MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement)
Grant agreement no.: FP7-266831

WP7: Interpreting Activism (Ethnographies)

Deliverable 7.2: Transnational cluster report
Cluster 3: Anti-austerity/Occupy movements

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<tr>
<th>Editors</th>
<th>Phil Mizen</th>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>Work Package</td>
<td>WP7 Interpreting Activism (Ethnographies)</td>
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<td>Deliverable</td>
<td>7.2 Transnational cluster report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissemination level</td>
<td>PU: Public</td>
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<tr>
<td>WP Leaders</td>
<td>Hilary Pilkington (UM), Phil Mizen (Aston University)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliverable Date</td>
<td>31 January 2015</td>
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Document history

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<th>Date</th>
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<td>25.01.2015</td>
<td>First draft</td>
<td>Phil Mizen</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>26.01.2015</td>
<td>Comments and edits</td>
<td>Hilary Pilkington</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>29.01.2015</td>
<td>Final draft</td>
<td>Phil Mizen</td>
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1. Introduction

The ‘Anti-austerity and Occupy’ cluster emerged from the case studies proposed and undertaken by Consortium members under Work Package 7: ‘Interpreting Activism’. The final composition of the cluster comprises a highly distinctive and topical group of case studies that have as one of their objects the (consequences and impact of the) political turn towards austerity following the crisis of 2009 and the perceived crisis in political legitimacy that this entailed. The cluster thus addresses directly MYPLACE’s key objective to ‘map the range of youth activism across Europe’ and, more specifically, the WP 7 objective of ‘provid[ing] profound insight into the practices of youth activism’ at that very moment when significant and distinctive forms of youth activism were coming into being across Europe during the upswell in political activism during 2011.

The concern with activism whose focus is opposition to austerity programmes, and which includes the use of political tactics and forms of protest under the umbrella term of Occupy, makes this cluster a coherent and robust one. The one exception is the inclusion of an organisation whose substantive focus is ecological, particularly the conservation of pristine forests. This case study is included in this cluster because the forms of protest and organisation it involved – direct action, organised protest, flat or horizontal forms of organisation, petitions and educational activities – bore close resemblance to those characteristic of the other case studies. While it thus constitutes something of an ‘outlier’ when considered alongside the substantive concerns of the other social movements in this cluster, its organisational and political forms justify its inclusion.

The case studies that comprise the ‘Anti-austerity and Occupy movements’ cluster are:

- The Indignant Movement (Greece)
- Barreiro Popular Assembly (Portugal)
- Inflexible Precarious (Portugal)
- The Student Movement of Barcelona (Spain)
- Local Occupy (UK)
- Occupy Copenhagen (Denmark)
- Forest Conservation Group WOLF (Slovakia)

The coherence of the cluster is further apparent in the principal methodological approaches utilised by each case study and the types of data these produced. A summary of this is included in Table 2.1. All case studies combined periods of participant observation with recorded interviews with key participants, and this data was supported by the creation of field diaries. In a small number of cases these data were further augmented by the production and collection of visual materials, mainly still photographs, and by the collection and analysis of secondary documentation. In the main, however, the case studies share a well-defined ethnographic sensibility centred on periods involving sustained participation in, and observation of, the practices of the organisation, group or movement being researched, together with the understandings and experiences of its members.
2. Scope of the Data

2.1 Overview of Data

Table 2.251 provides a summary of the synthesised data. The number of interviews ranged from 10 to 30, with the lower numbers accounted for by problems of access to respondents brought about the informal or short-lived nature of the movements under study. In one case, Local Occupy, the number of respondent memos (19) conceals the fact that repeat interviews were undertaken with a number of respondents across the course of the research bringing the total number of recorded interviews to 29. There are, nevertheless, significant contrasts in the nature and quality of the data made available for synthesis for this report (see Introduction to D7.2). In the case of Occupy Copenhagen no node or respondent memos were made available and so data for synthesis was taken from the case study report provided under Deliverable 7.1. Elsewhere, the number of Level 1 and 2 nodes varied greatly, ranging from a high of 556 to a low of 25 Level 1 nodes; and a high of 38 to a low of 6 Level 2 nodes. There are also significant differences in the quality of the descriptive content and illustrative data provided in the node memos. In places good quality descriptive and illustrative data off-set to some degree the low number of node memos. Nevertheless, the provision of more extensive and detailed data from some of the case studies is reflected in the following analysis and discussion.
## Table 1 Overview of Data By Case Study

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<tr>
<th>Methods and Concepts</th>
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2.2 Introduction of the Organisation of the Cluster

As already noted, the cluster consists of 7 related case studies. The detail of each case study can be found in the respective D7.1 report, but to provide necessary context each case study is briefly summarised below.

