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Progressive Social Movements and the Creation of European Public Spheres

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Abstract

While the normative debate on European integration has addressed the importance of the construction of truly democratic institutions as well as the establishment of social rights at EU level, the role of progressive social movements has not been much debated. Building upon theorization and research in social movement studies, I argue that progressive social movements are indeed already contributing to the construction of European public spheres. Not one liberal (or bourgeois), public sphere but the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics could allow for the participation of the excluded, giving them the possibility to make their political voice heard. Through different paths of Europeanization (in particular, domestication, externalization and transnationalization), progressive social movements have played an important role in the creation of a critical public sphere as, by contesting European institutions, they have contributed to make them (more) accountable, but have also developed collective identities at EU level and, with them, European public spheres. A main challenge is now to connect an emancipatory critical public to public institutions.

Keywords

democracy, Europeanization, public sphere, social movements

The Need for European Public Spheres

The public sphere has been referred to in very different ways in different subfields of the social sciences, with a substantial misalignment between empirical research operationalizing it as a mass-media debate, and a normative vision pointing to its fundamental role for the very development of democracy. Among the latter, Nancy Fraser (2007: 7) has noted that the concept of the public sphere is not simply oriented to analyzing communication flows but rather that it must contribute to a normative political theory of

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democracy, in which 'a public sphere is conceived as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion. . . . Thus, a public sphere should correlate with a sovereign power. Together, these two ideas – the *normative legitimacy* and *political efficacy* of public opinion – are essential to the concept of the public sphere in democratic theory. Without them, the concept loses its critical force and its political point.'

This gap between empirical analysis and normative assessment is all the more relevant for discussing the development of a *European* public sphere. In empirical research, the debate on the challenges for the construction of a European public sphere has highlighted the low level of attention paid to the EU in national mass media as well as the failure of attempts to construct proper European outlets. The lack of a common language has been considered as just one of the many problems that have until now limited the success of attempts in this direction (see Dorr, 2018, on the democratic role of translation). However, there is another, deeper, way in which a European public sphere has been referred to in debates that address the very existence of a European collective identity, that is a fundamental condition for democratic developments (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009). Undoubtedly, the democratic deficit of the EU is not only related to the lack of proper EU parties and elections, but also to the challenge of building a European demos or, at least, the conception of a shared destiny. While some recent research points to a (slowly developing) sense of reciprocal solidarity (Gerhards et al., 2020; Lahusen, 2020), the construction of a demos is far from being achieved. Once again Nancy Fraser (2007: 8) has underlined the specific challenges of conceptualizing a transnational public sphere as, she noted, 'it is difficult to associate the notion of legitimate public opinion with communicative arenas in which the interlocutors are not fellow members of a political community, with equal rights to participate in political life. And it is hard to associate the notion of efficacious communicative power with discursive spaces that do not correlate with sovereign states.'

The impact of the multiple crises that have affected Europe has certainly exacerbated the challenges of building democratic institutions at an EU level. Not only during the Great Recession but also during the pandemic crisis an overemphasis on emergency logic has seen decision-making shift to the least accountable and least transparent of the EU institutions (first and foremost, the European Central Bank), while the European Parliament, notwithstanding its formally increased competences, has assumed a very low profile (White, 2020; Della Porta, 2021). Transparency itself, which has been considered to be a fundamental value for the creation of a public sphere, has also been with reduced in the management of these crises. As was the case in the financial crisis, the so-called refugee crisis and the health crisis, competition between member states is increasing and solidarity seems weakened at the institutional level. With the development of neoliberalism, as Wolfgang Streeck noted, 'the arena where it is decided who is to suffer and who is not has become more remote: it has moved to international financial diplomacy and the backrooms of a handful of leading central banks. The governors, claiming to command the higher wisdom of arcane economic theories that only they understand, now tell governments what "structural reforms" they have to impose on their citizens: how wages are to be set and whose pensions are to be cut' (Streeck, 2014: 49).

