, the party entered parliament with almost five percent of the votes. From the outset, The Alternative's main objective was to represent various alternatives to the economic, social, and environmental state of affairs. However, instead of presenting a detailed list of demands, The Alternative started out with no political program whatsoever; and instead of claiming allegiance to any existing ideology, they claimed to be guided solely by six core values: *courage*, *generosity*, *transparency*, *humility*, *humor*, and *empathy*.

In order to explore the role of organizational values within The Alternative, I use the dynamic framework proposed by Bourne and Jenkins (2013) to chart the role of 'espoused' and 'attributed' values within the party. While the former type of values is constituted by the six core values, the latter is constituted by two additional values, namely *curiosity* and *trust*. With inspiration from recent work within organizational psychology (Finegan, 2000; Abott et al., 2005), I group these values into two new categories: 'vision values' and 'humanity values'. Through an empirical investigation, I observe how The Alternative's vision values encourage the party's members to pursue their own objectives and to take initiative in realizing these. On the other hand, the humanity values encourage members to remain morally inclusive towards members with different views. One humanity value – *trust* – serves an additional purpose. As we shall see, trust effectively removes the need for political decision-making and, by implication, political demarcation. This, I

argue, is what allows The Alternative to maintain a universal appeal while also engaging in very particularistic activities, such as signing bills and striking compromises in parliament.

The paper's main research interest is to explore the relationship between organizational values and organizational commitment. However, rather than following the dominant approach in organization studies by asking *if* and *why* organizational values influence commitment (Dubin et al., 1975; Kidron, 1978; O'Reilly et al., 1991; Amos & Weathington, 2008), the paper sets out to explore *how* organizational values influence commitment. The paper's contribution is thus twofold: First, it seeks to revitalize the study of organizational values by using qualitative methods to study a political organization (instead of using quantitative methods to study an economic organization). Secondly, it seeks to supplement the growing literature within organizational psychology on the relationship between values and commitment by providing a more sociological account. This helps us see that the meaning of organizational values is fully dependent on the context in which they are articulated: Whenever values are counterposed to the notion of ideology, they become very universal ideals capable of crossing political boundaries, but as soon as they are brought to life in a specific context, they acquire a much more particular meaning. This finding has some interesting implications for the study of organizational values, which will be discussed towards the end of the article.

## The curious case of The Alternative

A few months prior to the launch of The Alternative, the party's coming leader and former minister of culture in Denmark, Uffe Elbæk, authored a conceptual sketch for The Alternative as a political organization. In this document, Elbæk repeatedly stressed the need for a political party and a social movement that is willing and able to imagine a 'radically different future' and to provide a progressive answer to the 'massive global challenges' that dominate contemporary societies. 'Paradoxically', he continued, 'while the challenges are stacking up, we have never seen so many inspiring examples of individuals and groups of citizens who, on their own accord, develop concrete, positive answers to the problems we currently face'. The question for Elbæk then became how to forge connections between all these citizen-driven initiatives and how to channel all that political energy into one single project. He called the solution: 'The Alternative - an international party, a movement, and a cultural voice' (The Alternative, 2013a: 1).

It seemed clear from the outset that no existing ideological formation would be able to tie all these initiatives together and represent all those who believed in a radically different future – or, as stated in the party's manifesto, anyone 'who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old' (The Alternative, 2013b). In order to accommodate such an objective, The Alternative had to be based on something broader, something more universal than any existing ideology. To this end, Elbæk and his team came up with the notion of value-based politics. Instead of claiming allegiance to any one ideology, The Alternative would be based on six core values that should guide both internal processes and political messages. These are the values that I refer to as the party's 'espoused values' (The Alternative, 2013b):

1. *Courage*. Courage to look problems in the eye. But also courage about the future we share.
2. *Generosity*. Everything which can be shared will be shared with anyone interested.
3. *Transparency*. Everybody should be able to look over our shoulders. On good days and on bad.
4. *Humility*. To the task. To those on whose shoulders we stand. And to those who will follow us.
5. *Humour*. Without humour there can be no creativity. Without creativity there can be no good ideas. Without good ideas there can be no creative power. Without creative power there can be no results.
6. *Empathy*. Putting yourself in other people's shoes. Looking at the world from that point of view. And creating win-win solutions for everyone.

The Alternative was officially launched at a press conference in late 2013 by Uffe Elbæk and his colleague, Josephine Fock. However, instead of presenting a complete political program, or at least a set of demands, Elbæk and Fock announced that they did not have a 'grand party bible on the shelf' (The Alternative, 2013c). In fact, save for a short manifesto, all they had was the six core values. The political program, they proclaimed, would be developed later through a series of publically accessible workshops called 'Political Laboratories'. The surprising lack of concrete policies initially provided The Alternative with important momentum, as it allowed anyone who identified with the need for something 'alternative' to read their own personal preferences into the project. This kind of mobilization, however, made it equally difficult for the party to particularize its political project, because every proposal added to the political program risked marginalizing all those who thought The Alternative was going to be something else (see Laclau,

2005: 89). This naturally caused a problem for a party thoroughly dependent on electoral support. I will refer to this problem as *the problem of particularization* (Husted & Hansen, 2017).

In order to cope with the problem of particularization, The Alternative needed to implement a range of managerial technologies that would allow the party to maintain its universal appeal. As argued in this paper, the notion of value-based politics constitutes one such technology. While there is little clarity as to what value-based politics actually implies, and what the individual values truly signify, one thing is certain: It implies something different from ideology-based politics. Within The Alternative, ideologies are often framed as rigid and restrictive programs that prevent productive dialogue and cooperation across the political spectrum, whereas values are framed as uncontaminated ideas capable of crossing political borders. As Elbæk explains:

> Apparently, we did something that makes sense for a lot of people. Instead of being tied to an ideology, we are tied to values. This means that people who are former members of socialist parties and people who used to be members of liberal [parties] suddenly unite because the values tie them together. It's not a specific history or a particular understanding of system or class – it's the values. (The Alternative, 2016a)

The pursuit of a non-ideological position is far from novel in politics (Freeden, 2006). However, as several post-structuralist writers have shown, it is a quest bound to fail. For instance, Laclau (1997) argues that ideologies are nothing but discourses structured around a series of 'nodal points' (or signifiers) that have been emptied of meaning in an attempt to represent what he calls 'the absent fullness of the community'. The notion of ideology is thus synonymous with that of discourse to the extent that a dominant ideology is the same as a hegemonic discourse. The point is that the critique of ideology *as such* depends on the possibility of finding a place external to ideology, which would be the same as trying to find an extra-discursive point of observation – and that is not possible. Hence, value-based politics cannot be seen as a non-ideological type of politics but as an ideology that pretends to be something else. In fact, as Žižek (1989: 2) notes, with a reference to Althusser: 'the idea of the possible end of ideology is an ideological idea *par excellence*'. Crucially, however, the practical implications of invoking values rather than ideologies are very different. Not least because, as Eagleton (2007) observes, ideologies are most effective when invisible. As we shall see, the explicit rejection of ideology not only allows The Alternative to mobilize support from across the political spectrum, it likewise installs a certain type of self-management in the individual 'alternativist' (see also Husted, forthcoming).

Today, The Alternative holds 10 of the 179 seats in the Danish parliament. This makes them the sixth largest party in general and the third largest party in the center-left opposition. Structurally, The Alternative is modelled on the Social Liberal Party (Elbæk's former party), with a political leadership (the MPs) and a central board as the two main executive bodies. However, unlike the Social Liberal Party, The Alternative's policies are developed bottom-up through the so-called Political Laboratories, in which anyone (also non-members) is allowed to participate. This highly inclusive process naturally helps The Alternative maintain a universal appeal, but once the policies reach the executive bodies, they are frequently modified and rewritten to fit the logic of the parliamentary system (Husted & Plesner, 2017). This modification creates a decoupling between the ordinary members and the political leadership that occasionally threatens to tear the party apart. In this paper, I will argue that what keeps The Alternative from fracturing is a sophisticated combination of vision values and humanity values. In particular, the notion of trust is found to be extremely vital for the party's survival. However, before we get to the analysis of these values, we need to briefly consider the literature on organizational values.

## Organizational values: A short review

Organizational values have played an important role in some of the most canonical texts within the realm of organization and management studies. For instance, Barnard (1938) spoke of the 'moral factor' as an important yardstick for any responsible executive, and Selznick (1957) stressed the need for organizations to incorporate institutional values into their social structure as a way of attaining legitimacy. Often understood as 'yardsticks or criteria for the operation of an organization' (Walsh et al., 1981: 137), organizational values have figured in research on a wide range of organizational phenomena (Agle & Caldwell, 1999). While the lion's share of these studies seem to focus on the relationship between organizational values and organizational structure (Hage & Dewar, 1973; Connor & Becker, 1975; Greenwood & Hinings, 1988; Hinings et al., 1996; Perkmann & Spicer, 2014), others have investigated the link between organizational values and strategic change (Carlisle & Baden-Fuller, 2004), output performance (Jurkiewiwicz & Giacalone, 2004), enrollment management (Kraatz et al., 2010), social control (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996), issues response (Bansal, 2003), and much more.

One particularly interesting area of research, at least for this paper, concerns the influence of organizational values on organizational commitment. Despite the apparent relevance for social

studies of organizations, however, the intersection of values and commitment has primarily been investigated by scholars working within the field of organizational psychology. For instance, an early study by Dubin et al. (1975) found that workers who have job-oriented 'central life values' are more inclined to develop strong organizational commitment than workers whose life values are oriented elsewhere. Kidron (1978) confirmed this finding and added that organizations that are based on 'protestant ethics' are more likely to foster morally committed members. Later, O'Reilly et al. (1991) argued that moral commitment and job satisfaction is often driven by values rather than more instrumental concerns like wage and job security. The common thread in these works – and *plenty* of similar studies – is that so-called person-organization 'value congruence' (Liedtka, 1989) is of the utmost importance to organizational commitment. In other words, the more an organization is perceived as displaying the same values as an individual member, the more committed to the organization that member is likely to be (see also Boxx et al., 1991; Posner, 1992; Amos & Weathington, 2008).

More recent studies have confirmed the tight link between values and organizational commitment. One particularly interesting example is Finegan's (2000) study of the relationship between values and commitment at a large petrochemical company. Through a survey-based analysis, Finegan investigates four kinds of value clusters and how these clusters relate to organizational commitment. The study shows that values such as courtesy and cooperation, which belong to the cluster called 'humanity', and values such as creativity and initiative, which belong to the cluster called 'vision', are generally preferred by highly committed employees. More specifically, values belonging to the humanity and the vision clusters are closely connected to two types of commitment, namely affective and normative commitment. While the former designates a type of commitment driven by a *desire* to remain part of the organization, the latter designates an *obligation* to stay with the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991: 78). This finding is particularly interesting, not only because – as we shall see – the notions of humanity values and vision values fit nicely with The Alternative's values, but also because the connection between the values and affective/normative commitment can help us make sense of the role that organizational values play in political organization.

The importance of the focus on commitment becomes evident if we recall this paper's main research interest: How do organizational values help political parties such as The Alternative maintain a universal appeal while going through a process of rapid particularization? If we reconsider this question in light of the above, it becomes clear that The Alternative's effort to

sustain political support by maintaining a universal appeal is invariably linked to the question of commitment. In fact, one could even argue that the problem of particularization is essentially a problem of commitment: How do organizational values help political parties such as The Alternative maintain commitment in the face of rapid particularization? However, while Finegan's study, and studies confirming her findings (e.g., Abbott et al., 2005), provide us with valuable insights into *why* individuals commit to an organization, we still lack informed accounts of *how* values influence organizational life in relation to questions of commitment. This is the theoretical gap that this paper sets out to cover.

In order to analyze The Alternative's organizational values, I am inspired by Bourne and Jenkins' (2013) dynamic framework, which delineates four different types of values: *espoused* (collective values sanctioned by management), *attributed* (collective values ascribed by ordinary members), *shared* (the aggregation of individual values), and *aspirational* (values that individuals believe should represent the organization in the future). However, instead of investigating all four value-forms, I limit my inquiry to espoused and attributed values. The reason for doing so is that shared and attributed values operate at an individual level, which gives them an essentialist bend, in the sense that they are concerned with intrinsic beliefs and intentions. As such, the study of shared and aspirational values is a job for (socio-) psychologists rather than social theorists (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013: 503). Espoused and attributed values, on the other hand, operate at the collective level, which means that they are thoroughly embedded in historical circumstances, power relations, and group dynamics (d'Andrade, 2008).

