Contentious politics in the EU

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Introduction: contentious politics in contemporary Europe

Contentious politics in the EU takes a variety of forms, from the highly visible mass protests holding European Councils to siege to apparently banal petitions. This chapter will provide an overview of the contentious politics that has targeted the EU since the beginning of the millennium, describing specific cases and actors to illustrate the different forms of contentious politics that have arisen at various combinations of territorial levels.

A focus on contentious politics in the EU as a polity-in-the-making is particularly important in the light of the role social movements played in the development of European nation-states. Charles Tilly has shown how these groups gradually came to direct their demands towards national governments as the modern nation-states emerged (e.g. Tilly 1984; Marks and McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1996). Paradoxically, this shift was critical in legitimizing the rise of national polities, linking the emergence of the national social movement in Western Europe to the advent of electoral democracy. Research on the labour movement, for example, has stressed its contribution to the development of democracy and social rights between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries (Bendix 1996). Thus, the potential role of contentious politics in transforming the EU into a less distant and incomprehensible institution, or even in decreasing its democratic deficit, represents an important avenue of research.

One might also expect that contentious politics will increase deliberation within the EU (Eder and Trenz 2008: 172). The collective claims-making observed in the cases we will describe fosters strong publics that have provoked deliberation in EU institutions and contributes to the formation of new epistemic communities among citizens (ibid.). Contentious politics are also important in terms of their contributions to transnational participation and citizenship. In groups that are dependent on their members’ expertise, carry out campaign actions at both EU and national levels, and employ both conventional and contentious actions, proper member participation can be achieved (Kohler-Koch 2008: 264).

This chapter will provide an overview of the different types of contentious politics in the EU. We begin with some examples of contentious politics that have taken place very much within the auspices of the EU, where transnational movements and organizations have targeted specific policies and legislation. These examples involve an interesting mix of contentious politics
and actions that are much more traditionally ingrained in the EU institutional sphere. Although this type of contentious politics is perhaps less visible in television and print media reports than the more spectacular examples we will later address, it has been shown to have demonstrable effects on EU policy (della Porta and Parks 2013). Specifically, we investigate the involvement of trade unions and environmental groups in campaigns focused on EU policy. After exploring these examples, we move on to describe the global justice movement and its protests at European summits, which has been the most visible type of mass protest at the European level. We then examine the European social forums that grew out of the global justice movement, before ending our overview of contentious politics in the EU with some observations about the recent Occupy and Indignados protests. Although these recent movements are not obviously EU oriented, in our view their focus on global democracy and popular disappointment in the EU’s neo-liberal agenda are important.

Contentious politics within the EU

As mentioned above, social movements and protest played a significant role in the development of European nation-states, shifting their attention to the national level as power migrated there. Following this logic, such movements should also be important in the development of the European Union (EU), again shifting their focus in parallel with the transfer of power from the national to the supranational level. In other words, the EU, like other intergovernmental organizations, has altered the landscape of opportunities available to social movements. If changes in the power structure provided the impetus for the emergence of national social movements from their earlier and more parochial incarnations, then a similar ‘scaling up’ could reasonably be expected to accompany the transfer of power to the EU (e.g. Tarrow 1995). There is indeed evidence of a surge in European-level associations that supports this idea. In particular, following the extension of the EU’s competences that resulted from the Single European Act of 1986, the number of European public interest groups increased exponentially (Lahusen 2004; Mazey and Richardson 1993). However, as multi-level structures, it has been argued that the supranational EU institutions generally discourage contentious politics in the form of protest (Marks and McAdam 1999). Although the mass protests of the global justice movement at various EU summits would appear to belie this theory, it does seem to be applicable in the case of specific policies and legislation. In particular, this is due to the lack of resources of the EU Commission and Parliament and the consequent openness of these institutions to the advice and contributions of a wide range of civil society groups (not least because of the democratic legitimacy that may be derived from such consultation processes).¹

This model does not always hold, but contentious politics at the EU level has certainly exhibited characteristics that differ from the images of mass protest commonly evoked by discussions of contentious politics. To begin with, there have certainly been fewer protests targeting the EU than protests targeting national states. Imig and Tarrow find low but increasing levels of EU protest between 1984 and 1997 (Imig and Tarrow 2001), while Uba and Uggla identify bursts of protest activity corresponding with events that increase the public discussion of the Union, such as treaty changes and enlargement, between 1992 and 2007 (Uba and Uggla 2011).

In order to illustrate contentious politics within the EU, we will focus on two distinct groups of organizations that campaign to influence EU policy and legislation. Of course, the resulting picture does not come close to conveying the range of contentious politics taking place in this arena, but these groups do provide instructive and contrasting examples. The first group is the trade union movement, which in recent years has used more contentious approaches to great
effect. These cases are interesting precisely because transnational EU protest on specific issues is rare, and they are significant because these successful examples may herald changes in how campaigning happens in this arena. The second group is the environmental movement, which has exhibited a tendency to supplement its scientific and lobbying efforts with media-friendly ‘stunts’ with less mass involvement. Both camps have found success at the EU level – the trade union movement in more recent years, and the environmental movement at earlier stages.

