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Imagining another Europe: Building a pan-European counter-hegemonic bloc around an anti-austerity master frame

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Abstract Going beyond the local and national scopes of anti-austerity mobilizations, we contribute to this special issue by focusing on counter-hegemonic protest at the pan-European level. In the context of the current austerity regimes, this emerging and precarious social formation enacts resistance against neoliberal hegemony and invokes the re-construction of European institutional arrangements and policy from below in explicit opposition to the dominance of austerity. We employ a neo-Gramscian approach complemented by framing theory to scrutinize the development of a pan-European counter-hegemonic bloc, focusing empirically on two key current pan-European initiatives: the Alter Summit platform and the Blockupy alliance. Our analysis unravels the process by which different progressive social movement frames become increasingly aligned through reference to an anti-austerity master frame with three key elements: (a) the rejection of austerity measures, (b) coordinated transnational solidarity, and (c) the defense of democracy and popular sovereignty. This master frame has the potential of supporting stronger pan-European counter-hegemonic mobilization and thereby facilitating a counter-hegemonic bloc opposing neoliberal hegemony. However, our analysis also reveals three challenges for our counter-hegemonic initiatives. First, concrete institutional alternatives are still weakly elaborated and articulated, which gives the force of rejection of the austerity master frame little direction and testifies to deeper structural disagreement within anti-austerity movements. Second, insofar as concrete institutional counter-proposals are made, they still remain entrenched in national frameworks. And, third, counter-hegemonic movements aspiring to be truly pan-European need to reconcile conflicting tendencies between those who want to re-found and those who want to exit from the European integration project.

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Introduction: Examining the Emergence of Pan-European Resistance to Austerity

The credit crisis of 2007–2008 has been termed “the largest financial shock since the Great Depression” (IMF, 2008: 4). In Europe, the credit crunch soon transformed into a sovereign debt crisis, hitting particularly hard in the southern Eurozone countries with rapidly accumulating public debt and revealing the economic divide between the “core” and “peripheral” member states. Eight years later, the structural problems of the European Monetary Union (EMU) and a widening center-periphery divide seem far from resolved, while most of Europe’s North has also faced economic contraction. The responses to the crisis that have been adopted across the European Union (EU) and enforced inter alia by the Troika of European Commission, European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund have had as their common denominator a strong focus on one particular twin set of policy choices: reduction of budget deficits and sovereign debt. The fiscal discipline and harsh austerity packages implemented as a result have led to profound restructuring of the public sector in many EU member states, with major repercussions for national health and education systems, cultural sectors, social welfare provisions, public employment, and pension systems. Across Europe, we see a strong bias in favor of anti-Keynesian, supply-side attempts at recovery. Like a phoenix, neoliberal hegemony – in discourse as much as concrete policies – is rising from the ashes of the crisis (Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013).

Given these developments and the immediate palpability of their effects, we might well expect the rise of counter-hegemonic forces opposing the direction of the current political answers to the crisis. As we will show, there is a precedent for such contestation in the mobilizations against the neoliberal foundations of European integration in the past 20 years, which fused with the early counter-globalization movement and the European Social Forum (ESF), claiming that “Another Europe is possible.” We have argued elsewhere (Freyberg-Inan and Scholl, 2014; Scholl and Freyberg-Inan, 2013) that pan-European mobilization against the austerity bias is made very difficult by hegemonic forces’ techniques of insulation, co-optation, and securitization of counter-globalization movements. In addition, as pointed out by della Porta and Parks (2016), the EU’s response to the financial crisis has brought about a contraction of political opportunities for counter-hegemonic actors. Still, as opposed to the first years of what started as a credit crunch, we now have more than just the Gaulish village called Greece where people resist or oppose austerity measures. Next to occasional eruptions of mass protest on a national scale, such as in Greece, Spain, and Portugal (Castells, 2012; Castañeda, 2012; Dhaliwal, 2012), the 2011 Occupy protests triggered much attention and resulted in a high number of case studies.¹ However, none of these case studies addresses the aspect of possible pan-European movement formation.



As Wigger *et al.* (2014) point out, the study of resistance and alternatives is still too often tied to methodological nationalism.

We want to address this weakness in the literature by focusing specifically on the process of *pan-European* social movement formation in this field of political contestation. As we will explain more fully below, we do so by examining the construction of an anti-austerity master frame and its three constitutive elements, namely (a) the rejection of austerity measures, (b) coordinated transnational solidarity, and (c) the defense of democracy and popular sovereignty.

To examine the development of a pan-European counter-hegemonic bloc, we employ the vocabulary of framing theory in connection with a broader neo-Gramscian theoretical orientation, which sees discursive power as key to resistance alongside material struggle. In keeping with our neo-Gramscian theoretical take on political resistance, we insist that discursive evolution does not take place, nor is it susceptible to successful analysis, separately from the material relations of power and the means of organizing counter-power encountered and developed by protest movements. The formation of a counter-hegemonic bloc requires convergence on contesting discourses as much as lasting alliances and transnational solidarity building. We therefore focus on the frame alignment process in pan-European anti-austerity initiatives as reflecting both the discursive and the material dynamics of counter-hegemonic struggles and discuss them in conjunction.

We define anti-austerity protest with Walton and Ragin (1990: 882) and Ancelovici (2015) as “(a) mass actions that (b) specifically address [...] austerity policies (e.g. [...] cuts in government jobs or services), and (c) stem [...] from actions by governments that were strongly urged by international institutions [...] in connection with the debt problem.” We focus empirically on two key initiatives that started and have since maintained a pan-European mobilization process against austerity: the Alter Summit platform and the Blockupy alliance. Blockupy is a mass mobilization for civil disobedience and protest with pan-European involvement. It is based on an alliance originally initiated by German counter-globalization groups, trade unions, and the party *Die Linke* in order to mobilize for a 1-day blockade of the ECB as one protagonist of the Troika. The blockades first took place in 2012 and were repeated in May 2013 and March 2015, accompanied by other methods of public protest. Alter Summit is a platform for trade unions, NGOs, researcher networks, and social movements to create a space for pan-European exchange, discussion, deliberation, and strategizing. It held a first big Europe-wide gathering in Athens in June 2013 and continues to co-organize gatherings and contribute to anti-austerity mobilizations.