The usefulness of these concepts consists in the dual focus on espoused and attributed values, which allows the analysis to venture beyond those kinds of value statements that are found on websites and in annual reports. By highlighting the equal importance of attributed values, the framework incorporates a sensitivity towards those values that ordinary members (rather than just managers) use as guidelines for appropriate behavior within the organization. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the framework directs the analytical focus not only at the different value-forms but also at the relationship between these forms. As we shall see, this focus proves particularly relevant for the forthcoming analysis. Here, it is the *interplay* between espoused and attributed values that allows The Alternative to cope with the problem of particularization.

# Methods

Empirically, the paper is based on a total of 34 semi-structured interviews, approximately 200 hours of participant observation, and more than 1,000 pages of written material. While all three data sources have been important in terms of arriving at the paper's conclusions, the interviews and the observations have proven particularly valuable and will thus be used most extensively in the forthcoming analysis. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were all conducted and coded by the author himself. The respondents were mostly recruited through the method of 'snowballing', where the researcher allows one respondent to guide him/her to the next (Ekman, 2015). A handful of respondents were, however, recruited through the method of 'purposeful sampling', where the researcher selects so-called 'information-rich cases' (Patton, 1990: 169). The latter type of respondents are people who, prior to the launch of The Alternative, were active in developing and authoring the official value statement and thus knew something about the motivation for engaging with value-based politics. While the focus of the interviews varied accordingly, all respondents were asked about their perception of The Alternative's values, and how they related to the values on a daily basis.

The observations, which constitute the second primary data source, took place from June 2014 to November 2015 during both public and non-public events. While I kept a low profile during most of these events (especially the non-public ones), I participated actively in others. The reason for doing so was to get a first-hand experience of value-based politics in practice and to engage actively with the 'implicit meanings' that members of The Alternative use to make sense of their daily life (Lichterman, 1998). Contrary to some ethnographers, I did not conduct the fieldwork with the hope of arriving at a true understanding of reality 'out there' but with the ambition of experiencing how values influence life within The Alternative. As such, the rationale guiding this part of the fieldwork has been one of immersion and sensitivity rather than revelation and disclosure (Schatz, 2009).

Participant observation has previously proven fruitful when studying political organizations. Besides allowing the researcher access to the implicit meanings that exist within activist circles, participant observation often improves the interpretation of additional data, precisely because the researcher is acquainted with the local language and practices of the organization (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002). However, as argued by McCurdy and Uldam (2013), when conducting participant

observation in political organizations, it is particularly important to remain reflexive about one's own position in the field. In order to maintain a critical distance, I assumed the role of an 'overt outsider' (McCurdy & Uldam, 2013: 48). This meant that I never became a member of The Alternative and that I only rarely voiced my personal opinion about the party's policies, but that I was always open about my research. The outsider role also meant that I commenced the observations before I knew what to look for. In fact, I knew very little about The Alternative, let alone their use of organizational values, prior to my engagement with the field. Hence, rather than arriving at the research site with a number of preconceived hypotheses and preliminary conclusions, I allowed the empirical data to lead my analytic gaze from the outset.

Accordingly, the analytical work began as the observations unfolded. Intrigued by the claim to be non-ideological and value-based, I quickly developed an interest in the role of organizational values within The Alternative. This led me to look for moments where references to the values had a visible impact on the actions of party members. I analyzed the data by moving back and forth between different data sources in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, but the observations often constituted the analytical starting point. For instance, the argument about the apolitical character of trust was first observed at a so-called 'Political Forum' meeting in which an appeal to place 'trust in trust' resolved an otherwise irresolvable conflict (see the final part of the analysis). Having observed this episode, I revisited already conducted interviews and incorporated my newfound interest in trust into the remaining interviews. In that way, such episodes not only guided my analytic gaze but also helped refine my understanding of accounts provided by the interview respondents.

In what follows, I analyze The Alternative's version of value-based politics with the aim of providing new insights about organizational values in general. I thus consider The Alternative an 'extreme/deviant case' (Flyvbjerg, 2006), in the sense that it provides more information about the use of organizational values than traditional cases of value-driven organizations. In particular, it allows me to generate new insights about the political dimensions of organizational values, since such dynamics are naturally accentuated within a political organization (Moufahim et al., 2015). The forthcoming analysis is divided into four parts. Departing from a speech made by The Alternative's political spokesperson, the first part introduces the notion of value-based politics in general. The second and third parts explore the party's vision values and humanity values, respectively. The fourth and final part of the analysis examines *trust* as a particularly interesting

value in relation to politics, which then allows me to summarize the overall argument and provide reflections on the implication for studies of political organization. Each part of the analysis is commenced by a vignette that briefly presents a short story from my fieldwork in The Alternative.

## Analysis: Value-based politics in practice

*There is a tradition in Danish politics that, on the opening day of parliament, the prime minister delivers a speech on the current state of affairs. A few days later, representatives from all political parties will comment on the prime minister's speech and present their own visions for the coming year. Usually, the representatives use this occasion to fiercely criticize their political opponents and highlight the irresponsible nature of their policies. However, during the opening debate in 2015, The Alternative chose another strategy. The Alternative's opening speech, delivered by the party's political spokesperson, was divided into two parts. In the first part of the speech, the spokesperson presented The Alternative's visions and ideas. Amongst other things, he talked about the vision of a sustainable society and the need to raise Denmark's financial contribution to developing countries. In the second part of the speech, he did something thoroughly unexpected. Instead of emphasizing the differences between The Alternative and other political parties, as a way of harnessing support through negative campaigning, the spokesperson used this part of the speech to highlight various points of agreement across all nine parties in parliament. In fact, he went through each party, one at a time, while promoting consensus instead of conflict. 'We really want to listen to all of you', he said in conclusion, 'because we fundamentally believe that more people know more' (The Alternative, 2015a).*

When asked about what kind of values that guide The Alternative as an organization, most respondents interviewed for this study quickly echoed the party's six espoused values: *courage, generosity, transparency, humility, humor, and empathy*. Several respondents even managed to repeat the short description that follows each of the six values. Having done so, the respondents would often add values that they thought were missing in the party's official value statement. Some would talk about 'equality' as something that runs through all of The Alternative's activities. Others would mention words like 'truth' or even 'love'. However, the most frequently attributed values were, without comparison, *curiosity* and *trust*. While the notion of curiosity was often framed as a missing core value, trust regularly surfaced as a meta-value that somehow constitutes the bedrock of The Alternative:

> There's a value that I always miss and that's curiosity. I always mention it first when people ask me what our values are. (Respondent #21)

> It's an extremely trust-based culture, but I think that's implied in the values. You can't have these values without trust, otherwise the math doesn't add up. (Respondent #28)

Tallying espoused and attributed values, we thus reach a total of eight values that constitute the epicenter of The Alternative's organizational ideology. As already mentioned, within the field of organizational psychology, values such as courage, curiosity, and humor are often labeled 'vision factor' values (Finegan, 2000; Abott et al., 2005). These are values that encourage ideation and personal initiative based on the freedom to think and act independently (Schwarz 1994). On the other hand, values like empathy, humility, generosity, and trust are frequently referred to as 'humanity factor' values (Finegan, 2000; Abott et al., 2005). These are values that encourage a benevolent approach to other people at a universal level, which means that those who share these values are inclined to cancel or disregard differences that usually separate people such as race, religion, and political convictions. In short, humanity factor values tend to foster what Schwartz (2007) calls 'moral inclusiveness'. Hence, one could argue that The Alternative's organizational ideology is constituted by a combination of *vision values* and *humanity values*.[21]

This was exemplified by The Alternative's political spokesperson, Rasmus Nordqvist, in the parliamentary speech referred to above. Nordqvist's speech is interesting in several ways. First of all, at the rhetorical level, the speech breaks with the established tone of debate in parliament. Instead of employing a condescending attitude towards political opponents by highlighting deficiencies, it focused solely on the positive facets of their policies. Internally, this approach is known as 'talking up' rather than 'talking down'. Secondly, at the political level, the speech served to tear down political frontiers and promote a 'transversal politics' (Iglesias, 2015: 18) that crosses political boundaries by encouraging consensus rather than conflict. In relation to this paper, however, the most interesting aspect of Nordqvist's speech is that it neatly reflects the combination of vision values and humanity values and illustrates the role that these values play within The Alternative. The first part of the speech, in which Nordqvist detailed The Alternative's own policies, illustrates the role of vision values, which is to promote ideation, uniqueness, and

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[21] Crucially, this categorization should not be read as an attempt to delineate the essential characteristics of the values in and of themselves. Instead, the categorization is merely used to distinguish between two kinds of ideals that generally seem to guide members of The Alternative.

progress. The second part of the speech, in which he accommodated the other parties' policies, illustrates the role of humanity values, which is to encourage moral inclusiveness and discourage marginalizing activities. In what follows, I will empirically investigate each of the two types of values and how they structure organizational life within The Alternative.

I shall begin by considering the role of the vision values and then proceed to the humanity values. Before doing so, however, it should be noted that the value of *transparency* has been excluded from the analysis because it does not immediately relate to the argument conveyed here. Though transparency has previously been associated with vision values, such as curiosity and openness to change (e.g., Van der Wal et al., 2008), it would require a lengthy argument to do so here. Accordingly, I will limit my study to only examining seven of the eight values.

## *Vison values: Courage, curiosity, and humor*

*On a sunny Wednesday morning in June 2014, I found myself in a small village hall in a small town on the northern tip of the island of Bornholm. Throughout the morning, people had arrived from all corners of Denmark to participate in the second part of The Alternative's first annual meeting. While this part of the meeting concerned The Alternative's legal statutes, the first part, held two weeks earlier in the city of Aarhus, concerned the party's political program. Upon my arrival, I immediately sensed that the Aarhus meeting had been a discouraging and somewhat tiresome experience. As one guy said: 'Believe me, it was a thoroughly terrible day'. According to several participants, the meeting had dragged out for hours on end because of a seemingly never-ending list of proposed amendments by participants who wanted to push the program in different directions. With this experience looming in the back of everyone's mind, the second part of the annual meeting commenced. However, before launching into the official agenda, a board member took the stage and asked everyone (myself included) to pick one of the six espoused values and reflect on how we intended to bring that particular value to life during the meeting. Having done so, we were then asked to share these reflections with our neighbor. I was quickly paired with an elderly man, and I told him that I had chosen courage because I thought that contemporary politics needed some bravery and determination on the part of politicians and voters alike. The elderly man smiled sympathetically. 'I have chosen humor', he said, 'because without humor, we're never gonna get anywhere' (Observation, 2014a).*

The Alternative's six core values are espoused in multiple ways. For instance, like in the incident described above, they almost always figure during meetings, workshops, and public events. Similarly, at the end of board meetings, board members often spend some time contemplating which values characterized the meeting and how some of the less represented values might be better represented at forthcoming meetings (e.g., Observation, 2014b). A third way in which the core values are espoused is through merchandise. At public events such as televised speeches or demonstrations, leading members of The Alternative are often seen wearing t-shirts or jumpers with one of the six core values printed on them. Particularly Uffe Elbæk, the party's founder and leader, has made it his trademark to wear such shirts, which often provides him with an opportunity to highlight the importance of value-based politics. Furthermore, through the party's official webshop, members of The Alternative are able to purchase these shirts alongside other merchandise that likewise display the values such as clothing badges and fridge magnets (The Alternative, 2016b).

