

“European Youth and Political Participation in Times of Crisis”ⁱ

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Introduction

How can we make sense of the current wave of anti-austerity and pro-democracy mobilizations and in particular the role of youth? In this article, I will provide a brief context or and chronology of some of the main protest events in Europe, and highlight some of the key roles and issues related to youth participation.

Political-economic context: Global financial crisis

The first consideration which is essential to understanding this wave of protests in Europe is the political-economic context.

Explaining the complexities of the global financial crisis in detail lies outside the scope of this article. For my purposes here however, some central facts can be determined which shed light on the protesters' claims and demands. The financial crisis was triggered as a result of the indiscriminate proliferation of subprime mortgage lending in the US, encouraged in part by the low Federal Reserve rates from 2001-2005, which created an unsustainable housing bubble. The crisis became global

because US investment banks had been bundling home loans from the US housing market into complex mortgage-backed securities and selling them to banks and other investors around the world as high yield but low risk investments.

When the housing bubble “popped”, many banks in the US and elsewhere found themselves saddled with huge losses. Some banks collapsed, others were bailed out by the government. The situation shifted rapidly from excessive credit to a credit freeze, where troubled banks stopped lending to each other and to consumers. The crisis was ultimately caused by deregulation of the financial sector (a political process fuelled by a belief in neo-liberalism), essentially amounting to a failure to adequately monitor and regulate banks, which enabled them to largely “self-regulate” encouraging ever riskier and less sound lending practices. Essentially banks were lending money to borrowers who had little chance of paying off the loans, but then passing on the loans to US investment banks who bundled them into securities and sold them worldwide. The “cheap money” provided by the Federal Reserve Bank’s low interest rates, coupled with corporate marketing strategies also encouraged consumers to “buy now and pay later” despite not having sufficient income to pay later, encouraged by a generalized wide spread failure of banks and lenders to properly assess credit risk (Orlowski, 2008).

The US was not the only country following a policy to increase domestic consumption based on credit, and the Anglo-American financial crisis was followed by a sovereign-debt crisis in the Eurozone exacerbated by the European Monetary Unions low interest rates and suppression of national bond risks, which led some countries to take on huge public debt. The high globalization of the financial sector and the pegging of national currencies to others (or joining a monetary union) means that individual nations lose some capacity to determine national economic policies, which leads to declining citizen trust in national political elites' capacity to solve problems. The financial crisis led to a generalized loss of trust in the financial sector and in the political classes, and caused increased economic inequality, higher unemployment, widespread feelings of economic insecurity and pessimism for the future. The political response in the US and Europe was to bail out banks at huge cost to taxpayers and the imposition of harsh, and some would argue, punitive austerity measures by International Financial Institutions including the International Monetary Fund. In Europe, the political response was led by the European Commission, in which Germany had the leading voice as the most powerful political actor. The crisis happened in the context of increased social inequality and precarious labour conditions for many workers. This in turn triggered mass protest in a number of countries, both from right wing, ultra-nationalist and

xenophobic actors and also from more progressive actors calling for political reforms, an increase in democracy and an end to persistent social inequality. There has been an increased mistrust of political elites and of the financial sector as a whole. Central to the protests have been a rejection of austerity measures, touted by the “Troika” as a necessary response to the crisis. According to a number of economists these policies actually are worsening the economic crisis and indeed we have not seen promised improvements in places like Greece as a result of austerity measures. In a major comparative study of the health impacts of austerity programs across the world, Stuckler and Basu (2013) estimate that in Europe and the US there has been an increase in depression (about 1 million) and suicides (some 10,000 more) since the introduction of austerity measures after the crisis. In Greece, where the Troika have imposed radical austerity cuts in exchange for an economic bailout, HIV rates have increased by 200%. Their most crucial finding is not that financial crises cause unemployment, foreclosure and debt, which lead to negative health outcomes, but that the way governments respond radically affects public and economic health outcomes. When governments enact austerity cuts they slow the economic cycles further, and the social and economic costs are much higher than the “savings” generated from the cuts. On the other hand, when governments intervene with stimulus packages early on, not only do they help build

the economic cycle over time but also avert health crises and increase the welfare of citizens. Work such as that of Stuckler and Basu show that challenging austerity is much more than just trying to maintain individual gains in a bad situation, it is about overturning the flawed logic of a system that is not working to meet people's needs.