Faced with these challenges, some scholars, such as Wolfgang Streeck (2013), have suggested a return of competences at the nation-state level. Others, such as Jürgen

Habermas, have instead pointed to the need for 'more Europe' in order to address social injustice (Habermas, 2013). As in nation-states democracy developed out of the need for an apparatus to execute binding decisions, a defined self for political self-determination, and a citizenry that can be motivated to participate challenges emerge when neoliberal globalization increases social inequalities and fragmentation, and ethnonationalist reactions to globalization spread. A public sphere is all the more necessary as Europe is 'a highly complex and highly differentiated, politically animated and flexible political project' that combines 'appreciation of differences and alterity with attempts to conceive of new democratic forms of political rule beyond the nation-state' (Beck and Grande, 2007: 11–12). The public sphere plays a fundamental role as difference-friendly integration and integration-friendly differentiation need to embed principles of intervention based upon inclusive strategies towards those who are excluded, with a recognition of otherness (with a qualified right to veto, reflexive loop, control strategies between institutions) (pp. 11–12). In Gerard Delanty's view (2009), a cosmopolitan imagination 'entails a view of society as an ongoing process of self-constitution through the continuous opening up of new perspectives in view of the encounters with the Other' (Delanty, 2009: 13). This process is characterized by the relativization of national identity, a politics of recognition, critical and deliberative forms of culture, and inclusive conceptions of a European polity based on recognition and solidarity. While pointing to a shift from the integration of states to the integration of peoples, Delanty lays out a civic vision of Europe as a post-nationalist community of rights, stressing the need to connect solidarity with cosmopolitism as societies are linked to each other. The public sphere is relevant as integration should develop through the interactions of different publics more than in the coexistence of differences.

When discussing the construction of a European public sphere it is important to consider that even at the national level the idea of *a* public sphere has always been fictitious, in relation to both of the meanings referred to above. Firstly, the national media systems of member states have always been fragmented, not only on a territorial but also on an ideological level (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Secondly, Habermas's (1989) conceptualization of a bourgeois public sphere (with an independent public discussing public issues in public) refers to a normative ideal that was never achieved in what Robert Dahl (1971) dubbed the 'really existing democracy'. Rather, the media system has become more and more commercialized, fragmented, and elitist. While never really meeting standards of high discursive quality, the mass media have (at all territorial levels) undergone a decline, even with regard to the mere respect for professional standards in news production (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018).

In relation to the demos, the myth of a unified people is also challenged at a national level by the acknowledgement of many lines of fracture, which become even more visible in 'populist times' (Mouffe, 2019). As cleavages multiply and conflicts intensify, the multiple crises that Europe (not to mention the wider world) has lived through since the turn of the millennium provide evidence of collective identification around class, gender, generation, ethnic/linguistic/religious belongings that are often stronger than the national, let alone the European, bonds felt by citizens (Della Porta et al., 2018). As a public sphere implies some agreement on common norms, what we observe is rather a development of multiple public spheres.

In this regard, Nancy Fraser has in fact pointed to the democratic relevance of not one liberal (or bourgeois) public sphere but rather of the proliferation of subaltern counter-publics, defined as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1990: 67). These subaltern public spheres allow for the participation of the excluded, giving them the possibility to make their political voice heard. According to her conceptualization, in a *weak* subaltern counter-public 'deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making' (Fraser, 1990: 75). Such a counterpublic 'recognises the equal rights of all (not only delegates and experts) to speak (and be respected) in a public and plural space, open to discussion and deliberation', as well as 'to the formation of collective solidarity and emerging identities'. *Strong* publics, on the other hand, are those 'whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making' (Fraser, 1990: 75). As she has suggested in her critique of the 'liberal public sphere', under conditions of massive inequality, only social movements that challenge the very basic features of bourgeois publicity can reduce those disparities (Fraser, 1990).

While recognizing the challenges for the creation of a European public sphere, we should add that multiple (including subaltern) public spheres have developed as spaces of conflict but also of reciprocal recognition. Building upon theorization and research in social movement studies, this paper suggests that progressive social movements are indeed already constructing a European public sphere. As had been achieved by the labor movement during the twin processes of the development of the nation-state and of capitalism (Tilly, 1975; Della Porta and Caiani, 2009), by targeting the EU through supranational protests, these movements have contributed to developing organizational structures and visions of another Europe that are both just and democratic. In doing so they have, in fact, contributed to creating Europeanized public spaces by discussing Europe in public. By contesting European institutions, they have made them more accountable, at least in the sense that they are under greater scrutiny, but they have also developed collective identities at an EU level and, with that, European public spheres. In this fashion they have created a European public, at least in the 'weak' meaning of the term, by the formation of opinion as well as of solidarities and identities. While the issue of the formation of a 'strong' public remains open, it is essential that emancipatory social movements raise the 'political voice' of the excluded in order to mitigate the deficits of the legitimacy of public opinion (Habermas, 1992; Fraser, 2007). While not denying the role that regressive social movements play in challenging the process of European integration by mobilizing for exclusive forms of activism, often producing a conservative backlash (Della Porta, 2020d) – most importantly Brexit – in what follows this article will focus on the potential for emancipatory social movements to contribute to fulfilling some of the main challenges singled out in the Europeanization process. The article will then address their role in the creation of European public spheres by looking at the recent evolution in the Europeanization of progressive social movements, pointing to their capacity to constitute subaltern public spheres as well as at the challenges in forming strong publics in a context characterized by several crises.