**The European trade union movement**

Throughout the EU, trade unions have been engaged in contentious politics for a very long time. Farmers’ unions in particular have been active on issues concerning the Common Agricultural Policy, sometimes resorting to road blocks and other highly contentious methods. Eurostrikes involving members working for multinational companies coordinated by national unions have also taken place. Covering the entire spectrum of trade union activism in the EU is not possible here, and therefore we focus on examples of contentious EU-level trade union episodes that we believe are particularly noteworthy. The literature has generally considered trade union organization at the EU level to be weak (Gajewska 2008; Martin and Ross 2001).

The principal organization here is the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which is a federation of national trade unions. Founded in 1973, long after the formation of a similar federation by employers in 1958, the group only began to come into its own as a vehicle for representing workers’ points of view on European-level legislation in 1991. This owed much to the activism of the Delors Commission, which provided considerable funding for the ETUC. Nevertheless, divisions between member unions, which range from Christian Democrat to Communist, have often represented an obstacle to the organization’s development of transnational positions (Balme and Chabanet 2002: 66). In 1991, the ETUC became an official legislative player alongside the UNICE in the social dialogue. The joint texts of the actors involved in the social dialogue (where agreement is achieved) take the place of Commission proposals for relevant legislation. The social partners also act as privileged interlocutors on a host of other non-legislative issues in this area.

However, in recent years, some members of the ETUC have begun to question whether exclusively institutional involvement in EU processes through the social dialogue is the best way forward. This new direction for the organization is particularly evident in its involvement in a coordinating role in the campaign against the directive on services in the internal market (better known as the ‘Bolkestein Directive’).

The draft of the Bolkestein Directive was presented by the European Commission, the EU’s executive body, in January 2004. This came as a shock to the ETUC and other unions organized at the EU level, as no consultations had been held during its drafting (thus calling into question the ETUC’s role in the social dialogue). The main point of contention in the draft was the ‘Country of Origin Principle’, whereby member-state companies providing services in other states of the EU would only have to abide by the laws in place in their home country, not those of the country where they provided the service. This, the unions argued, would lead to a ‘race to the bottom’ in social protection by governments seeking to make their own companies more competitive, and would also have serious repercussions on issues such as the right to strike and collective wage agreements. In their eagerness to quickly respond to the draft, the unions at the EU level bypassed their usual, rather lengthy consultation procedures; this move gave the campaign more synergy than is often the case where positions must be painstakingly negotiated among scores of member unions. The Belgian member of the ETUC also sensitized the Belgian Socialist Party to the controversy, prompting that party’s research institute to launch an
extremely successful online petition entitled ‘Stop Bolkestein’, which also sparked a number of email campaigns and protests. Protest played an important part in the campaign, alongside a targeted lobbying initiative. Lobbying tasks were divided among the participating unions and continued throughout the campaign in order to prioritize the directive on the agenda of the European Parliament (EP). Protests took place at the EU level in November 2004, March 2005 and February 2006, and member unions and social movement groups also staged numerous protests in the member states. The EP finally voted to substantially amend the directive in February 2006, removing the Country of Origin Principle.

Although many notable circumstances contributed to the success of this campaign (stemming primarily from the debate over the Constitutional Treaty, which focused the attention of the public on the EU, facilitating mobilization), the fact that EU-level trade unions had mobilized in a contentious way and, to some extent, succeeded in blocking a move towards greater liberalization in the EU was significant.

In another somewhat similar episode of EU-level contention, trade unions were also successful in their contentious politics against the proposed ports directive on two occasions. In the case of the first ports directive, launched in February 2001, trade unions were excluded from initial consultations by the European Commission. Again, unions perceived potentially serious problems with the draft text concerning employment and social problems, as well as environmental and safety concerns. Protests were prominent and occasionally violent during the campaign, which ended when the EP rejected the draft proposal outright – a highly unusual outcome, particularly in the light of the fact that the text had already progressed to conciliation (where the EP and Council members generally work out a joint text together following two failed readings). An even more contentious campaign followed in 2004 and 2005 when the European Commission relaunched the ports directive with a text not based on the conciliation agreement. This time, the opposition was even more widespread, including industry organizations as well as the unions, with unions blocking ports in several European countries before the vote in the EP. Again, the EP rejected the directive outright. At the time of writing, the Commission has passed yet another Regulation on ports to the EP and Council.

Again, in this case there were other important circumstances that facilitated the success of the campaign, not least the activism of the EP (which had also been an important factor in the Bolkestein campaign). However, these examples are particularly interesting with respect to contentious politics in the EU, as they indicate that protest can be fruitfully employed in campaigns on very specific pieces of EU legislation. Bieler (2011: 178) suggests that the structure of the EU makes combinations of lobbying or advocacy and protest of this sort much more likely to succeed in halting neo-liberal restructuring, citing these very cases, while Parks (2009) argues that a more nuanced view of the political opportunities provided by the EU (sensitive to territorial levels and institutions) suggests that protest combined with lobbying offers the most comprehensive approach to campaigning in this transnational arena. Contentious politics takes many different forms, however, and it is not necessarily protest marches, strikes and mass demonstrations that lead to effective multi-level campaigning on EU matters. This point will be explored in the following section on the work of environmental groups at the EU level.