We have three reasons for looking at these two particular initiatives. First, both are explicit about the intent to create a pan-European movement against EU austerity management. They are key agents of frame alignment under the banner of anti-austerity in European counter-hegemonic organizing. Second, they are partly interconnected, which offers the possibility to assess the broader dynamics of the



process of discursive pan-Europeanization beyond a single event-based mobilization. Third, together these initiatives come close to constituting the universe of pan-European anti-austerity mobilizing on the ground over the past few years. We could not gain a great deal of analytical traction by additionally studying other, smaller, past, or very recent mobilizations.

Our work on this topic reflects our long-standing research on and involvement in the struggles against neoliberal governance in Europe (Scholl, 2012, 2013; Freyberg-Inan, 2006; Birchfield and Freyberg-Inan, 2004, 2005, 2009). We conduct ethnographic fieldwork on the pan-European struggles against neoliberal austerity measures, have attended the protests and various preparatory meetings of the initiatives discussed here, and monitor the e-mail lists and (social) media sites where these initiatives communicate and coordinate. Moreover, we have systematically collected manifestos, mobilization material, discussion papers, and press releases for the period 2012–2015 in order to analyze the initiatives' discourses.

We proceed as follows. We first lay out a neo-Gramscian theoretical foundation for studying counter-hegemony in times of neoliberal globalization and complement it with the relevant elements of framing theory to provide the analytical apparatus that will be applied in the rest of the paper. We then present the historical context of pan-European movements and their struggles of the past decades to counter neoliberal hegemony, including the more recent rallying around resistance to austerity. This is important to embed the ensuing analysis, which focuses heavily on discursive developments, from the get-go in its material context. It shows, *inter alia*, that current initiatives against austerity policy in Europe are not ephemeral, but build on a history of pan-European networking against the neoliberal direction of the European integration process. We then move on to analyze the construction of the anti-austerity master frame and its three components in two recent pan-European mobilizations which are of key importance for these struggles – Blockupy and Alter Summit. In conclusion, we highlight three challenges pan-European counter-hegemonic movements need to address in future which have become particularly apparent in our analysis: weak convergence on institutional alternatives, the national entrenchment of existing counter-proposals, and the tension between those demanding reform and those pushing for reversal of EU integration.

Understanding Counter-Hegemony and the Importance of Frame Alignment

Neo-Gramscian theory employs the term “hegemony” to refer to a form of power that connects the state to civil society, relies on a combination of force and consent, and is embodied in a great variety of social practices. Hegemony is constructed and sustained if ruling elites succeed in persuading subordinate groups to internalize



their values and partial interests as being legitimate and in the general interest, and its logics of argumentation as “common sense.” In this way, domination does not have to rely on sustained coercion but comes to rely largely on consent. As a result, the maintenance of domination becomes considerably less costly and more likely to be sustainable in the long term.

In this view, ruling elites are not constituted only by representatives of states or capital interests, although both categories play important roles. Rather, hegemony is exercised by an assemblage of national as well as inter- and transnational public and private actors. It reflects, in Cox and Sinclair’s (1996: 151) words, “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities” (see also Klein, 2007). By the same token, the construction of counter-hegemony also depends on a multiplicity of actors (Laclau and Mouffe, 1984; see also Gill, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2004). If hegemony can be understood as ruling elites’ ability to secure their leadership through a combination of consent and coercion, then counter-hegemony designates the capacity of working for change within the hegemonic system, with the aim of overcoming it.

Given the combination of the evident structural and material power of capital and the expanding ideological hold and institutionalization of neoliberalism as a set of ideas and a discourse, neo-Gramscian scholarship perceives the contemporary international political economy as characterized by neoliberal hegemony. Neoliberalism can be defined with Hay (2007: 54) as entailing “a defense of labour-market flexibility and the promotion and nurturing of cost competitiveness; [...] and, more generally, [...] the allocative efficiency of market and quasi-market mechanisms in the provision of public goods.” Austerity policies, as currently propagated in the EU and the bone of contention of the protests investigated below, are understood in this view as a quintessentially neoliberal reaction to financial crises, as they are designed to allow and indeed reinforce the continuation of neoliberal policies as sketched above by passing the costs of crisis onto public budgets and the working classes while avoiding state interventionist or demand-side means for recovery (cf. Gill, 1998).

Gramsci’s (1971) view of power, understood in terms of hegemony and counter-hegemony as a struggle for societal control, is connected to a model of political action through the concept of “historic blocs.” These are the stable, institutionalized relationships between socioeconomic structures and the superstructural realm of ideology, norms, and ideas. They are contingent on the existence of a hegemonic social class. At the international level, historic blocs are constituted by the social relations of production and specific forms of state and world order. From a neo-Gramscian point of view, then, the contemporary global political economic order in general – as well as the European austerity regime in particular – reflect the existence of a neoliberal historic bloc (Cox, 1986; Rupert, 1995; Harvey, 2007; Chomsky, 1999).