2.2.1 The Greek Indignant Movement

The Greek Indignant movement (alternatively known as Aganaktismenoi, The Syntagma Square Movement, The Movement of the Squares, or hereafter the Indignants) can be regarded as a significant example of a spontaneous and initially unorganised protest movement that drew the active support of large numbers of young people. It emerged out of the widespread social protests that accompanied the austerity measures introduced in Greece after May 2010. Preceded by large-scale protests, demonstrations and strikes, the Indignant movement appeared seemingly spontaneously with no identifiable leadership and without affiliation to established political parties or social movements, or trades unions. Its first identifiable presence was the creation of an anonymous Facebook page calling for a day of protest on 25 May 2011, news of which spread quickly across social media (Oikonomides 2013). Several thousand protestors turned up in Syntagma Square in Athens on the appointed day and over the next days and weeks hundreds of thousands of people came to give the Syntagma protest their support. What united these Indignants was opposition to the austerity programme initiated in 2010. Among its demands were calls for the immediate cessation of public expenditure cuts, the resignation of the sitting government, the cancellation of the Greece’s external debts and the rejection of austerity (Douzinas 2011).

A further defining feature of the Greek Indignants (GI) movement was its rejection of established forms of institutional politics and democratic representation. The clearest expression of this was the occupation of the Square through the creation of a protest camp which became the focus for the movement’s demands and the centre of new experiments in democratic representation. A daily people’s assembly was established and a multiplicity of workgroups were created in what constituted something like a public agora that fused attempts at direct democracy with the formulation of an alternative programme of economic and social policies. Political parties and established politicians were excluded to signal the rejection of ‘politics as usual’ and to underscore the commitment to direct democracy, self-organisation and open political expression. The appeal of the Indignants was such that, on the one hand, other parallel occupations appeared throughout Greece following the call to ‘fill the squares’. One the other hand, however, from mid June 2011 onwards the Indignants were subject to extensive and sustained police interventions that came to a head around the movement’s repeated – and ultimately unsuccessful – attempts to prevent the granting of parliamentary approval to the programme of austerity measures.

Although not exclusively a youth movement, the research confirms that young people were central protagonists in the Indignant movement. This is significant given that other research suggests a long-term decline in active participation in politics among Greek young people and a growing anger towards the status quo (Galland and Roudet 2005; GSY and V-PRC 2000; GSY 2005). There is also evidence of young people’s increased belief in the need for radical change, one that the Indignants movement appears to have tapped into. Even before the crisis of 2009 discontent with the functioning of Greece’s representative institutions was
growing notably. Nevertheless, the significance of the crisis and the consequent turn towards austerity appears decisive in creating the conditions that allowed the Indignants the opportunity and support required to pose an open challenge to established political structures and orthodox economic policies.

2.2.2 The Popular Assembly of Barreiro (APB)

The Assembleia Popular Barreirense, or Popular Assembly of Barreiro (APB), provides an example of a grassroots, small-scale community movement that emerged spontaneously in late 2011. It constitutes an example of a locally oriented movement of community activists committed to alternative ways of living framed by, and in opposition to, austerity following the crisis of 2009. Its core inspiration is the nineteenth century transcendentalism of Henry David Thoreau (1995/1854) and his quest for ‘experimental’ forms of living that embrace simplicity, self-reliance and a closeness to nature. Originating in Barreiro, on the south bank of the river Tagus near Lisbon, Portugal, among APB’s defining characteristics include a commitment to localism and to the search for alternative democratic forms of living and working, and its opposition to the defining force that free market capitalism is held to exercise over daily life.