Environmental groups in the EU

The European branches of the largest environmental groups, along with umbrella groups representing member organizations from across the EU, were primarily established with a view to lobbying and providing information to national and local groups (Marks and McAdam 1999: 105; Parks 2008: 91–3). Nevertheless, with the participation of member groups, they also carry
out smaller-scale, media attention-seeking forms of contentious politics in the vein of ‘creative confrontation’ (a technique closely linked to the history of Greenpeace) – the logic being that a few people participating in spectacular actions is more effective than mass protests in creating space for discussion by way of media attention. The track record for these tactics at the European level is mixed, and success appears to be heavily dependent on the capacity of EU-level groups to (indirectly) mobilize individuals; in this aspect, it closely resembles the cases outlined above with respect to trade unions in the EU. Again, we will focus on two examples of campaigns on EU issues to illustrate the contentious politics employed by these groups. This time, the focus is on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the EU Chemicals Regulation (known as REACH – Registration, Evaluation, and Authorisation of Chemicals).\(^9\)

The first European directive on the experimental use of GMOs was passed in 1990, and as the market grew steadily during the first half of the 1990s legislation on labelling (the ‘novel food’ directive) was initiated. However, institutional wrangling over these rules lasted until 1998, with limited results. Against the background of the EU’s hesitation, as well as the increased salience of food safety issues in the wake of the BSE crisis, a first wave of protest against GMOs began in 1995, lasting until early 1996.\(^10\) This wave saw protests against governments and biotech companies (including the sabotage of experimental fields) and actions against the transport of genetically modified goods. Two ‘Global Days of Action’ were organized in 1997, and the targets of protests shifted from the national to the EU level in accordance with decision-making schedules. A second wave of protests arose in 1998 with the progression of legislation on labelling. Protest and lobbying actions took place all across Europe, leading many supermarket chains to ban the sale of GMOs in their stores, while many European governments were obliged to change their positions on the issue (Kettmaker 2001; on the UK, see Imig and Tarrow 2001; Lezaun 2004). In June 1999, the EU imposed a \textit{de-facto} moratorium on the import and sale of all GM products until proper legislation could be put into place, leading Margot Wallström (the then-Environment Commissioner) to ‘declare NGOs victorious’ (Imig and Tarrow 2001: 29).

As legislation on the traceability and labelling of GM foods wound its way through the various institutions under the co-decision procedure (with its final adoption in July 2003 spelling the effective end of the moratorium), other issues connected to the GMO field began to move into the spotlight. One of these concerned the coexistence of GMO and ordinary seeds and crops. Again, European and national groups mobilized, albeit in rather different ways. European-level groups increased their lobbying efforts; more innovatively, a conference on the subject was organized by Friends of the Earth Europe and other groups at the EP, sponsored by an MEP who went on to present an own-initiative report to the body that was then adopted as its official position. One of the central points of the campaign was the demand for European-level legislation on coexistence, but the Commission proved unyielding on this point. In response, European-level groups began to follow up, coordinate and publicize – tactics that had long been employed by their member groups at the local level. This involved convincing local governments to ban the cultivation of GMOs on their territory and declare themselves ‘GM free’. A website providing information and advice on campaigning and legal tactics was set up, and this form of contentious politics grew and spread. Alliances with like-minded regional governments also added gravitas to the campaign, with the regional governments appealing the Commission rejection of their laws banning the cultivation of GMOs to the European Court of Justice. Ultimately, the efforts of the campaign did not result in any European legislation following a WTO ruling in May 2006, but the success of the GM-free network in terms of presenting the EU with a \textit{fait accompli} is clear. Although some mass-based forms of contentious politics were seen in the GMO campaign, other types of events were more common. Again, this was mixed with more conventional lobbying actions in the EU that bolstered these efforts. Also important in the contentious politics
on the issue of GMOs were the wide networks of alliances that environmental groups developed – from supermarkets and other retailers in the earlier stages to regional governments in the later campaign on coexistence, as well as a range of environmental groups including Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the European Environmental Bureau.

The second example of environmental campaigning within the EU is the coalition active on REACH – the EU’s legislation on chemicals. Here, the main aim of the campaign was to ‘rescue’ a piece of draft legislation that at its earliest stages had been generally approved by environmental groups, but was perceived as having been ‘hijacked’ by industry interests in its legislative draft version. The extended consultation on the legislation included a public internet consultation in which a wide coalition of EU environmental groups and others participated. In addition, this coalition presented a ‘Declaration for a Toxics-Free Future’ signed by 22,000 EU citizens. The campaign also saw the launch of another website, entitled ‘Chemical Reaction’, intended to publicize the actions of national and local initiatives and coordinate online actions such as email campaigns. The wide-ranging coalition meant that a variety of resources (including financial resources, expertise, etc.) could be shared among the participating groups. The campaign continued with a joint report to the European Parliament, revelations about the chemicals contained in various consumer products, offers to move Commission members’ offices to the headquarters of the German chemical producer BASF, testing the blood of members of the EP for the presence of chemicals, letter-writing campaigns and the invasion of the EP by 100 German garden gnomes. Although the coalition was ultimately unsuccessful in getting its demands included in the legislation that eventually came into force in 2007, the campaigning on REACH once again highlights the wide range of different types of contentious politics taking place in the EU, as well as the role of coalitions of various groups with expertise in different types of campaigning at this level.