Social Movements and the Building of European Public Spheres

Although they have been rather neglected within theories of Europeanization, social movements are indeed constructing Europeanized public spheres. Social movement organizations struggling for increasing social, political and civic rights have long voiced critical positions about the low levels of concern paid by EU institutions to such rights. However, at the same time, they have promoted visions of 'another Europe' and, connected to this, they have Europeanized their organizational networks and action strategies (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009). Just as in the case of the labor movement in the creation of nation-states, progressive social movements have played an important role in bringing about social justice and democracy at a European level. In the process of targeting the EU institutions they have scaled their organization and protest upwards (e.g. Tarrow, 1995; Marks and McAdam, 1999; Imig and Tarrow, 2001; Della Porta, 2009b).

While it has been late to develop, research on transnationalization and social movements has indeed singled out a gradual but steady process of Europeanization of contention (Della Porta, 2013). Following the increase in competences assigned to EU institutions, progressive social movements have contributed to the politicization of EU issues through the selective use of unconventional, protest-oriented strategies. This process has taken place along different paths, and at various speeds in different periods, as it has been influenced by the evolution of multilevel political opportunities as well as the material and symbolic resources of social movements themselves.

In the first steps of the Europeanization process of social movements, research pointed to a path of *domestication*, with the spread of protests that targeted EU decisions, while remaining anchored at the national level, in which elected political institutions were considered more accountable to the citizen-electors (Imig and Tarrow, 2001; Tarrow, 2005). In addressing specific EU decisions, framed as infringing upon national sovereignty, these protests contributed to an increasing Europeanization of national public discourses (see Eder and Trenz, 2003), even if the presence of civil society actors in the mass-media debate on Europe remained limited (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009; Imig and Tarrow, 2001). While such a path of contention could be taken as proof of the persistent relevance of the nation-state and of the permanent weakness of the EU institutions, these protests against EU-induced policies at the national level have, however, also singled out a potential for the emergence of a European public. Indeed, during the course of these campaigns there was a development of European-wide organizational networks and Europeanized frames (see, e.g., the protest of dairy farmers against EU milk quotas in Italy in the mid-1990s in Della Porta, 2013).

During the same period, researchers also noted that the increasing competences of the EU triggered a path of *externalization* (Chabanet, 2002), as social movement actors (especially those who felt in a weak position at home) aimed at mobilizing allies at the transnational level, targeting the EU in order to pressure their own governments. In these cases, protestors addressed EU institutions, in order to push them to intervene with domestic governments. In particular, transnational social movement organizations addressed those policy areas in which EU institutions had more competences. While the

inclusion of civil society organizations has been quite selective, since only those who adapt to the 'rules of the game' obtain routine access to EU institutions (Ruzza, 2004), a number of campaigns targeting the EU have been able to achieve policy changes as well as some recognition (Parks, 2015).