Counter-hegemonic forces placing direct pressure on neoliberal actors and alliances can destabilize the neoliberal historic bloc, but such efforts are likely to be successful, at least in liberal democratic settings, only to the extent to which they involve the building up of broad alliances in civil society that support genuine organizational and political alternatives to the status quo (see also Worth, 2016). We have recently examined the capacity of counter-globalization movements to construct effective counter-hegemony and explained their evident weaknesses (Freyberg-Inan and Scholl, 2014; Scholl and Freyberg-Inan, 2013). Here, we focus on anti-austerity protest at the pan-European level as a specific form of protest following up on such counter-globalization organizing. What does it take for such emerging pan-European counter-hegemonic forces to build up broad alliances in civil society that support their critique and visions for change? Here is where framing processes become crucial.

Snow *et al* (1986; Snow and Benford, 1988; see also Snow *et al*, 2014) pioneered the framing perspective for analyzing the social construction and alignment of frames by social movements as a way to spread their visions of society, engage potential constituencies, and build solidarity. They distinguish between diagnostic frames, which offer ways to interpret social reality and the major problems in it, prognostic frames, which suggest solutions to those problems, and motivational frames, which aim to mobilize collective action to implement those solutions. Framing must be understood as a dynamic process by which actors seek to make sense of their changing worlds and simultaneously persuade others to share in their interpretations. The concept of frame alignment describes this process of interconnecting various frames with each other as a way of building up both intellectual resources and broader support. It is therefore an important element in social mobilization and a key ingredient for achieving solidarity (Snow and Benford, 1988). Frame alignment not only allows actors with previously divergent frames to enter into communication and cooperation, but can even support deeper processes of “identity convergence” (Kendrick, 2000, p. 201), which support stable political coalitions. To the extent that frame alignment progresses, in other words, the social movement can gain more as well as more stable support. This, in turn, can be seen as the key resource in what Gramsci termed the “war of position” – the battle for the hearts and minds of civil society. In and across the pan-European anti-austerity protest initiatives we analyze below, the use of an anti-austerity (mainly diagnostic) master frame as well as recurring reference to the struggle for sovereignty of the Greek people are crucial discursive resources facilitating frame alignment.

A master frame is “a generic type of collective action frame that is wider in scope and influence than run-of-the-mill social movement frames” (Benford, 2013; see also Snow and Benford, 1992). Since the original conceptualization of master (or dominant interpretative) frames to account for the puzzling phenomenon of movement success in the face of weak political opportunity structures, a number of



studies have shown that “resonant” master frames can be vital resources for broad-based mobilization, especially in conditions when the audiences targeted are diverse (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992; Noonan, 1995; see also Swart, 1995; Carroll and Ratner, 1996). This is because “a master frame’s articulations and attributions are sufficiently elastic, flexible, and inclusive [...] so that any number of other social movements can successfully adopt and deploy it in their campaigns” (Benford, 2013). In this way, social movement groups become able to connect and form broader coalitions. In our cases of counter-hegemonic organizing, resistance to austerity functions very clearly as such a master frame.

Through a focus on frame alignment, it becomes possible to analyze how social movement actors – in our case the two pan-European initiatives against austerity – try to connect their ideas with potential constituencies and thereby struggle for broader political agreement and transnational solidarity – the key resources in their war of position against neoliberal hegemony. However, our analysis also shows how movements’ framing processes are embedded in their material conditions. The following section will set the stage for the later analysis of contemporary anti-austerity movement discourse by placing pan-European counter-hegemonic organizing in its historical context.

“Another Europe Is possible”: The Historical Context of Pan-European Counter-Hegemonic Organizing

One of the first major summit protests in Europe took place against the 1997 European Council meeting in Amsterdam. As della Porta and Caiani (2007) point out, despite skepticism about the impact of transnational activism, at that time social movements across Europe started a drive for “Europeanization from below.” In the years to follow, mass protests at the half-yearly EU summits held in the country holding the EU presidency created a pan-European dynamic, accelerated by the emerging counter-globalization movement at the end of the 1990s. This dynamic came to a sudden end after the EU decided in 2002 to hold major meetings exclusively in Brussels. Whereas mass protests at the summit meetings of other intergovernmental institutions continued for some years, EU meetings in Brussels remained generally outside the spotlight of the counter-globalization movement and were only occasionally confronted with international trade union and farmer protests (Scholl, 2012: 36–40).

The issues addressed and the diagnostic frames regarding European integration varied in all these protests, and so therefore did the ways in which the mobilizations themselves self-defined. As Flesher Fominaya (2014) observes, these differences have also been related to tensions between autonomous movements and the institutionalized Left. In Amsterdam, opposition largely focused on the features of the emerging EMU. In the following year, the diagnostic frame “Fortress Europe”



became increasingly articulated to criticize the repressive European border and migration control regime. Along with growing counter-globalization critique of nontransparent and undemocratic global governance institutions, the democratic deficit of the EU's institutional network also moved to the center of attention. One specific strand of critique focused on corporate involvement in EU governance, especially through the powerful presence of corporate lobby groups in Brussels (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2011). Finally, more general opposition to the neoliberal restructuring increasingly in evidence across Europe after the 1980s triggered a critique of the EU as a neoliberal project designed to maximize Europe's global competitiveness on disciplinary neoliberal terms without compensating for the loss of the historical achievements of the welfare state (Rucht, 2002).

The first World Social Forum (WSF) in 2001 provided a template for organizing a similar event on the European level (della Porta, 2009; Sen and Waterman, 2004). In 2002, the first ESF took place in Florence, Italy, attracting tens of thousands of participants, followed by ESFs in Paris in 2003 and in London in 2004 with even more participation. The slogan of the ESF equally borrowed from the WSF – announcing that “Another Europe is possible” – and expressed the desire of (parts of) the counter-globalization movement to focus more on the elaboration of alternatives or prognostic framing. Many of the ideas for institutional and policy rearrangements that would later be articulated against austerity measures were discussed at the ESFs. After London, the ESF switched to a biannual modus operandi, taking place in Athens in 2006 and Malmö in 2008. Even though it took place during the unfolding of the financial crisis, Malmö would mark the (provisional) end of the ESF process.