By way of conclusion, it is interesting to note that the contentious politics described here as taking place within the EU (in that the actions targeted specific EU policy, rather than taking place exclusively at the transnational level) more closely resembles the kinds of contentious politics that were seen before the turn of the millennium, primarily at the national level. The experiences of the social forums and the Occupy/Indignados movements that we explore in later sections appear more innovative in this regard. However, the adoption of ‘traditional’ forms of contentious politics within the EU arena is an important area of study, given that Brussels is now considered to be gaining ground on Washington for the title of ‘lobbying capital of the world’. Perhaps the presence of these forms of contentious politics, and especially the involvement of ordinary EU citizens, can play an important part in counteracting the influence of private industry lobbying (see Chapter 42).

**Contentious politics in the EU: recent developments and examples**

In the late 1960s, and in particular in 1968, student protests swept across Europe and indeed the world, calling for peace, a less conservative social order and recognition of the rights of various groups. In their aftermath, research on new social movements pointed to an innovation in contentious politics, in particular the increase in symbolic actions designed to demonstrate commitment as well as attract media attention.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, at least in Western Europe, social movements seemed to become increasingly institutionalized (della Porta 2003). Some movement organizations developed extensive structures; they acquired substantial material resources and a certain level of public recognition, set up paid staffs (thanks to mass membership drives) and exhibited a tendency to substitute protest with lobbying or concertation actions. Other groups involved in
the process of contracting out social services had entered the third sector, acquiring professionalism and often administering public resources, also with little recourse to unconventional political action. In the meantime, protest became the domain of local campaigns and citizen committees, often fragmented down to the street or neighbourhood level, with the pragmatic objective of protecting limited territories. In some countries, even social centres established by squatters seemed to be torn between commercialization (administering spaces for alternative culture) and the radicalization of forms of action.

At the turn of the millennium, this apparent trend was interrupted by the global justice movement that brought about the return of direct action, in Europe and throughout the world (della Porta et al. 2006). Thousands of protesters demonstrated at European summits, G8 meetings and similar high-level meetings, discussing in social forums whether ‘another world is possible’. As the second decade of the 2000s approached, the financial crisis prompted the rise of the protest camps of the Occupy and Indignados movements. We will take a closer look at each of these three distinct but highly interconnected episodes of contentious politics in the following three sections.

The global justice movement in Europe

The global justice movement (often labelled the ‘anti-globalization movement’) is generally considered to have begun with the ‘battle for Seattle’ protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999. The movement has been characterized as a ‘movement of movements’, encompassing a wide array of organizations and individuals on the basis of a general distaste for neo-liberal economic globalization and calls for global solidarity and justice between North and South. This heterogeneous movement of networked individuals and organizations, ranging from long-established and hierarchical bodies to ad-hoc, informal and horizontally structured groups, is difficult to describe in any succinct way, but three identifying criteria have been suggested: first, the global nature of the contentious issues it challenges; second, the innovative forms of transnational mobilization it employs; and, third, the new, tolerant and multiple identities it has fostered (della Porta 2007). In Europe, a handful of transnational protests represented the founding events (or at least symbolic reference points) for this new wave of protest-seeking global justice. For example, the European Marches against Unemployment, Job Insecurity and Social Exclusion gathered 50,000 people in Amsterdam in June 1997 to demonstrate at the European summit (Balme and Chabanet 2008: 133). Many small groups of marchers from points all over Europe (particularly Germany and France) made their way to Amsterdam, making this protest transnational in the truest sense. In Switzerland, the 1998 counter summit against the WTO in Geneva and the subsequent anti-World Economic Forum demonstrations were also pivotal, as were the demonstrations in Italy against the OECD meeting on new technology in Naples in 2001 and the Genoa anti-G8 protests later that same year. For Spain, the protests in Barcelona against the World Bank in 2001, as well as the campaign against the Spanish presidency of the EU, were similarly important, and in the UK the anti-G8 protests in Birmingham in 1998 have been identified as founding events.

These varied events came to be known as counter-summits, defined as arenas of ‘international-level initiatives during official summits and on the same issues but from a critical standpoint, heightening awareness through protest and information with or without contacts with the official version’ (Pianta 2002: 35). Such events have accompanied every major EU summit from 1999 to the present day, although protests are now less intense than they were in the late 1990s and early 2000s, waning as new repertoires began to emerge.
Often in concert with counter-summits, global days of protest organized activist marches on the same day in many countries in a new model of transnational protest. For example, in what was defined as the largest mass protest in history, millions of people joined the international day of action against the Iraq war on 15 February 2003 in cities across the world.

All these events have displayed a tendency towards spectacle that emphasized individual creativity. In fact, many of these protest performances included various combinations of diverse forms of action: stands were erected, concerts took place, spaces were organized for debates and theatre performances were improvised on the streets. Among the many elements in the repertoire of contention of the global justice movement, mass demonstrations played a major role, as did the open discussions of the social forums, as we will illustrate in the next section.