It was only at the turn of the millennium that the Global Justice Movement and the European Social Forum, as its macro-regional expression, pointed to a third path of Europeanization of protest: *transnationalization.* This implied the creation of EU-wide social movement organizations that addressed claims for the extension of rights directly to EU institutions through the organization of Europe-wide protest events (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009). International summits were increasingly contested by counter-summits as contentious campaigns staged during official events, including EU summits (Pianta and Marchetti, 2006). The European marches against unemployment, insecurity and exclusion that addressed the EU summits in Amsterdam in 1997 and Cologne in 1999 (Chabanet, 2002; Balme and Chabanet, 2002) were pivotal in the emergence of the European wave of protests that reached its greatest visibility in the July 2001 anti-G8 demonstrations in Genoa (Della Porta, 2007). Counter-summits were organized in Nice, Gothenburg, Barcelona and Copenhagen to protest against EU decisions. Since 2002, protesters have also met annually at European Social Forums (ESFs) to debate Europeanization and its limits: this was the case at the first European Social Forum held in Florence in November 2002 in which 60,000 activists from all over Europe participated in three days of debate, and between 500,000 and one million activists took part in the closing march. This was followed by a second event in Paris in 2003, a third summit in London in 2004 and a fourth in Athens in May 2006. Resulting from the networking of groups and individuals with different political and social backgrounds that continued in the following years (Della Porta et al., 2006), the Social Forums criticized neoliberal policies in the EU, calling for a 'Europeanization from below'. Both during the preparation of the ESF and during the event itself, the debate on not only EU institutions but also, more importantly, on the alternative visions of Europe, actually contributed to creating a critical European public. While economic (and especially financial) globalization represented a main target of the protesters, the democratization of global politics was an important aim in attempts to reform international organizations, not only of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund but also of the European Union. The ESF acted as a Europeanized public sphere by making powerful and secretive international organizations accountable to world citizens for their deeds and misdeeds (Della Porta, 2009a, 2009b).

Europeanization was indeed visible in all the main dimensions of social movements (Della Porta, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). As they increased in number, transnational protests were particularly influential, given their capacity to network activists from different countries during long preparation processes and emotionally intense performances. Moreover, the ESF contributed to the construction of a discourse on an alternative Europeanization and even the development of cosmopolitan identities. Through the organization of transnational action, transnational networks also grew in members and in numbers. By bridging the local and the global (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005), they contributed to the development of a transnational public sphere and to cosmopolitan identities (Tarrow, 2005; Della Porta and Caiani, 2009). As Della Porta and Mattoni (2014: 285–6) summarized, in this process a *thick* diffusion was based

> on a global organisational network in which social movement organisations as well as grassroots activist groups had a relevant role in supporting (and spreading) transnational mobilisations like counter-summits. Partially supported through information and communication technologies managed within the social movement milieu, and in particular by activist mailing lists and alternative informational websites, this global organisational network was also thickened due to transnational, but also national, gatherings like the social forum, whose practices rested on a collective conception of politics based on activist groups and organisations.

A decade later, the Great Recession, with its related social and political crises, seemed to slow down or even invert the trend towards a Europeanization of social movements. In Southern Europe in particular, anti-austerity protesters addressed what they saw as the collusion of EU institutions with business and industry groups. Trust in EU institutions declined sharply, especially in the countries that had been most heavily hit by the economic crisis, including large cuts in public expenditure and growing inequalities (Della Porta, 2013). Indeed, for some time Europe seemed to have lost its centrality in the debate about democracy (Kaldor and Selchow, 2015). Although the EU was considered to be one of the main promoters of austerity policies, given the varying timelines and characteristics of the financial crisis in different member states, protest waves remained mainly national in their scope, as they were mobilized by national networks of social movements. As counter-summits during European Council meetings became increasingly rare, protests increased at the local level, where prefiguration of alternative visions of democracy took place.

It must be said, however, that the Europeanization of social movements, and with it the creation of a critical European public, did not stop. While collective action was focused on the national level, European protest events and campaigns did remain relevant in attempts to construct ‘another Europe’. These include the global day of protest on 15 October 2011, which saw protest events taking place in 951 cities in 82 countries; the Blockupy Frankfurt protests, which began in 2012 and occurred for several years afterwards, and organized by a transnational network of activists that targeted the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, denouncing the European financial policies and austerity measures implemented in many European countries (Della Porta, 2020b); the European strike/day of action called by the European Trade Union Confederation on 14 November 2012; the Brussels demonstration against the spring meeting of the European Council in March 2013; and the AlterSummit in Athens in June 2013 (Pianta and Gerbaudo, 2016). Moreover, Europeanization via externalization continued to develop, as can be seen for instance in the use of EU petitions during campaigns against water privatization (Della Porta and Parks, 2016; Della Porta, 2020a). Protest campaigns also mobilized various mets of social movements and civil society organizations as well as trade unions around specific EU policies through a combination of protest and advocacy tactics (e.g. Leiren and Parks, 2014; Erne, 2008; Turnbull, 2010; Bieler, 2011; Parks, 2015; Seelinger, 2019). At the organizational level, EU-wide networks have remained active beyond national borders, at times developing cross-national ties around highly symbolic struggles.