Aside from the short description that follows each of the values, it is not detailed anywhere what the values actually signify. As one respondent noted: 'It might be that we have 8000 different definitions of courage, but at least we reflect on our praxis, and then that can be our point of departure' (Respondent #6). The weakly defined nature of the values and their ability to attract people with remarkably different backgrounds is illustrated by members describing the values – rather than actual policies – as their primary point of attraction. Throughout the interviews conducted for this study, several respondents described how they felt that The Alternative, and the party's values in particular, represented them in a way they had never experienced before. Some respondents even characterized themselves as being one with the values:

> What tie us together are our values. I've never experienced that anywhere else – and I've worked with values *a lot*. But I must say that in all those workplaces I've been, even though values are taken seriously and people are involved in selecting the values, it's always difficult to work according to a set of values. But in The Alternative, we *are* our values. We've all got the values under our skin. That is what's most extraordinary, I think. (Respondent #13)

One heavily espoused value is *courage.* Members of The Alternative are frequently seen wearing shirts with 'courage' printed on them, and during various events, people will often remind each other to be courageous when debating politics. Courage also figures prominently in the party's

manifesto, where it is explicitly stated that the 'The Alternative *is* courage' (The Alternative 2013d, italics added). Furthermore, in a recently published Facebook video, Uffe Elbæk proclaims that 2017 should be 'the year of courage'. In a remarkable attempt to lead the way, the video is recorded in one of the most terrifying rides in the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. Elevated some 60 meters above the ground, Elbæk, who allegedly suffers from acrophobia, explains:

> I believe we need to be much more courageous in general, as citizens and as a society. We should be courageous when we face our problems, and we should be courageous in terms of our curiosity towards each other; courageous in relation to creativity; courageous in terms of stating what we really believe in. (The Alternative, 2016c)

According to Elbæk, courage is thus a matter of believing in oneself, being explicit about one's preferences, and facing the problems that one encounters. Particularly the notion of 'facing problems' or 'looking problems in the eye' is a recurrent theme that appears in several of The Alternative's texts, and it is often used to highlight the pressing need for action in relation to, for instance, climate change. In a newspaper article published in connection with the Facebook video, Elbæk elaborates on the need to be 'fucking courageous'. The article begins with a reference to Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous quote about fearing fear itself, which allows Elbæk to invoke a dichotomy between courage and fear. Throughout the article, this distinction is continuously repeated, especially in relation to the issue of terrorism. While fear is associated with passivity and retreat, courage is linked to initiative and progress. More importantly, however, courage is associated with the practice of realizing oneself instead of being subdued by those who terrorize:

> I feel like giving a damn about terror. I feel like giving a damn about those idiots who spoil it for everyone else. I feel like giving a damn about all that and all those who tear things down instead building them up. I feel like we should give each other the opportunity to realize the best version of ourselves instead of denigrating others. And the best version of me is when I'm courageous. (The Alternative, 2016d)

Even though Elbæk and other official representatives often speak of courage in more general terms, ordinary members of The Alternative are quick to translate the value into practice. For instance, one respondent explained how he used courage as a value to remind himself to overcome his fears in a variety of situations. In particular, when hosting workshops for The Alternative, he regularly plays the guitar and sings songs to create a nice atmosphere. But playing the guitar often makes him nervous to the point where he will consider not doing it. Upon

remembering to be courageous, however, he always overcomes. As he puts it: 'Dammit, we've got a value called courage!' (Respondent #4). In this sense, courage connotes self-confidence and willpower, which my own line of reasoning during the annual meeting at Bornholm also testifies to. But as Elbæk's video presentation shows, courage is likewise associated with curiosity, collaboration, and creativity.

This brings us to the second vision value, namely *curiosity*. Unlike courage, curiosity is an attributed value that does not figure explicitly in the official value statement. Nonetheless, it appears in several other texts such as the founding document, the manifesto, and in the political program, where an entire section is dedicated to policy proposals concerning 'education and life-long curiosity' (The Alternative, 2014: 34). Furthermore, curiosity is incorporated into the party's so-called 'debate principles', which are six almost Habermasian rules of engagement that are meant to guide members of The Alternative when debating politics internally as well as with political opponents. One principle reads: 'We will emphasize the core set of values that guide our arguments', while another proclaims: 'We will be curious about each and every person with whom we are debating' (The Alternative, 2013e). Understood in this way, the notion of curiosity is associated with open-mindedness and inclusivity. Accordingly, one might argue that curiosity is best understood as a humanity value that promotes courtesy and cooperation, rather than a vision value that encourages ideation and initiative. However, at least within The Alternative, the notion of curiosity is not only associated with keeping an open mind and attending to other people's views, but also with the notion of progress. As one respondent argued:

> This [curiosity] is what moves us forward. It's only by being curious about how things
> can be done differently that we progress. So perhaps it's more like a founding principle.
> It doesn't have to be an official value. (Respondent #21)

The understanding of curiosity as something that allows people to progress is perhaps best captured by the very first line in the party's manifesto, which simply states: 'There is always an alternative' (The Alternative, 2013d). Aside from the obvious reference to Margaret Thatcher's influential TINA doctrine, the statement is frequently used to remind members of The Alternative to continuously explore alternatives to the current state of affairs and to take the initiative in realizing these alternatives. For instance, during meetings and workshops, the statement is regularly displayed on posters or incorporated into speeches. In this context, as well as in the quote above, curiosity is conceived as the fuel that sparks initiative and encourages people to

pursue their own ideas. This is furthermore illustrated by an unwritten rule within The Alternative that one should 'take initiative instead of asking for permission' (Observation, 2014b). As expressed by a central figure within the party:

> Well, there is free play (…) Everyone's free to do as they please, also in terms of projects. For instance, in Northern Jutland [a part of Denmark], they're suddenly working on a webshop. And they're free to do that. (Respondent #8)

Today, the webshop has been realized and is now an integral part of the party's online presence, which testifies to the importance of personal initiative within The Alternative. As previously mentioned, through the webshop, members are able to purchase a selection of merchandise, including various items that display the six espoused values. One very popular value, not only in terms of merchandise but also more broadly speaking, is humor. Like curiosity, humor could easily have been categorized as a humanity value, but as several official accounts illustrate, humor is more often connected to notions of creativity and initiative. In the official value statement, for instance, humor is framed as the main driver of creativity and good solutions:

> Without humour there can be no creativity. Without creativity there can be no good ideas. Without good ideas there can be no creative power. Without creative power there can be no results. (The Alternative, 2013b)

As such, all three vision values are in some way connected to notions of creativity, ideation, initiative, and progress. The value of humor is particularly telling in this regard. As illustrated by my own experience during the annual meeting at Bornholm, humor promotes a different kind of progress than courage. At the meeting, I chose to focus on courage because I believed in the need for determination and willpower, while my neighbor (the elderly man) preferred humor as a means of progression. Of course, one can only speculate about incentives and motivations, but in hindsight, it struck me that the elderly man's propensity for humor might have been motivated by his experience in Aarhus where conflicting interests prolonged the meeting and created an atmosphere that many members associated with 'old politics'; that is, an atmosphere characterized by confrontation, combativeness, and dogmatism. Hence, the difference between courage and humor, at least within The Alternative, seems to be that the latter promotes an approach to politics that is more concerned with creating a multiplicity of new ideas rather than clinging dogmatically to one set of ideas.

This can be observed not only in the case of The Alternative but also in many other contemporary organizations. For instance, in his well-known study of a high-tech company, Kunda (1992) argues that the notion of 'fun' constitutes an important part of the company's corporate culture, where virtues of entrepreneurship and creativity are highly valued. Fleming and Sturdy (2009, 2011) extend this argumentation by associating the notion of organizational 'fun' with a culture of differentiation and individualization, which ultimately prevents employees from engaging in collective modes of resistance. The authors refer to this type of management as 'neo-normative control'. The common theme in these works is that humor is associated with an increasing demand for authenticity and uniqueness instead of the kind of cultural conformity traditionally associated with normative control (Etzioni, 1961). In the case of The Alternative, the 'demand' to be humorous tends to promote an approach to politics where creativity (with an emphasis on *creative power*) is prioritized. Instead of conforming to other people's views, humor encourages members to be unique and to allow themselves the freedom to explore their own ideas. As one respondent put it: 'When we have a value called humor, I dare more' (Respondent #4).

Summing up, The Alternative's three vision values seem to serve relatively similar purposes. While *courage* stimulates self-confidence and willpower, *curiosity* promotes open-mindedness and personal initiative, and *humor* encourages creativity and uniqueness. The common denominators that connect all three vision values are the notions of ideation and progress based on the power of personal initiative and creative thinking (e.g., 'take initiative instead of asking for permission'). Through these three values, members of The Alternative are thus encouraged to pursue their own ideas and to take the initiative in realizing these. But what happens when mutually opposing ideas emerge within the party? In other words, what happens when antagonistic views collide? These are moments when The Alternative's humanity values set in.

## *Humanity values: Empathy, humility, generosity, and trust*

*Right from the start, The Alternative attracted supporters with remarkably different backgrounds. Some had previously been engaged in leftist parties such as the now-defunct Left Socialists, while others came from more liberal environments. A handful of people even told me that they used to vote for far-right parties, but that they now regarded this as part of a distant past. However, the majority of supporters had never been engaged in party politics prior to enlisting, which made The*

*Alternative an even motlier crowd. Despite this extreme political diversity, it nonetheless came as a shock for most members when a man called Klaus Riskær Pedersen applied for membership. Pedersen was known to one part of the general public as a skillful entrepreneur. The other part regarded him as a criminal. Convicted several times of fraud both in Denmark and abroad, Pedersen had served jail time for a number of years. Adding to this, he had previously been a member of the European Parliament for the biggest center-right party in Denmark. In many ways, Pedersen thus seemed to represent all that The Alternative was not: corporate greed and old politics. Nonetheless, due to the inclusive nature of the party, Pedersen was initially accepted. Immediately after enlisting, however, Pedersen began talking to the press. Here, he proclaimed that he believed in The Alternative, but that some of the worst 'fantasies' and 'illusions' had to be rooted out. His job, Pedersen argued, was to get things 'back on track'. After a few days of media frenzy, the central board decided to expel Pedersen from the party on the grounds that he had 'worked against The Alternative's main idea and basic values' (The Alternative, 2015b). This was the first time someone had been expelled from The Alternative. Later, an ordinary member told me her private opinion on the matter: 'He was probably courageous and had a sense of humor, but he was definitely not humble, he was not transparent, he was not generous, and he wasn't particularly empathetic either' (Respondent #12).*

While the general role of The Alternative's vision values is to promote ideation and progress, the role of the humanity values is to ensure that members remain morally inclusive towards people with different views. The most influential value in this regard seems to be *empathy*. In fact, the political leadership regularly frames The Alternative as a response to a 'crisis of empathy' in contemporary society, which allegedly has made people incapable of listening to one another without prejudice (e.g., The Alternative, 2015c). In the official value statement, empathy is described as the act of 'putting yourself in other people's shoes' and 'creating win-win situations for everyone' (The Alternative, 2013b). Being empathetic within The Alternative is thus a matter of being courteous and paying attention to other people's ideas instead of just trying to win an argument or to push one's own agenda. As one respondent explained:

> Empathy can make us listen to each other (…) it can make us listen to each other on a
> deeper level. We're supposed to listen to one another where the other's coming from…

or, I can't really remember how we put it exactly, but, you know, we need to pay attention to where the others are coming from. (Respondent #4)

The interesting thing about this quote is that it not only illustrates how members of The Alternative translate empathy into action but also that it reveals the espoused nature of the six core values. The last part of the quote is particularly telling: 'We're supposed to listen to one another', followed by, 'I can't really remember how we put it exactly'. Such utterances tie in with much literature on the use of values in organizations, especially the literature that attempts to answer the question: Where do values come from? Here, the most common answer seems to be that values (at least the espoused ones) are those parts of an organizational ideology that are displayed to the general public through, for instance, websites or mission statements (Jaakson, 2010). As such, espoused values are those values that leaders find useful, which means that they often end up constituting informal and indirect tools of organizational control (Schein, 1985). As Hofstede (1998: 483) puts it: 'Leaders' values become followers' practice'. Thus, a value such as empathy, while probably shared by most members, likewise serves as a guiding principle that, in the absence of direct supervision or explicit rules, encourages ordinary members to manage themselves according to the idea of listening to one another:

> I'm full of empathy. I'm always the one who helps others, always the one who makes sure people are all right. You know, it's not that I don't do stupid things, but I'm just like… All those values, they are just so much me. (Respondent #3)