Both EU summit protests and the ESF process provided a context for pan-European networking feeding the creation of a counter-globalization and counter-hegemonic bloc challenging the neoliberal hegemony inscribed in the EU. These networks also fed into other processes, such as other ongoing summit protest mobilizations, for example those against the G8, the EuroMayday movement, or the climate justice movement (Scholl, 2013). The specific networks often fell apart after the mobilization for a specific protest event, but also quickly re-assembled under different names soon after, often involving the same activists and similar organizations. This period of pan-European networking embedded in the “transnationalism from below” practiced by the broader counter-globalization movement produced a “cross-European communicative space in between activists” (Doerr and Mattoni, 2007: 2) and was therefore an important step toward the later development of pan-European movements which could maintain some stability.

As della Porta *et al* (2006: 74) have laid out, the counter-globalization movement with its critique of neoliberalism has created a powerful master frame that enables all kinds of social movements to link their specific struggles to this broader cause, thus building *common* cause. In the language of framing theory, the master frame of contesting neoliberalism provides a potential resource for all mechanisms of frame



alignment, but in particular for the bridging of previously separate discourses via the same master frame which is ideologically coherent with them all. As we show in this contribution, a few years later, an anti-austerity master frame would begin to function in a similar way to rally resistance in Europe.

In 2008, when the evidence of a global financial crisis became overwhelming, counter-hegemonic organizing in Europe, however, first suffered a setback, as the movements in place failed to provide a strategic response. Although the crisis seemed to confirm many of the economic critiques articulated in the 10 years before, the movements seemed to be largely absent as a political force. Elsewhere (Freyberg-Inan and Scholl, 2014; Scholl and Freyberg-Inan, 2013), we argue that the mass protests at summit meetings and democratic deliberation experiments at social forums had in good part failed to prepare the ground for such an ideological formation due to three techniques applied by hegemonic forces: insulation, co-optation, and securitization. Other accounts focusing on movement-internal factors (Stephen, 2009; Worth and Buckley, 2009; Gibson, 2008) corroborate our claim that at the outset of the financial crisis, not much remained of the earlier pan-European protest dynamics. Although occasionally strong protests and resistance started to emerge in the countries that were most hit by the crisis and the subsequent austerity measures, they were largely directed at national governments, and for many years, a pan-European movement against the EU's austerity management remained out of sight.

Frame Alignment in Pan-European Anti-Austerity Protest

Contextualizing Blockupy and Alter Summit

2013 saw the emergence of an intriguing trio of pan-European initiatives: the second wave of the Blockupy actions against the European Central Bank in Frankfurt; the Alter Summit pan-European meeting in early June (with a smaller previous Florence 10+10 Meeting in 2012 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the first ESF); and a mobilization against the EU Spring summit in Brussels called "For a European Spring." Whereas Blockupy prefers alliances to the looser organizational form of the network, "For a European Spring" remained essentially a network, in spite of the explicit attempt to continue mobilizing against EU summits. As this initiative petered out, becoming partly embedded in the other two, it will not be further analyzed here. Alter Summit is explicitly designed as a semi-open platform for cooperation, but has some built-in forms of more continuous commitment, such as the call, the manifesto, and country and regional coordination.²

These initiatives are not the only attempts by social movements to create pan-European answers to EU austerity management. However, they are prominent in the current constellation and have the potential to carry on and expand. Other



international European mobilizations have for the most part taken place within a specifically southern European dynamic with little potential to become truly pan-European, such as the European general strike on 14 November 2012, or the Agora99 meetings on Debts, Rights, and Democracy in 2012 and 2013. Others lasted only a short time, such as the Troika Party that critically accompanied the 2014 EP elections and the previously mentioned “For a European Spring” mobilizations, or were focused on a single action, such as the campaign for a European New Deal.

Blockupy is an alliance initiated in Germany comprising different (in the beginning mainly German) counter-globalization networks, trade unions, and the German left-wing party *Die Linke*. The name combines references to blockading, a tactic often used in counter-globalization protests (Scholl, 2012), and occupying, the chosen tactic of the Occupy movement. The Blockupy logo includes a third symbol, a flag referring to demonstrations. These are the three tactics the Blockupy protests try to combine. So far, Blockupy has organized three such combined protest events in Frankfurt. At the first Blockupy action against the European Central Bank in 2012, thousands of people defied a last-minute ban on all protests, occupied two central squares, and were corralled by riot police for several hours. During the attempted blockades, the next morning 1000–2000 protesters participated; the day after, about 30,000 people joined the demonstration. For the next action, a Blockupy International structure was created on the model of the German alliance; it organized European assemblies and action conferences, enlarging the pan-European dimension of the alliance. In 2013, although the ECB was again protected by huge fences and a massive police presence, several thousand protesters managed to reach and surround the fences, blocking all access. The general rally attracted about 20,000 participants.

The Blockupy alliance announced further protests for late 2014, when the ECB had originally planned to move to its new offices in another part of Frankfurt.³ In order to keep momentum and address the 2014 elections for the European Parliament, a call for a “May of Solidarity” was circulated. This call to “build democracy from below” alongside the EU elections, however, did not result in any major action. Since the ECB postponed the opening ceremony of its new building, Blockupy held a “festival” in November 2014 to continue networking and discussions on collective strategies and framing, alongside some protests against the ECB. Around 600 visitors participated. The third Blockupy protests took place at the official opening of the new ECB building on 18 March 2015. Blockading actions resulted in confrontations with police. The peaceful demonstration attracted around 20,000 participants.

Alter Summit is an initiative that started in 2011 with a “Joint Social Conference” of various European trade unions and social movements and now also involves NGOs, research networks, and cultural and political personalities from at least 21 European countries. This semi-open platform is organized through



international meetings and national and regional coordination based upon a shared call and a regular general assembly.