Research on the visions of Europe among the social movement organizations and campaigns that have developed as spin-offs of the European Social Forum (Della Porta, 2020c) has in fact indicated that the diagnostic frames had become more critical of EU institutions. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the perceived closure of political

opportunities, the increasing neoliberal policies of a stigmatized 'Europe of the Banks', the declining quality of social, civil and political rights, the increasing lack of transparency and democratic accountability as decisions move towards EU financial institutions. At the prognostic level, however, the solution was not a return to the national level, as it was considered not only inadequate for addressing global problems, but also as beholden to the same neoliberal policies promoted by the EU. Indeed, there was criticism of the xenophobic Euroscepticism of the radical right, and calls for a return to national sovereignty in general were rejected. The aim instead was to go beyond Europe, and activists called for the opening of borders and for attention to be paid to neighboring countries. Especially, the motivational frame still considered Europe as the main arena for progressive struggles, with continuous (albeit often failed) attempts to build coordination at the EU level, through both informal exchanges between national networks and more formalized transnational campaigns. Thus, a sort of critical Europeanism remained resilient among the movement organizations that were still invested in the attempt to build another Europe.

Moreover, processes of cross-national diffusion of frames and repertoires of action continued to be at work in this period, through both direct contacts and mediated channels. Direct forms of diffusion have been singled out within some geopolitical areas: Egyptian activists learned from Tunisians, with whom they had direct contact, but Egyptian activists also spread their ideas through mediated channels to the Spanish anti-austerity activists, who had direct communication with Greek activists as well as with the activists of the Occupy movement (Romanos, 2016; see also Gitlin, 2012). Across distant countries, social media facilitated the quick exchange of information and mutual learning, especially when issues were resonant with specific social movement organizations (Roos and Oikonomakis, 2014). During the anti-austerity protests, the Europeanization of protest also brought about the diffusion of ideas and practices (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005), thanks in part to the perception of a shared destiny in the global crisis.

One element that was particularly noticeable in its spread from one country to the next was the protest camp (*acampadas*), as the long-term occupations of open-air public spaces came to be the main repertoire of contention of the anti-austerity protests. Within the occupied squares, prefigurative politics developed as attempts to innovate democracy through the experimentation with different practices but also the elaboration of alternative knowledge (Della Porta, 2015). More precisely, it can be seen that protest camps spread from Tahrir Square in Egypt to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, and from there to Syntagma Square in Athens and Zuccotti Park in New York to many squares and parks in many other countries of the world, including Gezi Park in Turkey and the French squares of the Nuit debut (see Della Porta and Atak, 2017; Felicetti and Della Porta, 2018, respectively).

Even if they did not spread to all countries, when and where they did spring up the *acampadas* became part and parcel of the very identity of the anti-austerity protests as the occupied squares and parks became 'vibrant sites of human interaction that modelled alternative communities and generated an intense feeling of solidarity' (Juris, 2012: 268). Aiming to reconstruct a public space, in a direct challenge to the privatization of spaces linked to neoliberal policies, activists from the different countries experimented with participatory democracy during the informal and formal gatherings in the occupied

spaces. In the elaboration of a radical imagery of democracy, participatory and deliberative democratic practices allowed activists to experience different conceptions of democracy. The combination of participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy was expressed in the attempt to build large *agoras* where 'normal' citizens could exchange ideas, discuss and learn from each other, thus aiming to construct critical public spheres. In fact, what is valued as democratic is the possibility to develop ideas within high-quality discursive public arenas, in which citizens play an active role in singling out problems as well as in elaborating possible solutions. This conception of democracy is prefigured in the occupied squares, through attempts to develop counterpublics that recognize the equal rights of all to speak and be listened to in a plural space, open to public discussion as well as deliberation on various issues contributing to the formation of collective solidarity and emerging identities (Della Porta and Mattoni, 2014).