Two other humanity values – *generosity* and *humility* – serve similar purposes. Not only do they inspire people to listen to one another, they likewise discourage members of The Alternative from engaging in marginalizing activities. At least, it becomes extremely difficult to marginalize other people's ideas while maintaining a generous and humble stance. As one respondent explained, with a reference to what is commonly known within The Alternative as 'a new political culture', which is a term that is constructed as the negative image of the established political culture:

> Part of what I really like about the new political culture is that we express ourselves in positive terms – that we don't spend our time attacking each other. It's actually something that I've practiced for many years, but I've become even better at it since I joined The Alternative. Because sometimes, when I happen to post [at Facebook] something just a little bit critical of something, someone will say: "Is that really new political culture?" And I'm actually happy to be reminded in that way… I'm used to being

227

the most progressive in that area, but it's nice not to be the only one anymore. (Respondent #4)

As the quote above implies, the values of empathy, humility, and generosity are generally translated into an obligation to be morally inclusive towards others and to abstain from unproductive criticism ('attacking each other'). Crucially, this also goes for people with opposing views. An illustrative example of how this kind of self-management works in practice was observed at a spontaneously organized Political Laboratory in June 2015, held at a bridge in central Copenhagen. Here, the workshop facilitator approached passerby with a simple question: 'What is the most important political question for you?' When people answered, the facilitator would always nod his head approvingly and write their answer on a whiteboard. When I asked him how he managed to be so approving of everyone's answers, he showed me the back of his hand where he had written the words 'yes, and…' with a black marker. This, he explained, was to remind himself not to engage in the usual 'yes, but…' type of argumentation, which, according to him, was a far less productive way of deliberating (Observation, 2015a). When asked about why antagonistic views do not clash within The Alternative, another respondent elaborated on the link between the humanity values and the focus on inclusiveness:

> I don't think there's a need for it [clashing]. (…) Maybe things are carried by some of those beautiful values about generosity and humility (…) Some of these values intentionally dismantle all those traditional mechanisms of fear. Or, how should I put it, they dismantle the traditional impulse to manifest oneself and to puff one's feathers (Respondent #30).

As illustrated by the quote above, a byproduct of the focus on moral inclusiveness seems to be a dismounting of personal egos (puffing feathers), which is a translation of the values likewise espoused by the political leadership (e.g., The Alternative, 2015d). This brings us back to the story of Klaus Riskær Pedersen that opened this part of the analysis. While Pedersen seemed to share most of the vision values – he was courageous and had a sense humor, as one respondent noted – he never exhibited any of the humanity values. His worst offence, however, was his attempt to marginalize people with different views than his own. At least, this seems to be the case when judging from the official press release. Here, it is described how the expulsion of Pedersen was based on a series of utterances, in which he articulates a desire to 'root out the worst fantasies and illusions', to get 'things back on track', and to ensure that the project does not 'capsize' and

fall down 'the abyss'. Furthermore, Pedersen specifically targeted the political leadership, arguing that they were not capable of delivering on important areas such as financial and monetary policy, which supposedly also contributed to his expulsion (The Alternative, 2015b). Within The Alternative, such utterances are not tolerated. In fact, marginalization seems to go directly against the very idea of the party. To say, 'I am alternative, you are not', is the antithesis of what it means to be alternative within The Alternative. As one respondent explained:

> This is where I think we really have a job to do internally. We announce these six really solid core values and claim that they permeate everything we say and do. It's probably kind of impossible, but if you do that, then it's really important to walk the talk internally (…) This means that we have to figure out how we talk to and about each other, and in that sense, I certainly do not believe that marginalizing anyone is appropriate. (Respondent #15).

Summing up, like the vision values, The Alternative's humanity values serve relatively similar purposes. While *empathy* encourages members to listen to one another and to create win-win situations for everyone, *generosity* and *humility* are generally translated into an obligation to be morally inclusive towards people with different or even opposing views. The most important role of the humanity values, however, seems to be to discourage members from engaging in marginalizing activities. In fact, the act of marginalization seems to run counter to the very purpose of The Alternative, which, according to the manifesto, is to represent all those 'who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old' (The Alternative, 2013d). The combination of vision values and humanity values is of utmost importance to The Alternative as a political organization. While the party's vision values encourage members to pursue their own ideas and to take initiative in realizing these, the humanity values discourage people from 'puffing their feathers' by stressing the importance of moral inclusiveness. This combination was neatly summarized by one respondent:

> I usually say: "Everyone's right, but only partially". Explore the two percent of truth that is in what you're saying, instead of rejecting things consistently (…) It's far too definite to say: "This is how it is!" (Respondent #5)

By encouraging people to pursue their own 'two percent of truth' rather than 'rejecting things consistently', The Alternative allows antagonistic views to co-exist within the party. Since

'everyone's right, but only partially', The Alternative avoids losing support from people who would otherwise feel marginalized by the potential emergence of dominant ideas. Ultimately, this is what allows an irreconcilable crowd to endure despite fundamental differences. But what happens when the party's political leadership (the MPs) starts signing bills in parliament and striking compromises with other parties? In other words, how does The Alternative cope with the so-called problem of particularization? This is where the last humanity value, *trust*, proves vital.

|  | **Vision values** | **Humanity values** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Espoused and attributed values** | Courage, curiosity, and humor | Empathy, humility, and generosity (including trust) |
| **Function within The Alternative** | Encourages ideation, uniqueness, and progress through personal initiative and creative thinking | Encourages moral inclusiveness through the practice of listening and by creating win-win situations |

**Table 3**: Overview of The Alternative's values

## The anti-politics of trust

*On a cold Sunday morning in early January 2015, I got on the train to Roskilde, a suburban city just outside Copenhagen, to observe The Alternative's first so-called 'Political Forum' meeting (not to be confused with 'Political Laboratories'). The forum consists of approximately 40 people: the political leadership, the board, and representatives from local constituencies. The forum's task is to deliberate about incoming policy proposal and to decide whether or not to include these in the political program. When I arrived in Roskilde, the spirit was high. Since most participants had been at the venue the whole weekend engaging in various team-building exercises, people seemed eager to get down to business. And in this context, 'business' meant voting. Several topics were on the agenda that Sunday, but the thing that concerned most people was an incoming policy proposal about reducing the average working week to 30 hours. This was indeed a controversial proposal, and it seemed to divide members of The Alternative in a way that few proposals had done before. As usual, the day began with a series of group exercises. It was during one of these exercises that I heard someone whisper: 'Do people know that we're not gonna vote today?' At*

*first, I took it as a misguided rumor. After all, the main purpose of the meeting, I thought, was to vote on incoming proposals. However, when the group exercises ended, the forum's moderator announced that there was not going to be any voting today.*

*This immediately caused a stir. Especially people who had travelled a long way were frustrated about the prospect of yet another day with more exercises and plenum discussions. The political leadership tried to calm the waters by arguing that the forum should discuss more important things such as The Alternative's overall project, instead of just deciding whether or not to accept particular policy proposals. This would also allow the MPs more room for maneuver instead of tying them firmly to the political program. At this point, the tension in the room was palpable. A representative from Northern Denmark stood up: 'What if the leadership decides to go to war? I can't live with that', he said. Other participants nodded their heads. 'This is gonna explode', I wrote in my notebook while watching the events unfold. But then, out of nowhere, someone shouted from the back of the room: 'We need to trust the people we elect'. And suddenly, in what seemed like the blink of an eye, the mood changed from hostile to friendly. Another local representative agreed: 'We must have trust', he said. People then started showing jazz hands in approval. Finally, the moderator closed the discussion by reminding people to place 'trust in trust, trust in good intentions' (Observation, 2015b).*

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of trust to The Alternative's political project. Just like curiosity, trust is an attributed value that does not appear in the official value statement, but it nonetheless figures prominently in several other core texts. For instance, in the political program, it is stated that The Alternative wants a society that is 'built on trust rather than social control' (The Alternative, 2014: 2). Furthermore – similarly to the value of empathy – leading members frequently frame The Alternative as a response to a 'crisis of trust' between citizens and politicians. In fact, The Alternative's success in the 2015 elections was interpreted by many pundits as a sign of widespread distrust in politicians. Accordingly, most respondents considered trust a fundamental element in the organization of the party. Trust is often framed as a kind of meta-value that unites all other values within the party. Without trust, so the argument goes, value-based politics is not even possible. As one respondent explained:

> Well, it's the only thing that binds us together. You cannot launch a project like this without unconditional trust in each other. It's the belief that trust is what makes us better. Trust in each other (…) I've never been a place where there's this much trust. (Respondent #11).

Trust is easily characterized as a humanity value, but not in the same way as the other values belonging to that category. This is because trust not only brokers the relationship between ordinary members of the party but also the relationship between the members and the political leadership. There is a general agreement in The Alternative that members should trust, not only the actions of the political leadership, but also their motives. This was most vividly illustrated at the Political Forum meeting described in the vignette above. What happened in Roskilde was that, for a moment, opposing ideas broke the 'equivalential chain' (Laclau, 1994) and entered a differential relationship with each other, which immediately created a tension in the crowd. The political leadership's cancellation of the vote meant that the irreconcilable nature of The Alternative was exposed, and this exposure then threatened to terminate the party's claim to universality. This eventually caused some of the local representatives to worry that their own personal preferences would be given lower priority than other political agendas. As expressed by the representative from Northern Denmark: 'What if the leadership decides to go to war? I can't live with that'.

The only solution seemed to be to resume the vote, which would probably not have resolved the situation but only accentuated it, as the political decision to accept/reject the incoming proposal would have particularized The Alternative's political project even further. In the end, however, another solution presented itself, namely to *trust* the leadership instead of tying them to a fixed political agenda. Once a trust relationship had been established between leadership and members, the problem of particularization was resolved – or at least postponed. In other words, the political decision about *what kind of alternative* The Alternative should become was suspended through the use of trust as an organizational value, and this ultimately allowed antagonistic ideas to continue to co-exist within The Alternative.

The incident in Roskilde, and many similar episodes, points to an interesting finding regarding the use of trust in political organizations. By inserting trust as the medium that brokers the relation between the political leadership and the party's members, The Alternative avoids making decisions that would result in immediate particularization. Furthermore, as the moderator emphasized during the meeting, the important thing is to place 'trust in trust' and 'trust in good intentions'. This adds another layer to the use of trust within The Alternative as a means not only to postpone decision-making but also to curb criticism. At least, it gets extremely difficult to criticize decisions made by the political leadership if one has to simultaneously trust the

leadership's good intentions and the notion of trust *ipso facto*. In fact, the practice of placing 'trust in trust' seems almost counterpoised to the practice of critique. Of course, this does not mean that criticism is absent within The Alternative – far from it – but it means that criticism can often be refuted by referring to the essentiality of trust. As one respondent explained:

> There've been times where I've opposed something, and where someone told me: "You need to show some trust". And then I just realized: God, yes, you guys want this just as much as me, and I should probably just trust you guys a little bit more, right. (Respondent #4)

Summing up, within The Alternative, trust serves at least two interrelated purposes. First of all, trust effectively postpones political decision-making. By encouraging members to be trusting instead of controlling, the political leadership effectively removes the need for political decision-making, and consequently, the need for political demarcation. As long as the question about *what kind of alternative* The Alternative should become is postponed, the problem of particularization is kept at bay. This then allows an otherwise irreconcilable crowd to endure despite fundamental differences, as the vignette above shows. Secondly, trust likewise serves to curb criticism. When decisions about what kind of alternative The Alternative should become *are* made (e.g., by signing bills in parliament), members are discouraged from criticizing these decisions by referring to the notion of 'trusting good intentions'. As the quote above suggests, it becomes rather difficult for members to oppose particular ideas and actions, as that would indicate a lack of trust, which then would be considered 'non-alternative'. In other words, whenever critique is present, trust is absent and vice versa.

## Conclusion

The Alternative's organizational values play different roles within the party. While the vision values encourage members to pursue their own ideas and to take the initiative in realizing these, the humanity values help prevent antagonistic ideas from clashing, which could potentially lead to marginalization, and eventually, a loss of support. As a humanity value, trust serves as a buffer that brokers the relationship between ordinary members and the political leadership. This allows the leadership to postpone the problem of particularization and to refute possible criticism by referring to the importance trust. Ultimately, the combination of vision values and humanity values allows The Alternative to go through a process of particularization while simultaneously

maintaining a universal appeal. In other words, the particularizing actions of the political leadership – signing bills, striking compromises – rarely result in the marginalization of supporters because they have no contaminating effect on the party's universal appeal. This may, of course, not be the only explanation for how The Alternative manages to maintain a universal appeal, but it is a significant one if nothing else.