But there was also a strong investment in action that sought to ‘practice the objective’ – that is, symbolically show the potential for alternative politics and society. In particular, ‘fair trade’ and other forms of critical consumption were developed to allow citizens to have a direct impact on the market, by damaging the producers of bad products through boycotts, but also by encouraging good producers and practices. Ethical banks grew, together with the number of goods produced in an environmentally and socially friendly way. In addition to transforming markets and firms in all European countries (Balsiger 2011), critical consumerism helped construct alternative norms and fostered experiments with new lifestyles (Bossy 2011). Global justice activists and their organizations also invested a great deal in communication – producing and disseminating information on the evils of ‘turbo-capitalism’, among other subjects, and exploiting the potentials of new technologies, especially those offered by the Web 1.0.

Although global in name, different constellations have been observed within the global justice movement in different European countries (della Porta 2007). In countries including France, Italy and Spain, disruptive protest dynamics dominate. For example, the symbolic penetration of no-go areas for demonstrators (red zones) was a widespread tactic during counter-summits in these countries; the destruction of transgenic fields as well as the ‘démontage’ of McDonald’s marked the early history of the French global justice movement. In Italy, very different groups were involved in the blockades of trains transporting arms for the war in Iraq. Here, the networks of participants were both denser and more decentralized than elsewhere in this cluster of countries, including both informal groups and formal associations, but overwhelmingly activist based and protest oriented. In terms of issue definition, global justice in this group of countries is linked with a struggle against neo-liberalism at home within a global discourse and a conception of radical participatory democracy.

In the second constellation of European countries, including Germany and Great Britain, contentious politics in the global justice movement has taken on a different hue, relying largely on lobbying and media campaigns (such as Reclaim the Streets and the Jubilee 2000 campaigns in Great Britain). Here, strong associations and non-governmental organizations have been more visible, although not unchallenged by individual activists, and global justice issues have predominantly been framed in terms of solidarity with the global South. More traditional and hierarchical conceptions of internal democracy have tended to prevail.

Although a global movement in nature (and, of course, in name), the European ‘section’ of the movement is notably characterized by the blame it places on international organizations, and in particular on the EU, for failures in the world. The critique of the EU offered by the global justice movement at successive counter-summits can be summed up in the phrase ‘another Europe is possible’. The discussions that led to this position will be dealt with in greater depth in the section on the European Social Forums; in brief, the position of the movement is that Europe in its current neo-liberal guise is unacceptable, and that a different, more social Europe must be built. This image of ‘critical Europeanism’ has been confirmed by studies on
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the attitudes of activists (della Porta and Caiani 2009). While strong criticism of the EU in its current form is generally shared, so is a high affective identification with Europe and a certain level of support for the creation of a European level of governance. In this sense, global justice activists participating in contentious politics in the EU represent a ‘social capital’ of committed citizens who, although critical, might serve as an important resource in the building of a European citizenship.

The European Social Forums

We have come together from the social and citizens’ movements from all the regions of Europe, East and West, North and South. We have come together through a long process: the demonstrations of Amsterdam, Seattle, Prague, Nice, Gothenburg, Genoa, Brussels, Barcelona, the big mobilisations against neoliberalism as well as the general strikes for the defence of social rights and all the mobilisations against war, show the will to build another Europe.

(quoted in della Porta 2009: 24)

In the 2000s, protest in Europe was also progressively linked to the construction and exchange of knowledge. The global justice movement explicitly promoted the innovative experiment of social forums, beginning with the first World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 (della Porta 2007). These forums for open discussion and exchange built on the counter-summit model described above, with the aim of echoing the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland. The model was then taken up at the macro-regional level, with meetings organized in all the main continents.

In Europe, the intention of creating a public space was openly stated at the first European Social Forum (ESF), held in Florence, Italy, in 2002. This and successive ESFs (held subsequently in Paris in 2003, London in 2004, Athens in 2006, Malmö in 2008 and Istanbul in 2010) played an important role in the elaboration of activists’ attitudes towards the European Union, as well as the formation of a European identity and the Europeanization of social movements. Participation in the forums was open to all civil society groups (with the exception of those advocating racist ideas and those using terrorist means), as well as to political parties. ESF programmes included hundreds of workshops and dozens of conferences (with invited experts), testifying to the importance attributed (at least in principle) to the production and exchange of knowledge. At the first ESF, which took place on 6–9 November 2002, 60,000 participants from 105 countries attended the 30 plenary conferences, 160 seminars and 180 workshops organized at the Fortezza da Basso in the city of Florence.