APB is thus an example of a locally grounded radical community organisation, one of a number of similar organisations and movements that emerged in Portugal expressing dissatisfaction with representational forms of democracy and the political turn towards austerity. It possesses a small and loosely defined membership, with boundaries between its members and the wider community often loose and permeable. There is no formal organisational structure and decisions are made on the basis of open consultation and direct democratic accountability. It claims no formal list of demands or any organisational manifesto, but its politics and activism are defined by a commitment to translating its democratic and anti-austerity values into practical guides for everyday living. This includes an embrace of novel social practices, such as ‘experiments’ in local democracy and debate, the staging of cultural events such as festivals and a community cinema, participation in street protests and direct engagement with local political issues. One of the most prominent examples of APB’s ethos and practice is its allotment. This allotment has a practical and symbolic value standing as both a living expression of the group’s commitment to alternative ways of living cooperatively and that also look to satisfy a tangible need.

2.2.3 Inflexible Precarious

The Precários Inflexívies (Inflexible Precarious (IP)) is one of the most noteworthy grassroots movements to have emerged in Portugal in recent years. Its focus is opposition to the perceived increase in the use of flexible and precarious labour in Portugal over the past decade and the acceleration of this following the 2009 financial crisis. Its politics are clearly of the left, as evidenced by its ideological opposition to austerity and the increased use of flexible labour, protest forms and willingness to cooperate with other left-wing organisations in campaigns and protests, some of which have been large-scale. Nevertheless, the movement emerged spontaneously outside of more orthodox political groupings in 2007, becoming the formal association IP in 2012 when it adopted a more
prescribed organisation and practice. Its constitution as a formal association involved a series of organisational changes but these did little to alter its fundamental character as a deliberative democratic organisation committed to campaigning against precarious working and living.

At the core of IP is a group of around 20 core activists who were present at its creation in 2007, but its membership grew steadily following the crisis. IP is not a youth organisation, but recognises that young people are important both as a principal source of flexible labour and therefore as a significant means of opposition to this trend. Without stable jobs and adequate wages, the organisation argues that young people are unable to undertake successful transitions to adulthood since they are denied access to the financial independence, autonomous forms of living or means to create families of their own. Direct experience of precariousness in their own lives is common to IP’s membership after leaving education, including a significant number who had held precarious jobs while still in full-time education. A key objective is to raise awareness of precariousness especially amongst young workers. This includes a commitment to raising awareness of how precarious working often contravenes labour law.

As an issue-based social movement, IP engages in a range of formal and informal activities aimed at raising consciousness of, and solidarity among, precarious workers. These include: person-to-person activities; a web site and email distribution list; the organisation of, and participation in, large demonstrations; more bespoke actions directed at call centres, shopping centres, supermarkets and outsourcing agencies; and support for citizen legislation initiatives. IP also works with trade unions and political parties to integrate consideration of precarious working into their agendas. In engaging in these activities the movement aspires to preserve its commitment to an open organisation that is rooted in the drive and enthusiasm of its rank and file membership, and that seeks internal consensus among its members through deliberative decision-making processes in which each member has an equal say. This commitment to openness and dialogue is further evident in IP activists’ membership of, or involvement in, other left-wing organisations or social movements with ostensibly progressive agendas.

2.2.4 Student Movement of Barcelona

This is a case study of the student movement of Barcelona with a particular focus on the Unitary Platform for the Defence of the Public University (PUDUP). Its inclusion in the cluster derives from its importance as an example of young people’s political organisation against austerity, more specifically, its emergence in 2010 as a movement explicitly opposed to austerity in the public university system in Spain. PUDUP is one of the most recent examples of a longer history of student and youth movements in Barcelona and one of its defining principles is the commitment to a publicly funded university system. Its principal function is to act as an umbrella organisation and it draws its members from students’ unions, student assemblies and organisations representing university teachers and administrators. PUDUP’s main activity is thus strategic and organisational, providing a forum for debate and planning, campaign coordination, public events and debates, and the organisation of demonstrations, strikes and boycotts. It is structured around an organising committee and its activities comprise regular general meetings attended by delegates from its membership and specific
working groups (commissions) devoted to strategy, mobilisation and communications (including conventional and social media).

The day-to-day organising and activism of the students at university and faculty level rests with PUDUP’s constituent groups and for this reason this case study also included research with a student activist group. The Assembly for the Faculty of History and Philosophy at the University of Barcelona is among the most radical, active, dynamic and ideologically diverse student groups in Barcelona, facilitated in part by its central location in the city. The Assembly is an informal group constituted by the loose association of its participants and members, the number of which varies between 20 and 50 at each weekly meeting. Its business is organised in a similarly informal fashion and it deals with spanning specific faculty/university matters to those of national significance. Assembly meetings also serve as a strategic function as a visible site of the student organisation’s existence and thus as a means to attract and mobilise its membership. Like all but one of the case studies in this cluster, the Assembly was committed to creating a directly democratic and open organisation in possession of not only an organisational efficacy, but also which allows experiments in the creation of alternative forms of political practice.