Anti-austerity protests can in fact be considered as examples of *thin* diffusion as

> information travelled quickly from individual to individual through social networking sites, frequently in combination with portable mobile devices like smart phones. The ability of individuals to communicate the content of protests was therefore important to spreading imageries in the global wave of protest. More important than social movement organisations and social movement groups were activists who designed and provided web platforms able to function as content aggregators, to navigate the impressive amount of information produced in the framework of protests. The diffusion of information on the protest was therefore characterised by a weak organisational process of transnationalization. Occasions for face-to-face communication might have improved in time at the individual level – activists travelling cheaply and often – but collective arenas for transnational encounters like the social forum were less central. Indeed, the protest camps like the Spanish *acampadas* quickly achieved world visibility, but were mainly national, if not local in the range of people involved. (Della Porta and Mattoni, 2014: 286)

In this sense, although carried out through different mechanisms, 'both waves of protest speak a cosmopolitan language, claiming global rights and blaming global financial capital' (Della Porta and Mattoni, 2014). At a European level, they called for social justice and democracy, contributing to the construction of subaltern public spheres, at least in Fraser's 'weak' meaning of the term, as parallel discursive arenas in which public decisions in the EU were criticized and alternative visions of Europe discussed.

Constructing a Strong Public Sphere from Below? The Challenge Ahead

In summary, research on progressive social movements has pointed to their innovative capacity in terms of conceptions and practices of democracy, with the development of participatory and deliberative visions (Della Porta, 2013). Through processes of politicization, social movements have in fact created strong publics at a transnational level (Parks, 2015). As decision-making at the international level moved to less transparent, unelected bodies, social movements seemed to adapt to the shift in power by beginning to target international organizations, protesting at their summits, and building a

transnational identity. This was all the more the case in Europe, where at the beginning of the new millennium the European Social Forums represented a public space for the convergence of various streams of progressive movements from all over the continent and beyond. This does not mean, however, that the construction of a public sphere by progressive social movements has been fully achieved. Indeed, the connection between the critical public and the sovereign power, required by the *strong* concept of a public sphere, remains unachieved.

Research on the Europeanization of social movements has rather pointed to the challenges social movements encounter in their attempt to influence EU institutions in moments of economic or health emergencies as political opportunities close down (Della Porta, 2021) and organizational resources are reduced due to the reduction of space for civil society (Della Porta and Steinhilper, 2020). Indeed, changing resources and opportunities can explain, at the same time, the challenges to the Europeanization of progressive social movements, but also their persistent consideration of Europe as a main battleground for their struggles. The research also indicates a general decline in the collective resources that can be mobilized for action at the EU level. Not only is access to EU institutions more and more selective, but it is rare for even large NGOs to organize public demonstrations at the European level. While the ESF was seen to be capable of connecting various transnational networks, the financial crisis has reduced the material and symbolic resources that can be devoted to coordinating activities. Just as the very framing of a collective identity grew during shared protest campaigns, the reduction in opportunities to stage protests at the EU level has an effect not only on the potential external impact of progressive social movements but also on their capacity to develop ideas of an alternative Europe. While the progressive movements still aim at building 'another Europe', their hope of transforming the EU's politics, policies and polities has been weakened in the face of a closing down of political opportunities at the European level, and declining resources to mobilize transnationally.

Many studies have critically assessed the various ways by which civil society could be brought into EU governance, through consultation and participation (Liebert and Trenz, 2011). While in this institutional narrative civic society should contribute to overcoming the democratic deficit, its consideration as a stakeholder limits this function, due to the fact that 'although European citizenship is a cherished concept in the European Union, it is not linked to the idea of politically active European society' (Kohler-Koch, 2011: 71). Although some elements of citizen participation have emerged in EU treaties, the risks of bureaucratization challenge the need for preserving voluntary life, without being able to build one homogeneous identity (Sanchez Salgado, 2014: 119). While EU institutions declare their desire to complement elections with participation, for the moment there is a persistence of the system in which lobbying prevails, facilitating participation by grace and favor; no coherent transparent regime emerges and only a restricted number of well-organized NGOs have access to EU institutions. The EU, therefore, remains extremely far removed from the grass-roots, with a logic of influence prevailing over a logic of membership. Thus, despite all their best efforts, the increased participation of NGOs in EU governance has not rendered representation in the EU more democratic (Kohler-Koch, 2012: 820).