At least three contributions follow from this. First of all, the paper contributes to understanding the relationship between organizational values and commitment. While studies in organizational psychology have shown that the combination of vision and humanity values constitutes a forceful driver of both affective and normative commitment, few studies have explored how this unfolds in practice. Through a qualitative investigation of value-based politics in The Alternative, the paper showed that the party is able to sustain commitment because 1) members are persistently encouraged to pursue their own ideas despite the potential emergence of dominant ideas, 2) because dominant ideas are never allowed to marginalize subordinate ideas, and 3) because trust acts as a buffer between members and the leadership that helps prevent political demarcation. In this sense, it becomes clear that control and commitment are two sides of the same coin, which is an argument that indeed has been made before (e.g., Ouchi, 1979; Weiner, 1982), but only rarely illustrated empirically (e.g., Kunda, 1992), and certainly not within political organizations (see Kanter, 1972, for an important exception).

Secondly, by employing both interviews and observations, the paper contributes to expanding the field of inquiry for the study of organizational values, which is a discipline usually dominated by quantitative survey-based studies (Stavru, 2013). The strength of this methodological approach is connected to the above: By exploring the use of values qualitatively instead of quantitatively, the researcher is able to show the practical role that values play in the daily life of organizational members. In other words, instead of asking *if* or *why* values are important to organizations, the researcher is able to ask *how* values influence organizational life in practice. And this, naturally, leads to new and – hopefully – inspiring findings that may help reinvigorate the study of organizational values altogether (Agle & Caldwell, 1999).

Thirdly, by studying a political organization rather than an economic organization, the political dimension of organizational values is accentuated. For instance, in relation to trust, the study of The Alternative illustrates how trust can function as an apolitical value that removes the need for political decision-making and curbs criticism. This adds a new layer to the discussion of 'the dark

side of trust' (Skinner et al., 2014). In the case of The Alternative, trust is not used as a façade that conceals sinister motives (Hardy et al., 1998), as a breeding ground for corruption (Tonoyan, 2005), or as a tool for creating blind faith, complacency, and unnecessary obligations (Gargiulo & Ertug, 2006). In short, trust is not used as a political smoke screen. Instead, trust is used to dismantle the very possibility of politics by suspending the need for political decision-making, which is a finding that is equally applicable to other kinds of organizations that seek to maintain commitment from many heterogeneous groups.

Finally, a few words should be said about the role of values in political organization in general. Throughout much of the literature, organizational values are seen as either very abstract (or universal) ideas that are incredibly hard to realize in practice or as very tangible (or particular) guidelines for organizational behavior.[22] The case of The Alternative illustrates that, at least within the field of *political* organization, they can be both. What matters is the context in which the values are articulated; or, to borrow a phrase from Staten (1986), what matters is the 'constitutive outside' of the values. Whenever the values are counterpoised to the notion of ideology, they appear as universal ideas capable of crossing political boundaries, and hence capable of mobilizing support from across the political spectrum. Whenever they are brought to life within a specific organizational context, they immediately acquire a much more particular meaning, which helps to install a certain kind of self-management in the individual member. Crucially, in the case of The Alternative, this kind of self-management is one that prevents the members from equating 'the universal' with 'the particular', as this would collapse the dual role of the values. But what then ties the two levels together? Again, the short answer is *trust*.

In the case of The Alternative, trust assumes the role of the glue that keeps the organization from fracturing. Despite the existence of a partial decoupling between the particularistic activities of the political leadership and the universal aspiration of ordinary members, the two parts never fully disconnect. As long as the ordinary members trust that the political leadership's intentions are equivalent to their own, and indeed, as long as they 'trust trust', signing bills and striking compromises have no contaminating effect on The Alternative's universal appeal. In other words, when mediated by trust, particularization does not lead to marginalization. Translated into the language of values and ideologies, one could argue that trust ensures that 'value-based politics' never turns into 'ideology-based politics'. However, the uncontaminated nature of the values will

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[22] For instance, see Argandoña's (2003) distinction between 'ultimate' and 'instrumental' values or Rokeach's (1973) distinction between 'terminal' and 'instrumental' values.

persist only insofar as they remain 'empty signifiers'; that is, signifiers without a signified (Laclau, 1994). The moment when the values become commensurable with a *particular* ideology is the moment when The Alternative loses its *universal* appeal.

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Respondent (#3). Interview from 2015: 21 min.

Respondent (#4). Interview from 2015: 18 min, 19 min, 26 min, and 57 min.

Respondent (#5). Interview from 2015: 38 min.

Respondent (#6). Interview from 2015: 44 min.

Respondent (#8). Interview from 2014: 31 min.

Respondent (#11). Interview from 2015: 103 min.

Respondent (#12). Interview from 2015: 41 min.

Respondent (#13). Interview from 2015: 15 min.

Respondent (#15). Interview from 2015: 29 min.

Respondent (#21). Interview from 2015: 20 min.

Respondent (#28). Interview from 2015: 10 min.

Respondent (#30). Interview from 2015: 32 min.

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# 9. Conclusions

## The unfinished business of radical politics

I have gradually acquired the belief that the alternative lies in the unfinished, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing. The 'finished alternative' is 'finished' in a double sense of the word.

*Thomas Mathiesen (1971: 11), The Unfinished*

The motivation for this doctoral study has been to understand how a political party is able to mobilize support from across the political spectrum without having any policies to show, and how it subsequently manages to maintain commitment from an irreconcilable support base while developing a comprehensive (and sometimes controversial) political program during the course of only half a year. This motivation was sparked by my own experiences with The Alternative and not by a gap in the literature on political parties or by calls for research on radical politics. As explained in the introduction, the original plan was not to study The Alternative in any serious manner, but to follow the party out of personal interest. However, I quickly realized that The Alternative had the potential to tell us something interesting about the organization of politics as well as the politics of organization, though it was only later that I found out what.

This 'problem-driven' approach makes conclusion-writing less straightforward, since there are no hypotheses to confirm or discard and no theoretical models to correct (Reinecke et al., 2016). Fortunately, this does not mean that the dissertation has nothing to offer organization studies more broadly. In what follows, I will outline what I believe we can learn from the present study. Theoretically, I re-interpret the notion of 'neo-normative control' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) as a useful way of understanding how radical political parties keep members in line without compromising their sense of commitment. At a practical level, I turn to the notion of 'the unfinished' (Mathiesen, 1971) to explain how radical political parties might maintain a universal appeal by keeping open the 'spaces of imagination' that allow party members the freedom to envision multiple alternative futures. However, before unfolding these contributions, I will return to the overall research questions and answer them based on insights from each of the four papers.

# Answering research questions

At the beginning of this dissertation, I posed the following research questions:

*How do radical political parties such as The Alternative manage to maintain a universal appeal when going through a process of rapid particularization? And how might certain management technologies assist them in this regard?*

Before proposing a concluding answer to these questions, let us revisit the four papers in order to clarify how they help us arrive at an answer. In the first paper (chapter 5), Allan Dreyer Hansen and I conducted a comparative analysis of Occupy Wall Street and The Alternative. The purpose of the paper was, first and foremost, to unfold and conceptualize the problem of particularization as experienced by The Alternative. In all brevity, our argument was that The Alternative can be seen as a continuation of Occupy Wall Street's political project; that is, as a project that began where Occupy Wall Street ended by presenting the established system with a list of particular demands. This ambition posed a problem for The Alternative because the prioritization of demands inevitably cuts short the equivalential chain and narrows the scope of political representation. Translated into common English, this means that The Alternative's aspirations to enter parliament risked marginalizing those supporters whose grievances were given a lower priority. As a consequence, we suggested that radical movements (exemplified by Occupy Wall Street) and radical parties (exemplified by The Alternative) avoid collapsing into one organizational form in order to preserve the universal spirit of radical politics. In conclusion, we rephrased the dissertation's overall research question: 'What political strategies, organizational practices, or managerial technologies have assisted The Alternative in maintaining the ongoing production emptiness that is so vital to radical politics, while simultaneously engaging with the state?'

In the second paper (chapter 6), Ursula Plesner and I picked up where the previous paper left off by investigating one of the managerial technologies that helps The Alternative maintain a universal appeal, namely the party's organization of 'open-source politics'. By employing a space-sensitive perspective, we analyzed how different spatial configurations afford different practices and how that impacts the process of policymaking significantly. In fact, rather than running linearly

from openness towards closure, the process oscillates back and forth between openness and closure. While the physical spaces (Political Laboratories and Political Forum) seem to afford openness and imaginative practices, the digital space (Dialogue Platform) affords closure and affirmative practices. This winding process not only runs counter to the official portrayal of open-source politics within The Alternative, which is conceived as a linear bottom-up process, it also splits the organization in two loosely coupled systems operating at two different levels: the movement (operating at a universal level) and the party (operating at a more particularized level). This partial decoupling allows the MPs to advance bills and strike compromises without contaminating the universal spirit of the movement, but it also allows movement actors the freedom to imagine different alternative futures beyond the scope of realpolitik. Hence, rather than a drawback, we argued that some kind of organizational decoupling is a precondition for success for political parties that seek to institutionalize radical politics through the parliament.

So far, so good. While the first paper (chapter 5) unfolded the overall problematique in more conceptual terms, the second paper (chapter 6) responded to the first research question by showing how The Alternative is able to maintain a universal appeal by decoupling the movement part of the organization from the party part. However, this leaves us with two new questions. First of all: How does the movement part of The Alternative manage to sustain its equivalential chain? That is, how is it possible to avoid a prioritization of demands? And secondly: Since decoupling is rarely a permanent solution (Hernes, 2005), how does The Alternative ensure that the loose bonds between movement and party do not tighten? Without explicitly stating so, the two remaining papers addressed these questions.

In the third paper (chapter 7), I sat out to investigate the management of subjectivity in The Alternative and how this type of managerial technology may help prevent a prioritization of demands and, thus, a stratification of identities within the party. The paper's main argument was that the party's political leadership manages to sustain the movement's equivalential chain by framing the organization as a boundless entity open to everyone and by inviting members of The Alternative to recognize themselves as inclusive, attentive, open-minded, curious, and selfless individuals. In doing so, the leadership contributes to the production of a subject that is more or

less incapable of demarcating The Alternative in terms of political representation. As one of the interview respondents puts it, stating that 'I am alternative, you are not' is the immediate antithesis to what it means to be alternative within The Alternative. Of course, this does not mean that there is no room for maneuver for the individual 'Alternativist'. In fact, there is plenty 'space of action' (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996) for party members to carve out 'their own' sense of self (Watson, 2008), as long as this does not infringe on other people's ability to do the same. One illustrative example is that of the 'eco-hippies', whom several members use as an Other in the constitution of their own identity. Even though the hippies may be somewhat secluded within The Alternative, they are never actually excluded, since that would violate the vision of The Alternative as a fully inclusive community.

With this third paper, we get a sense of how individual party members identify with The Alternative and how this type of identification helps sustain the equivalential chain. In a sense, this is also the purpose of the fourth paper (chapter 8), which could be seen as somewhat overlapping with the third paper, but also as extending the argumentation. In the fourth paper, I explored The Alternative's claim to be value-based rather than ideology-based and what this means for the party's ability to postpone or displace the problem of particularization. The first part of the analysis was concerned with two types of values that summarize The Alternative's eight organizational values: 'vision values' and 'humanity values'. While the vision values (*courage*, *humor*, and *curiosity*) encourage party members to pursue their own ideas and to take initiative in realizing these, the humanity values (*empathy*, *humility*, *generosity*, and *trust*) inspire people to remain morally inclusive towards their fellow party members, irrespective of political disagreements. Similar to paper three, this part of the analysis serves to show how people with remarkably different convictions are able to find representation in the same political party without this leading to stratification or marginalization. In other words, the combination of vision values and humanity values sustains the equivalential chain, while also providing space of action for individual party members.