After the official launch at the Firenze 10+10 meeting, the first large-scale gathering took place in Athens in June 2013. About one thousand people attended this “European Alternative Summit” and participated in one of the many thematic assemblies, focusing, for example, on health, housing, social rights, or feminism. Although much smaller in size, the initiative clearly follows the tradition of ESFs, yet also seeks to mark a difference with a different name and process. The slogan also marks this dis/continuity by demanding “Another Europe Now” instead of asserting that “Another Europe is Possible.” The explicit aim, linking three prognostic frames, is to build a “unified movement for a democratic, social, and ecological Europe.”

Alter Summit also used the 2014 ATTAC Summer academy in France as a space for exchange. On that occasion, the activists decided to use the broader trade union involvement to organize a debate focused on the role of trade unions during the then upcoming Blockupy festival in Frankfurt. Shortly afterward, in December 2014, Alter Summit contributed to the D19–20 mobilizations for an encirclement of the EU district during a meeting of the European Commission. The Alter Summit process has also found continuation in related thematic networks, for example the European Network Against Privatization and Commercialization of Health and Social Protection.

The Construction of the Anti-Austerity Master Frame

Anti-austerity as a master frame for pan-European movements is the result of a framing process in which various actors strive to integrate existing and emerging frames from ongoing mobilizations. The actors in our two cases have demonstrated considerable self-reflexivity about the processual dynamics and broader context of such attempts. In their own words, Blockupy brings together

various social movement activists, altermondialists, migrants, jobless, precarious and industry workers, party members and unionists and many more from many different European countries, who want to connect our struggles and powers beyond nation-state lines. Together we want to create a common European movement, united in diversity, which can break the rule of austerity and will start to build democracy and solidarity from below. Blockupy and the actions in Frankfurt are only one step along this way.⁴

At the first Blockupy protests in 2012, the initial plan of approaching the ECB from various sides with five thematic marches proved untenable given the ban and the high police numbers (9000 agents recruited from all over Germany). The different frames of each original march – for climate justice, against borders, against militarism, against the privatization of health care, and against precarious



labor conditions – and their connections to the anti-austerity master frame thus remained largely invisible. In 2013, a variety of interventions in the city of Frankfurt combined to enable frame-bridging between the master frame critique of austerity measures and the frames focusing on migration control, child labor, and precarious working conditions.

Following attempts at a “May of Solidarity” in 2015, Blockupy organized another pan-European meeting, this time in Brussels with 100–150 participants from 50 different organizations, groups, and networks, to start planning protests against the upcoming opening of the new ECB building. During that meeting, it was made explicit that the diverse movements Blockupy tries to bring together still needed to work on frame alignment:

We agreed to continue and to deepen the discourse between our groups, organizations and networks to develop our own – meaningful – agenda. This of course does not mean ‘We all do the same’, but to find a frame/connecting points for our heterogeneous struggles to be taken up by our and other networks with the objective to build a stronger common process of resistance.⁵

Alter Summit brings together civil society organizations and social movements from across Europe to exchange experiences and ideas, collaborate, and develop collective strategies and actions for the future.⁶ A flyer used to spread Alter Summit’s agenda for the year 2014 lists three priorities: (1) No to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the EU and the US! (2) No to the Troika and to the austerity policies of the EU! (3) Stop the surge of the extreme right!⁷ While the second priority represents the heart of anti-austerity protest, the third reflects a link between anti-austerity protest and resistance against the right. This linkage has become ubiquitous in anti-austerity discourse, especially since the 2014 European Parliament elections.⁸ The first connects with the then hottest item on the broader counter-hegemonic agenda in Europe – resistance to the TTIP and CETA.

Alter Summit expresses the intention to work “towards a European Front against Austerity and for Democracy”⁹ – directly expressing a full conjunction of the two master frame elements of anti-austerity and pro-democracy discussed below. It was also involved in the preparations for mobilizations at the COP21 Sustainable Innovation Forum in Paris in December 2015 and, in this way, contributed to bridging anti-austerity and climate justice frames. Here we can observe once again the general dynamic by which anti-austerity increasingly functions as a master frame that links with other social movement frames, most notably the defense of popular sovereignty and democracy, but also open borders and migrant rights, and climate justice. In the following three subsections, we analyze the three elements that constitute the anti-austerity master frame.



Rejection of Austerity Measures

The first element is the most obvious and common denominator: the rejection of austerity measures imposed by the so-called Troika in collaboration with national governments. We can observe increasing frame alignment within and across the pan-European protest initiatives against EU austerity management. Resistance to austerity functions as a master frame which enables the linking up of other progressive social movement frames, thus broadening the support base for anti-austerity protest. It is reflected in slogans such as “We don’t pay for your crisis,” used in several mobilizations to oppose public spending cuts that compensate for the bailout of banks. “Together with the people in Southern Europe we say: ‘Don’t owe, don’t pay!’ and resist the rehabilitation of capitalism on the backs of employees as well as unemployed, retirees, migrants and the youth.”¹⁰ Austerity measures are criticized as “socially destructive,” “economically absurd,” and “democratically suicidal,”¹¹ in a manner which invites the alignment of frames in defense of the welfare state, social justice, left-wing economic alternatives, as well as popular sovereignty and democracy. The counter-hegemonic movement discourse insists on re-framing austerity measures as a political choice as opposed to an inevitable necessity: “Austerity is not unavoidable, something that we all have to suffer through; it’s a political choice taken by the EU and many member state governments.”¹² This insistence on the possibility of alternatives opens up space for the formulation and alignment of prognostic frames which ask for the cancelation of all austerity-related EU treaties and connect this to demands for tax justice, a socio-ecological transition, and the protection of public services.¹³

The collective drafting of a manifesto has been an essential part of Alter Summit’s organizing. Given the proactive focus on developing alternatives in this pan-European initiative, the manifesto cleverly pushes the alignment of frames that work across Europe. Two of its four major elements clearly express the rejection of austerity measures: (1) the rejection of “debt slavery” in the form of debt being passed on to society’s weakest members and used to push through neoliberal measures; (2) the demand for a rollback of austerity measures and the simultaneous re-prioritization of social and ecological values.