Although at first glance they may seem to be merely discussion forums, the ESFs, and indeed the countless local and national social forums held across the continent, can be considered a new form of the global justice movement’s contentious politics. In attempting to create an inclusive public sphere, the European Social Forum represented an experiment of deliberative democracy that explicitly challenged the mechanisms of representative democracy judged to have failed the citizens of the world. The forum was conceived of as a space in which attention would be devoted to communication, with a focus on networking, respect for diversity, equal participation and inclusiveness. Encounters between diverse activists in terms of geographical origin and organizational affiliation (or lack thereof) sought to maintain a positive emphasis on diversity in the creation of movement discourses. As these encounters built up over the successive years of the ESF, ‘a “cultural logic”’ began to spread ‘as embedded sets of values oriented towards the building of horizontal ties, decentralized coordination of autonomous units,
and the free circulation of information allowed by the Internet’ (della Porta and Caiani 2007: 229). Activists in turn explicitly identified the forum as a place for a ‘new way of doing politics’ focused on horizontal ties, direct participation, consensus and openness, as opposed to the ‘old way’ involving the delegation of representation, hierarchy and majority rule. The transnational nature of the ESF is also viewed as an important feature of this new way of doing politics, in line with the global outlook of the activists involved.

The way that democracy was practised within the ESF was linked to the participants’ critique of democracy outside that forum. In line with the perception of the ESF as a form of contentious politics, those involved supported the development of a civil society that would be autonomous from the state. In this perspective, the ESF prefigures a potential new model of political participation. The activists involved considered protest to be highly important, but attached even greater value to the example set by the social forum. Despite tensions within the ESF with regard to how politically engaged it should be (in terms of taking unitary positions), this view was widely shared.

The various forums elaborated several critiques of the existing EU (stigmatized as a ‘Europe of the market’), but also called for an alternative Europe – a Europe of the citizens. Generally speaking, within social forums across the world, mistrust in representative institutions is high. In the ESF, this mistrust applied in particular to the EU, which was criticized on the basis of two perceived problems. The first was its neo-liberal stance – an unsurprising critique, given the links of the ESF to the global justice movement and thus to its views. The second problem concerned the EU’s democratic deficit, an issue that is more closely tied to the deliberative and participatory practices of democracy seen within the ESF. However, the criticism and mistrust of the EU among ESF activists belies a strong current of Europeanism. Indeed, studies have found that almost all ESF activists agree about the need to construct alternative supranational institutions of governance (della Porta 2009). They appeal for the construction of a number of ‘Europes’ – the Europe of rights, a social Europe, a Europe ‘from below’. Thus, while firmly rooted in a global vision, the ESF has a strong European dimension in both outlook and composition, indicating a Europeanization of social movements that contests but also accompanies the development of European institutions (della Porta and Caiani 2009).

‘Anti-austerity’ politics: Occupy and Indignados

With the onset of the financial crisis in Europe in 2008, a crisis that hit different European countries at different times and to varying degrees, a new wave of movements began to emerge, ostensibly to challenge the austerity policies adopted by governments (often under strong international pressure) to address the crisis. These protests took the form of camps established in public squares throughout the world, drawing inspiration from similar occupations that had recently taken place during the protests of the Arab Spring in Mediterranean and North African countries. Emblematic in this regard is the case of Spain, where protests were organized across the country on 15 May 2011 against the government’s response to the financial crisis, with turnouts of an estimated 130,000 people (Castells 2012). Following these demonstrations, camps were established, first in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, then in Plaza Catalunya in Barcelona and in other smaller cities across the country. Similar camps were also established in Portugal, Greece and, to a lesser extent, Italy. In the UK, the name ‘Occupy’ was borrowed from the movement’s North American counterpart, and a camp was established in Paternoster Square in front of St Paul’s Cathedral.

One striking feature in the diffusion of this movement’s practices and tactics is the use of online social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As the events of the Arab Spring
unfolded, the main sources of information – for both activists and the mainstream media – were often piped through such platforms. In a very concrete example of the importance of these channels for and in diffusion, members of ‘hacktivist’ groups such as Anonymous worked to provide online access to the outside world to Egyptian protesters when services were shut down by the Mubarak government (Castells 2012: 62; Knappenberger 2013). These platforms have also been used by the Occupy/Indignados movements to provide visibility and attract media attention for protests, to recruit new members, circulate information and the like. In Spain, for example, the Free Culture and Digital Commons movement played a key role in the origins of the 15 May protest movement (Fuster Morell 2012). These online platforms were also viewed as enhancing democratic procedures and individual participation, allowing remote participation, for example.

Nevertheless, several problems were also observed in these movements in connection to the widespread use of social platforms in these ways. With a view to mobilization, the use of Web 2.0 technologies (as opposed to the Web 1.0 mailing lists used during the era of the global justice movement and the social forums) facilitated a ‘logic of aggregation’ among interpersonal networks that allowed the mobilization of ephemeral, temporary ‘crowds of individuals . . . which disaggregate as easily as they aggregate’ (Juris 2012: 267). The temporary nature of this support affected the ability of the movement in terms of ‘facilitating complex, interactive discussions regarding politics, identity, strategy, and tactics’ (ibid.). Although the use of new media has made communication faster and cheaper and has facilitated the mobilization of inexperienced participants, it has also added complexity that has generated clashes, often leading to activist burnout and disengagement in a relatively short timeframe (Mattoni 2012).