Turning to the multilevel political opportunities, the trend towards transnationalization has undoubtedly slowed down, faced with increasing competition between nation-states and the growing perception of power inequality at the EU level (Della Porta, 2020c). The upward scale shift that took place at the beginning of the millennium had come in the wake of a certain level of opening up of opportunities in the EU, pushing social movements to combine multilevel protests. While critical of existing policies and politics, many social movement organizations within the ESF were particularly engaged in interacting with certain institutions within the EU (e.g. the European Parliament and some DGs in the European Commission), building upon the belief that representative institutions could be usefully reformed (Della Porta, 2013). More negative visions of existing EU institutions came about as a result of a perceived closing down of multilevel political opportunities, defined as political characteristics that facilitated the channeling of social movement demands (Della Porta and Diani, 2006: ch. 8). The financial crisis in particular, with the increasing power of the least democratically accountable institutions (such as the European Central Bank or Eco-Fin), is seen as a critical juncture that shifted EU institutions all the more close to business and further away from citizens. In addition, the institutional failure of the EU in dealing with the so-called 'refugee crisis' is perceived as further reducing the opportunities to create inclusive European institutions (Della Porta et al., 2017). The financial crisis and especially the response of austerity driven at the EU level, with the treatment of Greece during the financial crisis taken as a dramatic example of the market-orientation of the EU and disregard for a 'Europe of the citizens', have certainly frustrated the hopes of a development of a 'social Europe'. The promotion by the EU of a vision of the crisis as the responsibility of the weaker countries of the union and the imposition of neoliberal programs oriented towards privatization, liberalization and deregulation has been seen as promoting competition between countries, based on the incorrect assumption that all EU member states had to build export-oriented economic systems. In the same period, the strengthening of the external borders of the block during the so-called 'refugee crisis' has been perceived as proof of the lack of internal solidarity inside the EU's borders, with an increase in debates over the allocation of migrants and asylum seekers (Della Porta, 2018). What is more, as has previously been mentioned, the management of the euro during the crisis increased the power of the most opaque institutions within the EU, reducing, rather than enhancing, the role of not only the European parliament but also of the parliaments of the EU member states.

However, it is precisely these challenges to visions of justice and democracy that require a continued critical focus on EU institutions as targets for contentious politics. In his *Europe in der Falle*, Claus Offe (2016) observed that the Great Recession in Europe has been defined by the spiraling of many crises, such as the financial market crisis, the sovereign debt crisis, the economic/employment crisis, and the institutional crisis. Europe has been legitimized as the guarantor for future international peace, economic prosperity cum social inclusion, promoting democracy and rule of law, counterbalancing the international power of the United States, valuable diversity and mutual supervision, capable of managing EU-wide problems against the untamed Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism. However, the very fundamental promises on which Europe was legitimated become less and less credible given the economic decline, permanent negative integration and lack of real democracy at the EU level. In Offe's vision, there is, however, a

'trap' in the impossibility of exiting the union, as '[i]n addition to being built on the "wrong" currency area and being endowed with insufficient policy capacities there is a third flow: the Euro currency is, for all practical purposes, an irreversible arrangement' (2016: 48). What is more, in an 'entrapped' Europe, these crises have also contributed to disabling agency by paralyzing those very forces that might be capable of overcoming it. Consequently, '[t]he promises and appeals by which political power is acquired (i.e. politics) are disjointed, under the dictates of financial markets, from the purposes of the achievement of which power resources mandated to governments are effectively employed and used for the making of policies' (2016: 115). The crisis justifies haste and delegitimizes dissent, constructing the narrative of an exceptional time in which rules may be suspended, with politicians replaced by technocrats in order to implement the very same policies and thus delegitimizing solidarity and social justice (2016: 116–17).

In Conclusion

In summary, while the extent to which progressive movements are capable of gaining influence with the EU institutions, and consequently connecting their critical public sphere to sovereign power, is open to discussion, all of the abovementioned challenges point to the importance of a critical vision of Europe and of actors that can call for a just and democratic Europe. In this sense, the progressive movements that have been referred to here, through different paths of Europeanization, have constructed counterpublics, in Nancy Fraser's (1990) meaning of the word, i.e. as contextualizing the exclusionary norms of the mainstream public spheres. As she noted, the proliferation of competing publics is a sign of democratic development as, especially in stratified societies, the liberal assumption of an autonomy of political institutions from the (unequal) societies does not hold (Fraser, 1990).

In times of multiple crises, the development of public spheres, in plural, is of fundamental importance in the struggle for justice and in the construction of democracy. It is no coincidence that a just Europe, built from below, was the main aim of the European Social Forum, and progressive social movements still call for the construction of 'another Europe' almost two decades later. While the normative debate on European integration has addressed the importance of the construction of democratic institutions as well as the establishment of social rights at EU level, the role of progressive social movements in the construction of European public spheres through the mobilization of counterpublics is in fact all the more important.

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