The focus on trust is what extends the argumentation in the fourth paper. Based on an incident at a Political Forum meeting where an appeal to 'trust trust' resolved an otherwise irresolvable

conflict, I argued that trust plays an absolutely vital role in The Alternative. This is the case because trust acts as a buffer between the political leadership and the ordinary members (or, in other words, between the movement and the party) that helps remove the need for political decision-making and curbs criticism. As mentioned in the paper, this does not mean that criticism is absent in The Alternative, but it means that critique can often be refuted by referring to the importance of trust. Returning to the question of decoupling, we can say that what ties The Alternative's universal body (the movement) and the particular body (the party) together is a firm commitment to trust. As long as the ordinary members trust that the political leadership's intentions are similar to their own, the particularistic activities of the MPs have no contaminating effect on The Alternative's universal appeal. Or, to put it slightly differently: As long as a trust relationship is maintained, the problem of particularization is kept at bay.

Having summarized the four papers, we can now return to the overall research questions and propose a concluding answer. First of all, radical political parties such as The Alternative are able to maintain a universal appeal by implementing a partial decoupling between the particularistic activities of the political leadership and the universal aspirations of the ordinary members. This decoupling may manifest itself in multiple ways, but one solution is to construct a policymaking process that oscillates back and forth between openness and closure. In doing so, the political leadership is able to advance bills and strike compromises in parliament without compromising ordinary members' freedom to envision different alternative futures beyond the scope of realpolitik. Secondly, just as there are multiple ways of staging a decoupling between movement and party, there are also multiple ways of sustaining the movement's equivalential chain. One way of doing so is through the management of subjectivity, another involves the use of organizational values. In both cases, the point is to produce a subject that lacks the ability (and willingness) to demarcate the organization by marginalizing those that are considered 'non-alternative'. Finally, what keeps the organization from fracturing is a firm commitment to trust. Without trust, the movement and the party would most likely collapse into one organizational form, which, as argued in the first paper, would mean the end of universality.

# Contributions to research

In this section, I will highlight precisely what I believe that we – as researchers – can learn from this doctoral study. Since the contributions of the individual papers have been outlined at the end of each paper, I will not reiterate these here. Instead, I will try to elevate the discussion and concentrate on the dissertation as a whole by highlighting its most important contributions to research on 1) the organization of political parties, 2) control and commitment in political organization, and 3) organizations in general. In the next section, I will make an effort to translate these insights into tangible advice for practitioners, though without being prescriptive.

## *The loosely coupled party*

As mentioned in Chapter 4, surprisingly little has been written about political parties within organization and management studies. In fact, when searching through nine of the most prestigious and well-read journals in the field, it was possible to identify no more than five articles that focused specifically on political parties. Moreover, those articles that did take parties as their primary unit of analysis relied solely on external communication and secondary sources. While these studies are no doubt important and of great interest to scholars working with party organizations, we still lack informed accounts that help us open the black box of political parties. Hence, one of the main contributions of this dissertation is to examine the inner workings of a political party by relying on empirical material that is not immediately available to the general public. Hopefully, this dissertation helps inspire other researchers to follow similar paths in the pursuit of more nuanced understandings of one of the most important kinds of organizations in contemporary society.

Aside from this general contribution, the dissertation likewise contributes more specifically to our understanding of *radical* political parties and the organization of these. In the introduction, I defined radical political parties as parties that – unlike most other political projects – undergo a process of particularization, in which a counter-hegemonic identity is sought institutionalized through the parliament. The Alternative is obviously not the only party that qualifies as a radical party. Parties such as Podemos in Spain, M5S in Italy, and possibly also En Marche in France could equally be identified as such. Given the current success of these parties, research into their

organizational dynamics seems more pertinent than ever. As mentioned above, one of the primary findings in this dissertation is that The Alternative can be described as operating with a loose coupling between the movement part and the party part of the organization. Other radical parties have been described in similar ways. For instance, Chironi and Fittipaldi (2017: 296) characterize Podemos as a 'hybrid party' that manages to consolidate 'the horizontalism of social movements and the efficiency of a party' by democratizing its internal processes through the use of online platforms and social media. Along the same lines, Vignati (2016) describes M5S as a 'franchise system' that operates with a central headquarters and several more or less autonomous subunits, tied together by a common 'brand'.

The Alternative could easily be described in the same way. In fact, The Alternative often portrays itself as a 'platform' or a 'fourth-sector organization' that unites a variety of progressive initiatives in one hybrid formation. However, the difference between the above accounts and this dissertation is that the latter does not seek to provide an organizational answer to an *organizational* problem (i.e., how are horizontalism and efficiency consolidated?) but instead seeks to provide an organizational answer to a *political* problem (i.e., the problem of particularization). In doing so, the dissertation illustrates how a partial decoupling can assist a political party in masking the unbridgeable chasm between universality and particularity and how this helps the party maintain commitment in the face of particularization. As already alluded to in some of the papers (particularly chapter 7), this finding has some important implications for the study of such parties. For one, it means that radical political parties should not be treated as one single entity but as two (or more) semi-autonomous units operating according to different logics. It also means that researchers should be sensitive towards those managerial technologies that make decoupling possible, and, finally, it means that researchers should be willing to conduct fieldwork in multiple sites, instead of just focusing on the parliament and the actors associated with this part of the organization.

## *Neo-normative control in political organization*

The second main contribution has to do with the relationship between control and commitment in political organization. In chapter 4, I proposed that studies of power and control in political

organizations often rest on the implicit assumption that the dominant mode of control corresponds to the social structure of the organizations. When hierarchical political organizations such as parties and trade unions are analyzed, control is often seen as bureaucratic or coercive; in short, as something that is done to someone (what Follett calls 'power over'). In contrast, whenever horizontal political organizations such as social movements and activist networks are examined, control is often seen as informal or normative; in short, as something more or less self-imposed (what Follett calls 'power with').

The tendency to equate structure and control are problematic for at least two reasons. First of all, the ongoing focus on coercive and bureaucratic control in hierarchical political organizations has made it difficult to account for the way in which commitment is built in such organizations (see Osterman, 2006). Secondly, with the dissolution of class consciousness and the rise of consumer-oriented societies, coercive and bureaucratic control mechanisms have become increasingly irrelevant, forcing voluntary organizations to find new ways of keeping members in line (Rye, 2015). Taken together, this means that research on *hierarchical* political organizations needs to pay much more attention to informal and *normative* ways of exercising control, as this allows for a more nuanced understanding of how members are kept in line and on board.

As shown in the fourth paper (Chapter 8), members of The Alternative are acting in ambiguous circumstances. On the one hand, they are persistently encouraged to pursue their own personal objectives and to take initiative in realizing these. On the other hand, they are also asked to remain morally inclusive towards fellow party members with different or even opposing views. This means that people are incited to live-out their own dreams and visions, though without compromising others people's ability to do the same. As one respondent expressed it, being a member of The Alternative is a matter of exploring 'the two percent of truth that is in what you're saying' instead of 'rejecting things consistently'. This type of 'moralistic appeal' (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979) resonates well with the notion of neo-normative control, as advanced primarily by Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011). The main difference between customary forms of normative control and neo-normative control is that the former thrives on cultural conformity, whereas the latter

promotes heterogeneity and authenticity, often expressed through calls to 'have fun' and to 'just be yourself'. As the authors put it in relation to call center work:

> In short, employees are encouraged to *be themselves* rather than normatively conform to an externally engineered, homogeneous and organisational identity. A key element of this apparent new freedom is having fun at work. This reflects a development in the management of fun from the emphasis on conformity and organisational loyalty associated with normative control, towards one of diversity and instrumentality. (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009: 570)

In the work of Fleming and Sturdy, the managerial practices of neo-normative control are primarily associated with profit-related motives and are seen as a way 'in which the firm mines, captures and screens the social and emotional skills of the employee' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011: 195). By asking people to invest their private selves in work-related tasks, the firm not only breaks down the boundary between work and non-work, it also gets 'authentic' employees that are able to serve customers in a more personalized manner – something that has proven important in terms of customer satisfaction (ibid.). As such, neo-normative control does not signal a departure from management, as some business gurus suggest (e.g., Semler, 1993), but should be understood as a sophisticated way of masking management. However, if we transport the concept of neo-normative control to a voluntary non-profit context, the picture changes significantly. In the absence of profit-related incentives, the 'just be yourself' discourse could be seen as a potentially more liberating management style that provides an escape from the homogenizing effects of normative control mechanisms by allowing individuals the freedom to realize their 'autonomous' selves through the collective (see Reedy et al., 2016).

Returning to the question of commitment, we thus see that, in political organizations where members stay with the organization not because they *have to* but because they *want to*, neo-normative control can be an effective way of maintaining commitment. While coercive and bureaucratic control often leads to membership 'becalming' (Zald & Ash, 1966), and while normative control frequently creates a sense of inauthenticity and burnout (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), neo-normative control may be a way of keeping members in line without affecting their

sense of commitment negatively. Of course, this does not mean that there is no downside to the type of control that permeates The Alternative. For one, as illustrated in Chapter 8, the individualized nature of neo-normative control may discourage members from engaging in collective resistance. Here, we saw how a group of local representatives opposed a decision made by the political leadership and how this opposition was dissolved through a moralistic appeal to trust. Furthermore, the use of neo-normative control may, in time, create a post-political condition in which members are incapable of constituting a proper political community by drawing an agonistic frontier between 'us' and 'them' (Mouffe, 2005). Since everyone is considered part of the 'new we', it could prove difficult to retain the affective investment that is so vital for political projects to thrive (Laclau, 2005a).

Summing up, we could say that the kind of neo-normative control found in The Alternative signals a departure from traditional modes of 'command and discipline', which have dominated party organizations for more than a century (Rye, 2015). Not only does it break with the coercive control mechanisms found in Michels' (1911) account of oligarchy in parties and trade unions, it also breaks with the normative control mechanisms that Kanter (1972) identifies in her study of utopian communities. In fact, the scientific work that comes closest to describing the way that control is exercised in The Alternative is Follett's (1918) account of democracy in group organizations. However, in Follett's groups, the proposition that 'I do not control others and they do not control me' (ibid.: 70) only works in the absence of hierarchies. It would have been impossible for Follett to imagine a variation of self-management in political parties, which she regarded as 'dead wood' worthy of a 'death blow' (ibid.: 217). As she puts it: 'Representative government has failed. It has failed because it was not a method by which men could govern themselves' (ibid.: 5). With the rise of parties like The Alternative, such claims no longer apply. Whether this improves or impedes representative democracy in general remains to be seen.

## *Studying politics with organization theory*

Having outlined the dissertation's main contributions to research, something should be said about the claim (repeated several times throughout the text) that we can learn 'something' about the

politics of organization as well as the organization of politics by studying political organizations. But what is it exactly that we can learn? A recent paper in *Organization Studies* examines the rhetorical construction of organizational identity in a Flemish far-right party called 'Vlaams Belang' (Moufahim et al., 2015). Aside from exposing the party's populist and xenophobic rhetoric, the main purpose of the paper is to show that 'no attempt at influencing organizational identities is ethically or politically neutral', which is a finding that the authors claim is frequently overlooked in the literature on organizational identity (ibid: 103). Towards the end of the paper, they note that:

> … engagement with a broader range of organizations, despite their seeming distance from the more commonly studied business firm, may be a good way of generating new insights and a deeper understanding of the political factors that underlie the construction of organizational identities. (ibid: 106)

In much the same way, this dissertation could be seen as an attempt at generating new insights and deeper understandings of the political factors that underlie 1) the use of organizational spaces in bottom-up processes, 2) the management of collective and individual subjectivity, and 3) value-based management. The problem is that Moufahim et al. (2015) never clarify precisely what is meant by 'political factors' and how these underlie certain organizational phenomena. As noted in Chapter 4, there are several ways of understanding politics. Some perceive politics as a matter of who gets what, when, and how, while others maintain that everything is political. In this dissertation, I have opted for a middle ground based on a Laclauian understanding of politics, which has allowed me to view all organizations as political, to the extent that they participate in the process of constructing and/or challenging hegemonic projects (see Böhm, 2006).