Coordinated Transnational Solidarity

The second key element of anti-austerity as master frame is coordinated transnational solidarity as the proper response to the EU-wide austerity measures. From the outset, the Blockupy alliance emphasized their task of carrying the strong resistance in southern Europe into the heart of the austerity regime: Germany, and Frankfurt as the seat of the ECB, one of the key actors of the Troika. One of the participating networks, the Interventionist Left, reflects on the first Blockupy



protest: “Blockupy 2012 [...] attempted to connect the social movements in Germany with the mass protests of southern Europe. [...] But this gesture of solidarity with the occupations and strikes in southern Europe was also a conscious attempt to strengthen the resistance against the corporate crisis regime in Germany.”¹⁴ A number of preparatory meetings created the space to develop lessons from the first attempt, adapt some of the tactical elements, and, through a Blockupy International structure paralleling the German alliance and organizing European assemblies and action conferences, enlarge the pan-European dimension of the alliance. One of these meetings was combined with the Agora 99 gatherings on Debts, Rights, and Democracy in 2012 in order to coordinate different anti-austerity protests. Some activists from the Blockupy alliance also participated in the “For a European Spring” actions, and a caravan from the Blockupy protests made its way to the Alter Summit in Athens, making various stops throughout Europe to protest and mobilize against the EU austerity management. The mobilization for the 2013 Blockupy action thus became purposely embedded in a larger dynamic of pan-European gatherings and mobilizations, offering possibilities for frame alignment and building a truly pan-European counter-hegemonic bloc between northern European and southern European social movements.

Engagement with electoral politics and their promise for challenging the EU’s austerity management intensified after Syriza’s electoral success in January 2015. Here, after all, was an elected government which sided largely with the anti-austerity movement’s demands, representing a people whose struggle symbolized the movement’s diagnosis. In February, Blockupy participated in the European Action Days in Solidarity with Greece. In a separate call, it framed the mobilization against the upcoming ECB opening as part of the Greeks’ struggle against the Troika:

We also need to make a move. On March 18th we can take to the streets and clearly show that resistance to the unreasonable demands of the crises regime is more necessary than ever before; that we can recognize ourselves in the struggles of the Greek movements for a better life for everyone. In doing so, we will actively position ourselves against all nationalistic and racist actors. We need to make the protests in Frankfurt on March 18th large, not just because the ECB in Frankfurt stands for the reign of the European elites, but because the crisis is also taking place here [in Germany] and there is no alternative. We are taking on the challenge. Now.¹⁵

This linkage between solidarity with Greece (and other austerity-oppressed societies), invoking a defense of popular sovereignty and democracy frame as further discussed below, and protest against European austerity policy was then also clearly reflected in the protests themselves on 18 March 2015, when the new ECB building was finally opened. Syriza was the first participating organization to speak at the large public event on Frankfurt’s central square, the Römer. Later, the



Theodorakis Ensemble played, and many Greek flags and countless banners and placards referring to the Greek struggle strengthened the sense of immediate connection.

The Blockupy alliance was also one of the key organizers of the week of anti-austerity mobilization for Greece (20–27 June 2015). The first day of this week of protest coincided with World Refugee Day. Here coordinated transnational solidarity was explicitly connected to the frame of open borders and migrants' rights:

With our friends and comrades in Greece we know that the outcome of the ongoing battle against austerity matters to all of us. We also know in the light of the continuous attacks to people's lives that we can't remain spectators, but need to intervene, confront, and continue to practice our freedom just as migrants who everyday fight against the border regime and for their rights. Democracy and solidarity are borderless: there is no debt that can blackmail our present, no frontier that can establish who is citizen and who is not!¹⁶

The electoral success in Greece and the subsequent principled actions of the Syriza government gave a new impulse to the mobilization and framing efforts of both Alter Summit and Blockupy. Alter Summit continues its broad and open engagement with other pan-European initiatives. The ongoing WSF process has been one of its core spaces of engagement. The 2014 WSF convergence assembly on Greece declared that "the future of the Peoples of Europe is linked with the future of the Greek people." The report on the convergence assembly to the 2015 WSF was entitled "Greek Wind Blowing: support to Greek people fighting against austerity, for democracy and social change."¹⁷ Here we see clearly how the case of Greece brings together the frames of anti-austerity and defense of popular sovereignty and democracy in the service of an agenda for progressive policy change.

In May 2015, a meeting of European social, trade union, and political movements called by several European networks including Alter Summit took place in Athens. Under the slogan "Building another Europe – The time to act is now!" more than 60 people representing 40 organizations met for several days to discuss pan-European perspectives in the light of Greece's attempts to assert itself against its creditors. The final declaration states:

The Greek struggle is our struggle: We will try to link the "Greek question" – since we all are concerned and the demands of the Greek people and government are convergent with the movements' aims to change Europe – as a transversal question with all the struggles, movements and initiatives taking place during the next 2 months all over Europe. A call coming from Greece and a common logo will be the supports for this inter-linked campaign.¹⁸



Defense of Democracy and Popular Sovereignty

The third and final key element of the anti-austerity master frame affirms democracy as a focal point for a political project against and beyond austerity. The affirmation and prefiguration of popular empowerment linked to this discourse and the associated movement practices also serve to locate the initiatives discussed here within the category of “pragmatically prefigurative” disruptive agency as discussed by Bailey *et al* (2016).