With the aim of mobilizing ‘normal people’ rather than just activists, the camps of the Occupy movement in the UK and North America and the Indignados movement in Southern European countries brought people together not only to protest against austerity cuts, but also to formulate a response to the problems created by those cuts through deliberative democratic means (della Porta 2013). The assemblies of the camps focused special attention on the creation of egalitarian and inclusive public spheres; in this sense, the historical line connecting these groups to the social forums, which declined as Occupy and the Indignados movement were in ascendance, is clear. The fact that the main driver behind the first Indignados mobilizations in Spain was an organization named Democracia real ya – ‘Real Democracy Now’ – speaks volumes on this point. The true contentious politics of this movement thus lies once more in an explicit challenge to representative democracy, to perceived threats to freedom of speech (particularly concerning the Internet) and to the neo-liberal solution to the financial crisis created by the current model of democracy, a solution seen as depressing consumption and thereby jeopardizing any prospects of (sustainable) development.

A more detailed examination of what these movements talk about when they talk about democracy reveals that the activists’ discourse on democracy is complex. Exploring how democracy is practised in the assemblies of the different camps is perhaps the best way to illustrate the various streams within the activists’ critique of representative democracy, since we are once again dealing with an attempt to prefigure a possible future democracy in which activists ‘practice what they preach’. Assemblies held in the camps to discuss various themes were attempts to create high-quality discursive democracy, recognizing the equal rights of all to speak in a public and plural space, open to discussion and deliberation on a range of themes from the abstract to the concrete, as well as actual solutions. Systems of undisruptive hand signals were developed to signify approval, the need for a response, the need to move the discussion forward and the like, while moderators sought to ensure balance in discussions. Occupied spaces and the discussions they hosted thus formed the true crux of the contentious politics of this movement,
becoming ‘vibrant sites of human interaction that modelled alternative communities and generated intense feelings of solidarity’ (Juris 2012: 268). The divisions between those physically occupying public squares and those participating in a more intermittent or even virtual way, along with the significant fractures created by the eventual eviction of camps by police, support this view.

The functioning of these assemblies thus indicates the content of the critique of ‘politics as usual’ in representative democracies in Europe. The well-known slogan of the Occupy movement, ‘We are the 99 percent’, is in itself a clear indictment of the non-representativeness of this model of democracy in activists’ eyes (while also recalling ‘You G8, we 6 billion’, a slogan of the global justice movement). The perceived failures of representative democracy have thus been challenged in the direct democratic assemblies of the camps. This perception of the failure of democracy has also been expressed in a sense of outrage (Indignados translating as ‘outraged’) concerning the corruption of politicians, both in the most literal sense of accepting bribes and in what activists see as their enslavement to international institutions (in particular the International Monetary Fund and the EU) and economic powers. The latter have been viewed as responsible not only for the economic crisis per se, but also for the tautology – not accepted by activists – that austerity policies are the only solution to the crisis. The corruption of politicians thus encompasses this perceived servitude to powers that have little or nothing to do with the ‘99 percent’ of ordinary citizens whom they should be representing. In addition to demonstrating the practice of direct democracy in their assemblies, activists also call for greater possibilities for referenda with reduced quorums (in terms of the numbers of signatures required to trigger them and voter turnouts required for their validity) and an increase in the areas subject to decisions through referenda.

With varying success, camps spread across Europe as austerity policies hit a growing number of EU countries with progressive force. In the beginning, austerity measures were only imposed in certain countries, such as Iceland and Ireland, that appeared to be especially complicit in the financial crisis; however, the alarm soon spread to Southern Europe, moving on to threaten once-stalwart economies, such as France and the UK. With the proliferation of the financial crisis, some EU-wide action was also organized, such as an EU day of mobilization that took the form of general strikes in Spain and Greece.

Although both waves of protest employ cosmopolitan language, demanding global rights and blaming global financial capital, the global justice movement moved from the transnational to the national (and the local) level, whereas the new wave took the reverse route. In fact, protests followed the geography of the emergence of the economic crisis, which hit European countries with different force and at different times. First, between the end of 2008 and the beginning of the following year, self-convened citizens in Iceland – the first country hit by the crisis – demanded the resignation of the government and its delegates in the Central Bank and financial authority. Protests in the traditional forms of general strikes and trade union demonstrations contesting the drastic cuts to social programmes and labour rights followed in Ireland, a country that had previously been considered a showcase for the economic miracles of the neo-liberal economy, but had suddenly transformed into a textbook illustration of economic deterioration. Next, in Portugal a demonstration arranged via Facebook in March 2011 by the so-called ‘Geração á rasca’ (generation in trouble) against the country’s growing economic difficulties brought more than 200,000 young Portuguese citizens to the streets. Gaining global visibility, the Indignados movement developed with the aforementioned protest in May 2011 in Spain, a country whose position in terms of economic development was sliding downwards at an alarming rate. The Indignados protests in turn inspired similar mobilizations in Greece,
where opposition to austerity measures had already been expressed in occasionally violent forms. The wave of protest then moved to the US and beyond.13

Research has already singled out numerous examples of the cross-national diffusion of frames and repertoires of action. Both direct, face-to-face contacts and mediated encounters have contributed to bridging the protest in various parts of the world, in a form of upward scale shift. On 15 October 2011, a global day of action launched by the Spanish Indignados produced demonstrations worldwide, with protest events registered in 951 cities in 82 countries.