I recently spoke to a good colleague who suggested a distinction between Politics (uppercase p) and politics (lowercase p), with the former representing the Laclauian conception of politics and the latter representing the simple fact that everything is contested. As I see it, the argument in Moufahim et al.'s paper rests on the assumption that we can learn something about *politics* by studying *Politics*; that the always-contested nature of any social undertaking is illuminated through the study of organizations that engage in the universalization of particularities. To a large extent, this is also my argument in this dissertation. By studying the internal processes of a political party,

the contingent nature of different social configurations is brought to the fore. In other words, by studying Politics, we see more clearly how things could have been otherwise, and that the choice between two alternatives is always 'undecidable' (Laclau, 1990). For instance, studying The Alternative's approach to value-based management helps us realize that the articulation of values is fully dependent on its specific (organizational) context. It is not that some values are inherently 'benevolent', whereas others are inherently 'hedonistic' (see Schwartz, 1994). The meaning of any (organizational) value is inescapably tied to its articulatory context and, thus, a matter of perpetual contestation. This is not to say that studies of economic organizations have been oblivious to this point, but that contestation is more visible in political organizations.

On the other hand, I also believe that we can learn something about *Politics* by studying *politics*. That is, by examining the practical arrangements that go into coordinating and organizing political projects, we get a more nuanced understanding of the 'hegemonic link' between the universal and the particular. To a certain extent, this is the approach taken by scholars such as Polletta (2000) and Maeckelbergh (2009) in their work on participatory democracy in social movements. In this dissertation, I have tried to follow a similar path by investigating how different organizational configurations can help to solve a political problem. For instance, by studying how a bottom-up process oscillates back and forth between openness and closure, and how that oscillation effectively breaks the organization in two, we see how some political projects are capable of appearing to bridge the otherwise unbridgeable chasm between universality and particularity; as if 'the alternative' had found its one true manifestation in the particularistic activities of The Alternative's political leadership. This finding helps us to understand that political projects cannot always be pigeonholed and placed on a continuum running from particularity towards universality but should be seen as operating on different levels and according to different logics at the same time. In relation to his work on populism, Laclau (2005b: 47) writes:

> A movement or an ideology – or, to put both under their common genus, a discourse – will be more or less populistic depending on the degree to which its contents are articulated by equivalential logics (…) The degree of 'populism', in that sense, will depend on the chasm separating political alternatives.

The idea that one can measure the degree of populism in a certain movement (or party) by assessing the extent to which its political contents are articulated in equivalential chains strikes me as somewhat static and out of tune with reality. Ideally speaking, this would allow us to claim that The Alternative is only 40 percent populist, whereas Podemos is 60 percent populist. Of course, these numbers are drawn from thin air, but the point is that the empirical reality of contemporary politics is much more dynamic than that. As this dissertation has shown, some political organizations are capable of speaking with two tongues by partially decoupling one part of the organization from the other(s), thus appearing universal and particular, populist and non-populist, at the same time. This finding not only implies that we must be careful when ostensibly labeling political organizations, it also means that we must find new tools for investigating the political anatomy of the many movements and parties that currently emerge. One way of doing so is to appropriate the methods and concepts of organization theory and use these to study politics.

What all of this amounts to is, first and foremost, a call to researchers within organization studies to supplement their work on economic organizations with work on political organizations. In doing so, we might learn something novel about the ever-contested nature of organization that was otherwise obscured by the politically 'neutral' rhetoric of traditional business firms. Secondly, it is a call for researchers working within political science to utilize organization theory as a point of departure for studying politics. This would not only provide new insights and deeper understandings of the inner workings of political organizations such as political parties and social movements, it would also help us understand how 'organization' can be an answer to inherently political problems.

## Contributions to practice

Above, I highlighted the dissertation's most important contributions to research. In this section, I will make an effort to translate these points into more tangible advice for practice. Before doing so, it seems necessary to state – once and for all – that practical advice based on research can only take the form of suggestions, not prescriptions. This is the case because no advice is value-neutral, since it is always articulated from within society (Knudsen, 2017), and because all advice rests on

certain ontological assumptions that may not be shared by practitioners in the field (see Glerup et al., in press, for more on the link between science and society). That said, it would be a shame not to contemplate the practical implications of what has been concluded in the preceding sections. In what follows, I will dispense three pieces of advice by departing from the notion of 'the unfinished' as the *sine qua non* of radical politics. First, I will say something about decoupling, then proceed to the question of trust, and conclude with some reflections on the importance of creating 'spaces of imagination'.

## *Unfinished business*

Almost half a century ago, the Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen (1971) wrote a book called *The Unfinished* based on his experiences with the prison abolition movement in the late 1960s (the English translation of the book is called *The Politics of Abolition*). Written at the height of the movement's success, the book was originally intended as a conceptual contribution to the type of action research that advocates political changes; that is, the type of research that many organization scholars today associate with the 'critical performativity' agenda. In the book, cited in this chapter's epigraph, Mathiesen makes the argument that 'the alternative lies in the unfinished', and that the 'finished alternative' is finished 'in a double sense of the word'. This view has, as he notes in the following passage, some important consequences for politics:

> It means that any attempt to change the existing order into something completely finished, a fully formed entity, is destined to fail: in the process of finishing lies a return to the by-gone. Note than I am here thinking of change and revision in terms of structure. The existing order changes in structure while it enters its new form. This was the meaning of the oracles: they provided sketches, not answers, as entrances to the new. (Mathiesen, 1971: 47)

To illustrate his point, Mathiesen suggests the metaphor of psychotherapy. In a therapy session, the therapist offers a range of questions and sketches, but no answers. It is the process of arriving at those answers that helps the client move towards something new. Had the therapist provided prefabricated answers instead, the client would probably not have been open for change. It is not

difficult to transfer these observations to the world of 'alternative' politics: the moment of finalization marks the end of alternativeness. In other words, as long as a political project maintains a certain degree of incompleteness, the possibility of change is preserved. But what does all of this have to do with radical politics and the case of The Alternative?

If we return for a moment to the first paper (chapter 5), we see that radical politics involves the ongoing production of emptiness through the articulation of empty signifiers. This means that the defining feature of radical politics, rather than something positive, is a shared opposition towards established 'positives'. In the discourse of Occupy Wall Street, the establishment was represented by the notion of 'the one percent', and in the discourse of The Alternative, the establishment appeared under the guise of 'the old political culture'. The strength of radical politics is that it provides a shared frame of reference for counter-hegemonic identities. The weakness is that it is enormously difficult to institutionalize radical politics through the parliament, as this requires adding positive content to an otherwise negative identity. In this dissertation, I have referred to this difficulty as the problem of particularization.

Now, if we translate these observations into the language of 'the unfinished', we quickly realize that the problem of particularization can, in fact, be redefined as a problem of finalization. As long as radical politics abstains from engaging in parliamentary affairs, its universal appeal is easily sustained because the political decision to finalize the project – that is, to articulate its political objectives in positive terms – is not required. This was the solution that Occupy Wall Street settled for. By abandoning the ambition of one 'final demand', the movement could always be seen as representing that mythical 'something more', which is unfathomable because it lies beyond the limits of significations (Cederström & Spicer, 2014). In contrast, The Alternative chose to face the problem of particularization – or finalization – head on. By striving to be a 'positive countermeasure' and to propose 'real and serious answers' to a number of crises (The Alternative, 2013), the party began the process of finalizing its political program. One proposal at a time, the meaning of The Alternative was fixed, as the sketch that once was became a detailed painting.

If we are to take Mathiesen's words seriously, the finalization of The Alternative's political project represents a return to 'the by-gone'. According to him, the construction of a well-developed political program, and the entry into parliament in order to realize this program, inevitably marks the end of alternativeness. As he notes: 'The alternative society, then, lies in the very development of the new, not in its completion' (Mathiesen, 1971: 51). Hence, to paraphrase the member of The Alternative quoted in the beginning of chapter 2, this may seem like a good time to rename the project 'The Establishment'. However, as this dissertation has shown, this conclusion is too rash. It may very well be that 'the unfinished' represents the *sine qua non* of radical politics, but this does not mean that some kind of finalization is impossible. As long as parts of the organization remain unfinished, the universal appeal is preserved and the possibility of change is kept alive. In what remains of the dissertation, I will suggest three ways in which radical political parties can avoid finishing 'in a double sense of the word'.

***Embrace decoupling, but not explicitly****:* As persistently argued throughout the dissertation, some kind of organizational decoupling is a precondition for success when institutionalizing radical politics through the parliament. Hence, the obvious advice would be to suggest that the members as well as the leadership embrace the loose coupling between movement and party, instead of trying to turn the party into a movement (or vice versa). In doing so, the MPs would be allowed to pursue political influence at the level of realpolitik without contaminating the universal aspirations of ordinary members. However, considering that one of The Alternative's main objectives is to minimize the gap between people and parliament, this would appear to undermine the premise on which the organization was founded. The solution, it seems to me, would be to implicitly embrace the fact that the movement part and the party part of The Alternative are operating according to different logics; that one part is more 'finished' than the other and that their objectives are fundamentally irreconcilable – though without publically acknowledging this. Sure enough, this strategy may seem to be a hypocritical way of approaching the problem, but hypocritical organizing has previously proven effective in deparadoxing otherwise paradoxical conditions (Brunsson, 1986).

***Place trust in trust:*** In the preceding chapter, we saw how trust played a vital role in keeping the organization from fracturing. Not only does trust work to reduce complexity and minimize the need for coercive or bureaucratic control, it also works to postpone political decision-making. Returning to the discussion above, we see that the political decision to add positive content to an otherwise negative identity is precisely what draws a political project away from its alternative roots. In the incident described in chapter 8, the cause of antagonism was a particular policy proposal about reducing the average working week to 30 hours. While some members enthusiastically endorsed the proposal, others opposed it with similar force. As such, the situation proved irreconcilable by other means than voting until another solution presented itself. By choosing to trust the political leadership, the ordinary members not only bypassed conventional modes of control in political organization, they also postponed the decision about *what kind of alternative* The Alternative was going to be. Ultimately, this meant that the irreconcilable crowd could continue to co-exist despite political differences. In my opinion, this example shows how trust may be a useful way of prolonging the moment of 'undecidability' and of keeping 'the unfinished' unfinished.

***Create spaces of imagination:*** Perhaps the most innovative part of The Alternative's political project is the Political Laboratories. The attempt alone to reinvent the political conversation among common people seems to me one of the most important contributions to Danish politics in decades. Other radical parties have experimented with similar initiatives. For instance, Podemos is organized around a large number of 'Circles', in which both members and non-members discuss and develop different policy areas. Similarly, M5S is known for its many 'Meetups', which are citizen-driven groups coordinated through the Meetup.com website. What all of these initiatives share is a dedication to democratic deliberation and active participation, combined with a certain distance to what is going on in parliament. In the second paper, we conceptualized the Political Laboratories as 'spaces of imagination' because they afford the 'creative exercise by individuals and collectives of evoking that which does not yet exist' (chapter 6: 141). Hence, since the alternative, according to Mathiesen, lies precisely in 'what is not yet fully existing', the Political Laboratories could be seen as the very cradle of radical politics (in much the same way as the general assemblies of Occupy Wall Street). It matters less what policies crystallize out of the

laboratories and whether these policies can be realized in parliament. What matters is that the laboratories remain semi-autonomous spaces of imagination, where common people can meet across demographic and political boundaries and deliberate in the absence of hierarchies and party discipline. This is the key, I believe, to avoid returning to the bygone.

# Epilogue

As I am writing these final lines, members of The Alternative are working non-stop in preparation for the upcoming municipal elections in November 2017. It has been more than two years since the party entered parliament as a community of dedicated dreamers. The dream is still alive, but it has suffered severe blows along the way. Are there really alternatives to the current state of affairs, or was Fukuyama right in announcing the end of history 25 years ago? With the launch of The Alternative's new electoral campaign, cleverly framed as an extension of the UN's 17 goals for sustainable development, hope has been reinstalled in many of those who lost faith along the way. I am one of those 168,788 Danes who voted for The Alternative back in 2015. I will probably do so again. Not so much because of the party's particular policies – there are other parties I sympathize with more in that regard – but because they keep the dream alive. The dream of a better world. Whatever that may be.