The experience of police repression led Blockupy to reflect on the broader interlinkages between the neoliberal management of the crisis and the shift toward authoritarian forms of politics:

Because of this intertwining of authoritarianism and neoliberal crisis politics, the resistance against the social effects of these politics, against immiseration and the hopelessness into which millions of people are plunged, and the resistance against the curtailing of democratic rights also necessarily belong together. They want capitalism without democracy, we want democracy without capitalism.¹⁹

The connection made here and in many other statements between neoliberal hegemony and an assault on democratic self-determination is highly significant, for at least two reasons. One, it links the defense of popular sovereignty and democracy as a highly popular prognostic and motivational frame to the anti-austerity diagnostic master frame. Two, it facilitated the rise of references to Greece as a discursive catalyst for frame alignment. The political battle of Syriza and associated forces in Greece, and to a lesser extent of similar movements of resistance in other European crisis economies, have been referred to again and again to activate the connection between resistance to austerity and defense of democracy.

One of the key demands of Alter Summit’s Manifesto is a reinvigoration of democratic rule, including in economic policy domains and banking. These different critiques and alternative proposals are brought together under the umbrella of the anti-austerity master frame with a focus on the element of struggle for popular sovereignty and democracy. In a 2014 flyer²⁰ Alter Summit specifies three slogans which in combination exemplify these linkages: stop debt slavery; for an ecological and social Europe: no to austerity; and for economic democracy: put the banks to the service of public interest. A key demand is the call for political control over banks and financial institutions in order to avoid such excesses as those that led to the crisis. More regulation of the banking and financial sector is seen as crucial for the public interest argument, for example through a ban on speculation using money from ordinary savings and giro accounts, the separation of commercial and investment banking, and the abolition of tax havens. Higher taxes



for those with high incomes, and especially transnational corporations, are also seen as an intrinsic part of bringing about economic justice.

The anti-austerity master frame has thus become aligned to a highly popular prognostic and motivational frame in defense of popular sovereignty and democracy. Austerity policy is presented as being imposed on peoples across Europe, especially in the South, and most especially on Greece, against the expressed preferences of the popular sovereign. In this manner, the struggles for popular sovereignty, for democracy, and against austerity, have merged. References to the coming to power of Syriza in Greece, and the struggle of the Greek government since, have served as an important catalyst for the stronger integration of those frames. They have also served to support the alignment of the frame of struggle against right-wing gains in the wake of crisis, as Greece has – alongside many other countries – of course also witnessed a surge in right-wing activity in the context of austerity politics. In this sense, it has become a microcosm of the darkest fears as well as the highest hopes of anti-austerity activism in Europe.

Challenges for a Pan-European Counter-Hegemonic Bloc

The findings presented in this paper underline how processes of frames alignment feed into the creation of a broad counter-hegemonic bloc. The frame alignment processes we have observed, linking Blockupy and Alter Summit, are, in this sense, tentative yet hopeful signs for the development of counter-hegemonic capacity in Europe. Newer initiatives, like European Alternatives or Diem25, can and do build on these foundations. However, our analysis also sheds light on three linked strategic challenges that currently face anti-austerity activism: the lack of agreement on concrete institutional alternatives, the national entrenchment of existing counter-proposals, and the tension between exit from versus reform of the EU. We will sketch these to indicate where future research on European counter-hegemonic organizing might usefully focus.

First, the extent to which they should push for more concrete proposals for alternative institutional arrangements and policy, i.e., alignment in prognostic framing, is up for discussion within anti-austerity initiatives. At one of the workshops held in the context of the Blockupy conference in November 2013, this question was directly addressed. Many participants felt that a process of collective identity formation should precede the push for more concrete proposals, to help ensure that none of the groups involved in the alliance would be lost and to protect the participatory and democratic (prefigurative) nature of its political process. It was therefore a strategic decision to settle instead for supporting the three broad concepts “the commons, democracy and solidarity.” This can be read as a strategic decision to walk the fine line between risking shrinking activist numbers after deliberative closure, on the one side, and failure to develop concrete alternatives,



on the other. But whether such a course is sustainable or desirable in the longer term is unclear.

Second, we can see that despite an alignment of diagnostic and even general prognostic frames regarding the EU austerity regime among a relatively broad variety of actors across borders, concrete proposals for alternatives, to the extent that they do emerge, still tend to remain entrenched in national perspectives and vague about the European dimension of governance. For example, by protesting against the ECB and EU summits, Blockupy and Alter Summit identify key players and arenas in which EU austerity management takes shape and where social movements can intervene in order to push for a stop and reversal of austerity policies. Blockupy sees its actions as an explicit attempt to counter the power of the so-called Troika (now Quadriga). Nevertheless, it is clear that many austerity measures are implemented by national governments and will, therefore, have to be reversed at the national level. The pan-European anti-austerity initiatives are engaged in debates on how to relate to these various national processes and to left-wing political parties. Whereas a role for the EU is to some extent invoked in terms of general policy guidelines, a good part of the necessary reforms for implementing greater economic democracy, social justice, and sustainability are perceived as the preserve of the national level. For example, public control of the banking sector is usually discussed as a question of nationalization. In the ubiquitous references to the case of Greece, we can also see that while the critique of the EU's treatment of Greece is broadly shared, the solution typically suggested is to "liberate" Greece to let the country redefine its course on the national level. In short, we can see that while problems are quite clearly seen as emerging from the European (or even a higher) level of governance, the solutions are still largely envisioned on a national scale, and there is a scarcity of clear plans for re-programming institutional and policy setups at higher levels.