However, the degree of transnational coordination of the protest seems to be lower than that of the global justice movement at the turn of the millennium, for which the global social forums and later the macro-regional social forums had represented a source of inspiration and offered arenas for networking. At the same time, surveys carried out in various European countries have indicated a growing emphasis on the national level of government. The transnational brokerage in the most recent social movements emerged in, if not weaker, at least different, form: more grassroots oriented and mediated through new media. In view of the varying timing and depth of the financial crisis, mobilizations were also more sensitive to national political opportunities (or the lack thereof) than the global justice movement (mobilized around common transnational events).

Conclusions

The wide range of forms of contentious politics seen at the EU level seems encouraging in terms of the formation of an EU public, which is considered to be fundamental to promoting deliberation in EU institutions and ultimately resolving the democratic problems suffered by the EU. However, the contentious politics we observe at the European level is by no means comparable to the participation seen at national and local levels in Europe. The groups we describe in our examples of intra-EU campaigns are heavily engaged within the EU institutional sphere, and contentious politics makes up only a small fraction of their efforts. Such groups experience particular difficulties in inspiring mobilization among national and local members, and many – like the ETUC – have no direct links to grassroots movements but must instead work through nationally organized member organizations. A truly transnational public is far from a reality. In the more innovative contentious politics observed in the EU, the example of the Occupy/Indignados movements also raises an alarm regarding the formation of an EU public. The return to the local level signalled by this movement in the wake of the financial crisis may be interpreted as a warning for the EU: if this supranational institution is to endure and rebuild its ‘permissive consensus’ – that is, the tacit agreement of its citizens – then this must be done with the understanding and legitimacy conferred by participation.

Nevertheless, the picture is not entirely gloomy. The Occupy/Indignados movements, like their predecessors, are transnational in format and in their democratic aspirations. In addition, certain links bridging our (artificial) distinction between contentious politics in the EU and within the EU can be observed. In 2012, widespread protests took place throughout the EU over the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, which was perceived to be a serious threat to freedom of speech on the Internet. These actions brought together organizations ‘in’ and ‘within’ the EU, including the Greens–EFA European Parliamentary group. The campaigns on the Bolkestein and Ports Directives also saw similar alliances emerge (despite tensions). The Assembly of the Movements of the 2006 European Social Forum in Athens refers explicitly to this cooperation: ‘This year has been significant in that a number of social struggles and campaigns have been successful in stopping neoliberal projects such as the proposed European Constitution

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Treaty [sic], the EU Ports Directive, and the CPE in France’ (quoted in della Porta 2009: 24). As we stated in our introduction, contentious politics can also advance the formation of transnational participation. Participation in the various forms of contentious politics described here may qualify as such transnational efforts, relatively rare as they might be.

Studying contentious politics in the past, the present and the future of the EU is thus an important and fascinating task. Research has shown a rise in contentious politics in relation to the EU when important issues affecting this organization are at stake (Uba and Uggla 2011). This increased contestation is not necessarily a bad thing for the EU – in fact, it may contain the seeds of (a part of) the solution to the democratic deficit. Ultimately, this body must change in accordance with the wishes of its citizens if it is to survive. In addition, the dynamics and innovations of contentious politics are compelling in their own right. How these phenomena evolve in the coming years will surely captivate scholars and the public alike.

Notes

1 The formal participatory regime for organized civil society in the EU remains essentially ad hoc, with general agreement that ‘the Commission favours well-established CSOs [civil society organizations] with a high reputation and expertise’ (Friedrich 2011: 118). In recent years, however, the Commission has moved away from discourses viewing civil society as contributing to democracy in the Union and towards a more instrumental view in which transparency is considered an objective for civil society rather than the EU (ibid.).

2 See, for example, Chapters 4 and 5 in Imig and Tarrow (2001).

3 See, for example, Chapter 9 in Imig and Tarrow (2001) on the Renault ‘Eurostrikes’, as well as Erne (2008) on strikes by workers at ABB Alstom.

4 For a summary of the ETUC’s history, see Martin and Ross (2001).

5 Interview with a representative of the ETUC conducted in September 2005 by Louisa Parks.

6 Movements gathered around the ‘Stop Bolkestein’ slogan also demonstrated in Strasbourg in February 2006. However, the protests of unions and movements were held on different days due to disagreements over the general objection to the EU per se among movements versus dissent towards Bolkestein in particular among the unions, a split also seen among member unions of the ETUC, particularly in France.

7 The following draws on Leiren and Parks (2014), which provides a more in-depth comparison of these two cases.


9 On GMOs and coexistence and the REACH campaign, see Parks (2008), Chapters 3 and 4.

10 This brief description is drawn from the study by Kettmaker (2001), which provides an excellent account of the intricacies of the campaign as well as a thorough and accessible overview of the issues involved.

11 This coalition consisted of the European Environmental Bureau, Friends of the Earth Europe, Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, the European Consumers’ Union Bureau (BEUC), Women in Europe for a Common Future and the European Public Health Alliance.

12 On the Commission’s internet consultations, see Persson (2009).

13 On the spread of this form of contentious politics, see della Porta and Mattoni (forthcoming). For detailed timelines of the Spanish and US movements, see the appendices to Castells (2012).

Bibliography

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