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# 10. Appendix

## English summary

This doctoral study explores the case of The Alternative, a recently elected party in Denmark, by utilizing concepts and methods from organization studies in an effort to understand how a political party manages the process of entering parliament without losing political support. The Alternative was founded in late 2013 as a movement against the unsustainable program of neoliberal capitalism and the 'old political culture'. However, instead of presenting a list of tangible demands and trademark issues, The Alternative was launches without a political program. During the course of only half a year, the party developed its political program with inspiration from the open-source community by inviting everyone interested to participate in a series of 'Political Laboratories'. This culminated with the publication of The Alternative's first program in May 2014 – a document of no less than 63 pages, containing a variety of specific and sometimes controversial policy proposals. On June 18, 2015, the party entered the Danish Parliament with almost five percent of the votes.

Drawing on Ernesto Laclau's distinction between 'the universal' (as an unachievable beyond manifested in an empty signifier) and 'the particular' (as a field of differential identities), I conceptualize The Alternative's organizational transformation from movement to party as a drift from universality towards particularity. This transformation not only counters the way in which political projects typically emerge and become hegemonic, it also poses a serious problem for The Alternative. This is the case because the process of particularization that follows from constructing an elaborate political program and entering parliament after only 18 months inevitably narrows the scope of political representation and jeopardizes the party's ability to maintain support. However, if we look to membership statistics and opinion polls, we see that support for The Alternative has grown in the years following the national elections in 2015. This indicates that The Alternative has found a way of resolving what I call 'the problem of particularization'. In this dissertation, I set out to explore what managerial technologies and organizational practices that helped the party in doing so.

The dissertation contains four individual papers, all of which have been submitted to international journals. In the first paper, Allan Dreyer Hansen and I conduct a comparative analysis of Occupy Wall Street and The Alternative. The aim of the comparison is, first and foremost, to conceptualize the problem of particularization and, secondly, to illustrate the empirical difference between radical movements (groups united in common opposition to the establishment) and radical parties (groups that attempt to translate that opposition into a positive force for change). In the second paper, Ursula Plesner and I zoom-in on The Alternative by conducting a space-sensitive analysis of the party's process of policymaking. In doing so, we observe how the process oscillates between openness and closure, and how that oscillation breaks The Alternative into two loosely coupled systems operating according to different logics. While the movement-part operates at the universal level and according to the logic of equivalence, the party-part operates at a more particularized level and according to the logic of difference. Even though this counters the official portrayal of policymaking within The Alternative, we argue that some kind of decoupling between movement and party is a precondition for success when institutionalizing radical politics.

In the third paper, I conduct an analysis of subjectivity management in The Alternative. Relying on a detailed reading of the party's external communication and 34 interviews with members of the party, I argue that the political leadership manages to produce a political subject (the 'Alternativist') that is more or less incapable of demarcating party in terms of political representation. In that way, the party avoids marginalizing supporters that are deemed 'non-alternative' by members, since the act of marginalization contradicts what it means to be alternative within The Alternative. In the fourth paper, I extend the previous paper by analyzing The Alternative's approach to value-based management. Departing from a distinction between 'vision values' and 'humanity values', I argue that the former encourages the party's members to pursue their own political objectives, whereas the latter encourages them to remain morally inclusive towards members with different objectives. Ultimately, this allows an irresponsible support base to co-exist despite political disagreements. In conclusion, I analyze one particular value (trust) and argue that trust is what keeps The Alternative from fracturing. As long as a trust relationship is maintained between members and political leadership, the particularistic activities of the MPs have no 'contaminating' effect on the members' universal aspirations.

The dissertation has four interrelated contributions. First of all, it helps to alleviate the surprising lack of work on political parties within organization and management studies. Across the most prestigious and well-read journals in the field, only a handful of studies take parties as their primary unit of analysis – and no study have previously done so by focusing on the internal dynamics of parties. Secondly, the dissertation shows how *radical* political parties are able to enter parliament without losing support by partially decoupling one part of the organization from the other(s). Thirdly, the dissertation challenges the assumption that the social structure of political organizations corresponds to the control mechanisms employed by the organizations. By focusing on normative modes of control rather than coercive or bureaucratic modes of control, the dissertation nuances our understanding of the relationship between control and commitment in political organization. Lastly, the dissertation illustrates the merit of using organization theory as a point of departure for analyzing politics. In doing so, we are able to see things that were not immediately visible from the point of view of mainstream political science.

# Dansk resumé

Denne ph.d.-afhandling undersøger Alternativets tidlige udvikling ved at anvende begreber og metoder fra organisations- og ledelsesforskningen i et forsøg på at forstå, hvordan et politisk parti håndterer overgangen fra ekstra-parlamentarisme til parlamentarisk realpolitik uden samtidig at miste politisk opbakning. Alternativet blev grundlangt i slutningen af 2013 som en modreaktion til den neoliberale kapitalisme og den 'gamle politiske kultur'. I stedet for at offentliggøre en række politiske krav og mærkesager blev Alternativet dog lanceret uden et egentligt politisk program. Med inspiration fra open-source-miljøet brugte partiet derfor det følgende halve år på at konstruere sit politiske program ved at invitere interesserede borgere til at deltage i en række såkaldte 'Politiske Laboratorier'. Denne proces kulminerede med publiceringen af Alternativets første politiske program i maj 2014 – et dokument på intet mindre end 63 sider, som indeholdt en lang række meget detaljerede og lejlighedsvist kontroversielle forslag. Den 18. juni, 2015, blev Alternativet stemt ind i Folketinget med næsten fem procent af stemmerne.

Med afsæt i Ernesto Laclaus distinktion mellem 'det universelle' (som et uopnåeligt ideal, manifesteret i en tom betegner) og 'det partikulære' (som et felt af differentierede identiteter) konceptualiserer jeg Alternativets organisatoriske transformation fra bevægelse til parti som en overgang fra noget universelt imod noget partikulært. Denne transformation bryder ikke kun med den gængse måde, hvorpå politiske projekter typisk vokser frem og bliver hegemoniske, den skaber også visse problemer for Alternativet. Dette skyldes, at den partikulariseringsproces, der opstår som konsekvens af at skabe et udførligt politisk program og indtræde i Folketinget efter blot 18 måneder, unægtelig indsnævrer rummet for politisk repræsentation og sætter partiets brede opbakning på spil. Rådfører vi os dog med medlemsstatistikker og meningsmålinger, ser vi hurtigt, at opbakningen til Alternativet har været stødt stigende i årene efter valget i 2015. Dette kunne altså tyde på, at Alternativet har fundet en måde at løse partikulariseringsproblematikken. I denne afhandling undersøger jeg, hvilke ledelsesteknikker og organisatoriske praksisser, der har hjulpet partiet i denne henseende.

Denne afhandling indeholder fire individuelle artikler, der alle er indsendt til internationale tidsskrifter. I den første artikel udfører Allan Dreyer Hansen og jeg en komparativ analyse af

266

Occupy Wall Street og Alternativet. Formålet med analyse er først og fremmest at konceptualisere partikulariseringsproblematikken. Det sekundære formål er at illustrere den empiriske forskel på radikale bevægelser (politiske grupper, der forenes i en fælles modstand mod det bestående) og radikale partier (politiske grupper, der forsøger at give denne modstand en positiv artikulation). I afhandlingens anden artikel zoomer Ursula Plesner og jeg ind på Alternativet ved at undersøge partiets officielle politikudviklings-proces fra et rum-orienteret perspektiv. På den måde kan vi observere, hvordan processen oscillerer mellem åbenhed og lukkethed, og hvordan denne oscillation splitter Alternativet i to løst-koblede systemer, der opererer i henhold til hver deres logik. Mens bevægelsesdelen opererer på det universelle niveau og i henhold til en ækvivalens-logik, opererer partidelen på et mere partikulariseret niveau og i henhold til en differens-logik. Selvom denne konklusion modsiger den officielle fortælling om politikudvikling i Alternativet, argumenterer vi for, at en form for dekobling mellem parti og bevægelse er en betingelse for succes i institutionaliseringen af radikal politik.

I den tredje artikel foretager jeg en analyse af subjektivitets-ledelse i Alternativet. Baseret på en detaljeret læsning af partiets eksterne kommunikation og 34 interviews med medlemmer af Alternativet, argumenterer jeg for, at den politiske ledelse lykkedes med at producere et politisk subjekt ('alternativisten'), der i høj grad mangler evnen til at afgrænse partiet i forhold til politisk repræsentation. På den måde undgår partiet at udgrænse tilhængere, der af medlemmerne anses for at være ikke-alternative, da udgrænsende handlinger er i modstrid med selve definitionen af, hvad det vil siger at være alternativ i Alternativet. I den fjerde artikel bygger jeg videre på den foregående artikel ved at analysere Alternativets tilgang til værdibaseret ledelse. Med afsæt i en distinktion mellem visionsværdier og humanitetsværdier, argumenterer jeg for, at førstnævnte opmuntrer medlemmerne til at forfølge egne politiske målsætninger, mens sidstnævnte inspirerer dem til at forblive moralsk inkluderende overfor folk med andre målsætninger. I sidste ende tillader denne kombination af værdier en uforenelig gruppe at sameksistere trods politiske uenigheder. Afslutningsvist analyserer jeg en specifik værdi (tillid) og argumenterer for, at tillid er det, der holder Alternativet sammen. Så længe et tillidsforhold opretholdes mellem medlemmer og politisk lederskab har folketingskandidaternes partikulære aktiviteter ingen 'forurenende' effekt på medlemmernes universelle aspirationer.

Afhandlingen har fire beslægtede bidrag. For det første hjælper den til at udbedre den overraskende mangel på studier af politiske partier i organisations- og ledelsesforskningen. På tværs af de mest prestigiøse og mest læste tidsskrifter i feltet findes der kun en håndfuld artikler, der har partier som analytisk genstandsfelt – og ingen af disse fokuserer på partiernes interne dynamikker. For det andet viser afhandlingen, hvordan radikale partier kan indtræde i parlamentet uden at miste opbakning ved delvist at afkoble én del af organisationen fra de andre. For det tredje udfordrer afhandlingen antagelsen om, at politiske organisationers sociale struktur korresponderer til de kontrolmekanismer, der anvendes i organisationen. Ved at fokusere på normative kontrolformer frem for tvangs-baserede eller bureaukratiske former for kontrol, tjener afhandlingen til at nuancere vores forståelse af forholdet mellem kontrol og engagement i politiske organisationer. Sidst men ikke mindst illustrerer afhandlingen værdien af at anvende organisationsteori som afsæt til at studere politik. Dette tillader os nemlig at se ting, som man ikke ville få øje på fra den traditionelle politologis synsvinkel.

**Co-author statement**



| Title of paper | The **Alternative to Occupy? Radical politics between protest and parliament** |
| --- | --- |
| Journal and date (if published) | TripleC 15(2), 459-476 |

| 1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem to be investigated and its operationalization into an appropriate set of research questions to be answered through empirical research and/or conceptual development |
| --- |
| Description of contribution: <br><br> - Emil came up with the idea for the paper and invited Allan to co-author the article. |
| 2. Planning of the research, including selection of methods and method development |
| Description of contribution: <br><br> - Emil planned the research and selected the methods, though Allan contributed with important comments and suggestions. |
| 3. Involvement in data collection and data analysis |
| Description of contribution: <br><br> - Emil collected the data and conducted most of the analysis, though Allan contributed to vital parts of the analysis as well as other parts of the article. |
| 4. Presentation, interpretation and discussion of the analysis in the form of an article or manuscript |
| Description of contribution: <br><br> - The interpretation of data and the framing of the argument was carried out by both authors. |

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2/8 - 2017

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# Co-author statement



| Title of paper | Spaces of open-source politics: Physical and digital conditions for political organization |
|---|---|
| Journal and date (if published) | Organization, 2017, online first |

| 1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem to be investigated and its operationalization into an appropriate set of research questions to be answered through empirical research and/or conceptual development |
|---|
| Description of contribution: <br><br> - Emil came up with the idea for the paper and invited Ursula to co-author the article. |

| 2. Planning of the research, including selection of methods and method development |
|---|
| Description of contribution: <br><br> - Emil planned the research and selected the methods, though Ursula contributed with vital inputs and suggestions. |

| 3. Involvement in data collection and data analysis |
|---|
| Description of contribution: <br><br> - Emil collected most the data, though Ursula also participated in the process of collecting data. The analysis of data was carried out by both authors. |

| 4. Presentation, interpretation and discussion of the analysis in the form of an article or manuscript |
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