Youth and anti-austerity protest

Iceland

The first European response to the crisis was in Iceland, where the Saucepan Revolution started in 2008. Prompted by the economic collapse resulting from the banking crisis, protesters occupied Reykjavik's main square every Saturday from 11 October 2008 to 14 March 2009, banging on pots and pans.

They had a very clear set of demands: the resignation of the government, parliamentary elections, electoral reform, the prosecution of bankers and politicians responsible for the mishandling of the nation's finances, a new constitution, and a referendum to decide whether or not Iceland should assume the debt generated by the collapse of its three main banks.

The mobilizations were very successful: the Prime Minister resigned, a new constitution was drafted using participatory methods and Icelanders voted "No" on two referenda (6 March 2010, and 10 April, 2011).

The Icelandic revolution was characterized primarily by its extremely broad social base, and the large presence of middle aged and older, middle class people. Although the Icelandic protests had a far smaller radical youth component than the *Indignados* protests in Southern Europe, youth and radical youth groups played key roles in some of the most important and visible direct actions a several key moments in the protests. Iceland happened before Arab Spring, and although Iceland inspired activists in Europe, they themselves did not have much transnational dimension to their protest (Júlíusson and Helgason, 2013).

Greece

Greece experiences mass mobilizations and strikes in 2008 and 2010 in response to worsening conditions in Greece, but when the government signed the memorandum of cooperation with the Troika in May 2010 and agreed to impose harsh austerity measures to reduce the public deficit in exchange for bail out loans the protest situation in Greece shifted. As in the other cases here, youth have played an active role, particularly in the *Aganaktismeni* (Indignados) phase of mobilizations. From April 2010-April 2011, protest followed tradition forms and leadership, with General strikes, union leadership, mass demonstrations and so on.

However, after Spain's 15-M and inspired very clearly also by Arab Spring, from May 25th to August 2011 the Greek *Indignados* or

Aganaktismeni began to lead the protests and adopted the occupation of Syntagma and the squares of all main cities in Greece, and then from September 2011 a very strong and organized labour movement and mass civil disobedience encompassing a wide sector of civil society emerged. Protest activities included mass refusal to pay newly imposed taxes, verbal and physical attacks against the politicians in public spaces, and protesting in previously non-politicized settings (such as football stadiums, the military and school parades) (Sergi and Vogiatzoglou, 2013).

In Portugal, young activists calling themselves “the desperate generation ”(*Geração o rasca*), inspired directly by the events in Tahrir Square took to the streets on 12 March 2011 in the biggest public demonstration since the 1974 revolution. These activists were explicitly mobilizing around a youth identity. The protests lasted only one day, but activists later mobilized again in solidarity with the Spanish 15-M *Indignados* and went on to more sustained protests including global days of *Indignado* actions in 2011 and 2012, and mass demonstrations and general strikes including labour union participation (see Baumgarten, 2013).

Spain

On the 15th of May 2011, The Spanish 15-M or *Indignados* movement, also inspired by Iceland, Arab Spring and student mobilizations in

France and Italy, occupied the central plazas of Madrid, later spreading to Barcelona and other cities. “Real Democracy Now!”, the civic platform that called the 15-M protest, convoked the original protests and was itself made up of numerous groups and campaigns, including the student group “Youth without Future” (*Juventud Sin Futuro*) who had been key mobilizers against the Bologna university reforms.

While Indignados evolved to encompass all sectors of civil society, youth activists continue to be at the center of the movement in many ways.

The Spanish mobilizations were very inspirational to mobilizations in Italy and France, and influenced the framing and demands of the Greek and Portuguese movements who adopted the 15-M/Indignado/Real Democracy Now slogans and names.