This links to a third strategic challenge: that of reconciling conflicting tendencies within the European counter-hegemonic movements that want to either re-found or exit from the EU. Plans for a re-foundation of European integration, such as forwarded by the now prominent Diem25, call for a reversal of neoliberal policy and a stronger prioritization of social values. They tend to be basically neo-Keynesian in design. While Keynesianism grew from the liberal political economic tradition, its principles are not compatible with neoliberalism, which defines itself in explicit opposition to Keynesian principles. Therefore, Keynesian alternatives might today be considered counter-hegemonic, even if they are not radical in the sense of rejecting capitalism altogether. This is a potential problem for the European counter-hegemonic movements, as the anti-capitalist elements of counter-hegemonic opposition are difficult to align with Keynesian reformism. The likely (and indeed observable) result is a chronic division of counter-hegemonic critique. Moreover, there are tendencies within the pan-European initiatives discussed here that clearly reject the entire EU project and do not believe



that it can or should be re-founded. Instead, they call for a decentralized institutional design. Activists embracing decentralization are often suspicious of proposals to reform the EU.

Whether and how these conflicting tendencies within pan-European counter-hegemonic initiatives can be held together is still unclear. What is obvious is that the tensions between them will at least initially only be intensified by attempts at a stronger alignment of prognostic frames suggesting concrete EU-level institutional and policy alternatives. The battle for the hearts and minds of European civil society continues.

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Notes

- 1 See for example the special issue of *Social Movement Studies* edited by Pickerill and Krinsky (2012).
- 2 The recently emerged Diem25 movement appears to be taking a similar form. See <https://diem25.org/>.
- 3 For a long time, the ECB kept the date of its planned move secret – a fact that is surely owed in good part to fear of being confronted by protest and physical obstructions while on the move. Public visits to the Bank by visitor groups – until the move an integral part of the Bank’s operation – have also been suspended.



- 4 Blockupy, “Let’s Take Over The Party!” on: <https://blockupy.org/en/4344/call-march-18th-2015-transnational-actions-against-the-european-central-banks-opening-gala-lets-take-over-the-party> (last accessed 8 June 2015).
- 5 Blockupy, “Minutes of the Brussels Assembly – ‘Building together a transnational space for an Europe from below’ on September 26th/27th 2014” on: <http://blockupy.org/3967/minutes-of-the-brussels-assembly-buildi...nsnational-space-for-an-europe-from-below-on-sept-26th27th-2014> (last accessed 7 August 2015).
- 6 This process faces similar dangers as the ESF, due to internal hierarchies between large and well-funded organizations and smaller groups or resource-poor grassroots movements. Besides different organizational traditions and tactical repertoires, they also have different agendas and therefore frames. The frequently expressed critique that bigger, better-funded NGOs and/or trade unions have taken over various social forums (see for example Hudig and Dowling, 2010) indicates that the latter may be better equipped to impose their framings on such gatherings.
- 7 On <http://www.altersummit.eu/IMG/pdf/alterangl.pdf> (last accessed 28 August 2015).
- 8 Worth (2016) sheds light on why this linkage is politically important.
- 9 Alter Summit, “Week of action ‘With the Greeks against austerity’: 20–26th of June,” on: <http://www.altersummit.eu/accueil/article/week-of-action-with-the-greeks?lang=en> (last accessed 7 August 2015).
- 10 See for example Blockupy’s 2013 “Call to Action” on: <http://blockupy.org/en/call-for-action/> (last accessed on 7 August 2015).
- 11 Alter Summit, “Another Europe Now,” flyer on: http://www.eufagligt.dk/images/uploads/flyer_ENG_presentation.pdf (last accessed on 28 August 2015).
- 12 On: <http://forauropeanspring.org> (last accessed on 6 December 2013).
- 13 Alter Summit manifesto on: <http://www.altersummit.eu/manifeste/article/the-manifesto?lang=en> (last accessed 28 August 2015).
- 14 Interventionist Left, “Waiting no more. Staying in movement. Blockupy 2013,” on: <https://blockupy.org/en/1292/waiting-no-more-staying-in-movement-blockupy-2013/> (last accessed 7 August 2015).
- 15 Blockupy coordinating committee, “Instead of a comment: Let’s make our choice. #18 M” – on: <https://blockupy.org/en/4695/instead-of-a-comment-lets-make-our-choice-18m/> (last accessed on 7 August 2015).
- 16 Blockupy International, “Athens, Blockupy, and Europe: democracy and solidarity are borderless,” on: <http://blockupy.org/en/6057/athens-blockupy-and-europe-democracy-and-solidarity-are-borderless/> (accessed 7 August 2015).
- 17 Convergence Assembly, “Building another Europe – The Time to Act is Now!” On: <https://fsm2015.org/en/article/2015/04/08/convergence-assembly-building-another-europe-time-act-now> (last accessed 7 August 2015).
- 18 Alter Summit, “Week of action ‘With the Greeks against austerity’: 20–26th of June,” on: <http://www.altersummit.eu/accueil/article/week-of-action-with-the-greeks?lang=en> (last accessed 7 August 2015). The linkages thus established between a broad and broadening pan-European movement for another Europe and the struggle of the Greek government against EU policy dictates have to some extent been taken up and echoed in Greek civil society. “Call for a European Bottom Up Mobilization, From Movements of Greece,” on: <http://www.change4all.eu/change-in-greece/detail/call-for-a-european-bottom-up-mobilization-from-movements-of-greece.html> (accessed 7 August 2015).
- 19 Blockupy coordinating committee, “They want capitalism without democracy, we want democracy without capitalism,” on: <http://blockupy.org/en/2109/they-want-capitalism-without-democracy-we-want-democracy-without-capitalism/> (last accessed on 7 August 2015).
- 20 On <http://www.altersummit.eu/IMG/pdf/alterangl.pdf> (last accessed 28 August 2015).



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