Shared themes across the European protests

Common to all of these protests is:

- a rejection of austerity measures imposed by International Financial Institutions,
- a defence of the welfare state,
- a critique of neo-liberal global capitalism
- a deep critique of the political class and calls for democratic reform and
- rejection of social inequality

France, Germany , Ireland, Italy, Slovenia, the UK and others also saw some Occupy type movements during this period and there was a global day of action in 2011 in which many nations around the world took part.

Youth Issues

Youth have played a key role in all of these mobilizations, although they have by no means been the only actors. One key concept that helps understand youth mobilization in Europe is *precariousness*, which has been a key area of youth mobilization in Europe over the past 10 years. Precariousness highlights the uncertainty of the future for today's youth and they mobilize around related issues. This uncertainty centres around a lack of employment opportunities, high youth unemployment rates, low pay and temporary jobs, lack of affordable housing, lack of access to mortgage and bank credit, cuts to pensions and social welfare programs, and educational reforms that limit access and affordability of higher education. Precariousness as a mobilizing concept is linked to an entire social condition for many European youth, who face uncertain futures. While this can create feelings of anxiety it can also unite them with a shared collective identity around which they can mobilize. If these issues were already at the centre of much youth mobilization before the global financial crisis, the current situation has intensified their relevance and salience.

Although youth are mobilizing around youth issues with a clear youth identity (for example Youth without Future's campaigns which highlight the plight of youth in Spain), they are also connecting these to wider social problems like housing evictions as a result of loss of employment and inability to pay mortgages which are not affecting them directly (in that most are not home owners) but are affecting families all over Spain. Housing as a mobilizing issue has been important to 15-M activists and has been a long term youth issue as well.

The Arab Spring Connection

European activists were inspired by the Arab Spring, particularly the events in Tunisia and Egypt. The occupation of the central squares, while not a new tactic (recall for example the tent city of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution) had a symbolic power as an expression of the will of the people that found echo in the tactics of the Spanish 15-M and Greek *Aganaktismeni* and later in the many "Occupy" encampments. The shared use of the tactic of occupation of central plazas or emblematic sites in front of or near seats of political and economic power, or in sites where austerity measures are cutting funding such as universities, unites all of these movements. The tactic is powerful, symbolically charged and quickly and easily replicated, with a strong unmediated transgressive

and DIY (Do it yourself) ethos that infuses all of these mobilizations. Occupation is much more than just a tactic, but also involves creating a new agora which extends beyond the actual physical site. Reclaiming public space (as in Take the streets! And Occupy!) and engaging in a politics of space is also central. Clearly Arab Spring has been a huge inspiration for European protesters and there are some issues in common for some European and Arab youth, such as high youth unemployment, but the contexts are quite different, and even differ greatly within Europe, which explains the different levels of mobilization across countries. To highlight just one contrast, the main slogan of the Egyptian revolution was 'bread, freedom, human dignity'. This slogan calls forth three broad themes of key concern for Egyptians over the previous decade: poor economic conditions and social inequality, lack of democracy, and police corruption and abuse. In contrast, European youth were calling for "*real* democracy now!" a demand for a deepening of transparency, participation and accountability of existing democratic institutions. Whereas the critique of representative democracy is much more marked in Europe and North America, the mobilizations in the Arab world also demand a voice for the common people. In all cases the mobilizations were led by non-institutional actors as opposed to established political parties and unions.

Central to the message of youth protesters is the idea that politicians are put into office and paid with public money to protect the interest of all members of society, including people too young to vote, and including the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society. If they take public money for their salaries but then only act to protect the interests of economic and political elites, or engage in illegal or fraudulent practices, then they need to be held to account for those actions. In this sense European youth have made a powerful critique of our economic and political class and existing democratic institutions. Protest is a cornerstone of any democracy, a crucial mechanism of oversight against flaws in the political system, and youth have played an important role in raising and channelling public pressure to hold the political classes accountable for protecting a future for all of us.

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