2.2.5 Local Occupy UK

Local Occupy (LO) is a case study of one small-scale Occupy movement that spontaneously emerged in a British region on 15 October 2011, the designated Occupy global day of action. Local Occupy thus represents a further case study of the spontaneous creation of a social movement, one that is defined by its opposition to austerity and what it takes to be a dysfunctional and broken system of representational democracy (Chomsky 2012). Local Occupy is characterised by its loose and open association, and by its desire to promote non-hierarchical organisation and participatory democratic forms. At the centre of this is Local Occupy’s General Assembly, a bespoke and open forum that gives expression to the movement’s commitment to direct democracy through the absence of a fixed executive, open access and consensus as opposed to majoritarian decision making. Alongside this are thematically organised working groups whose purpose and remit ranges from the organisation of practical issues, such as day-to-day living matters and liaison with the authorities, through to providing a forum for the deliberation of political and social issues. As a loose association the membership of Local Occupy is difficult to estimate. During its early phase those lending their active support to Local Occupy and its actions could number as many as several hundred, but alongside this ‘outer movement’ an ‘inner movement’ (Gitlin 2012) of 20 to 30 activists was more representative of its ‘core’ membership, a group that declined to around a dozen during the movement’s latter stages.

As befits the epithet, the movement’s initial incarnation involved the spontaneous creation of a Local Occupy camp on the global day of action. To begin with, this tented encampment was located in a central location adjacent to significant city buildings, but following negotiations with the authorities it was voluntarily moved to a second location close to, but not visible, from the original site. In total, this encampment endured for approximately six months from its inception, attracted interest from all ages and appeared socially diverse and inclusive in its membership and practice. Its composition therefore did not easily fit the description of the Occupy movements involving ‘a new sociological type: the graduate with
no future’ (Mason 2011). During its existence participants engaged in debate and discussion with the public, erected banners and slogans, instigated their own protest actions and lent active support to others, and organised their own workshops, lectures and cultural events for members and supporters. Following the camp’s physical demise, the remaining ‘core’ membership continued Local Occupy by other means, including participation in local protests and actions, continuing to use the group’s Twitter feed and through short-lived workshops and other gatherings.

2.2.6 The Occupy Movement in Copenhagen

The Occupy movement in Copenhagen (OC) was also established on the 15th October 2011. It thus adds to the cluster a further example of an Occupy group and its emergence as a spontaneous protest movement whose key concerns were identified as growing social and economic inequalities, disconnected and undemocratic government, the undue influence of corporations on politics and the negative consequences of austerity. It also provides a further example of a protest movement occupying a visible physical space for a prolonged period. In the case of Occupy Copenhagen this followed a gathering of some 2000 participants, from which around 20 activists began camping in City Hall Square. In the following days the encampment was consolidated and the site became the central meeting place for many local activists and a focal point for others involved in the much smaller Occupy demonstrations that had also spontaneously appeared elsewhere in Denmark. After two months of ignoring demands from the authorities for the protestors to leave the Square, the police finally cleared the camp during the early morning of 21 December 2011.

The ‘inner movement’ of Occupy Copenhagen comprised 20-30 activists. Levels of participation fluctuated, however, as did the degree to which these activists remained involved. Similarly to Local Occupy in the UK, Occupy Copenhagen was ostensibly organised according to principles of horizontal democracy, a self-conscious absence of an identifiable leadership and open and inclusive modes of participation. There was also a similar commitment to consensus decision-making as an expression of the movement’s belief that the process of reaching a decision is as significant as the ultimate decision itself. The movement also looked to organise some of its activities into specific committees and working groups. Working groups were created to focus on the movement’s use of the internet, its protest and activism, the organisation of conferences and workshops, research around specific issues, public relations activities, the facilitation of the group’s day-to-day activities and the promotion of discussion and debate. Much of the movement’s communication took place on-line, mainly via Facebook. Its Facebook presence garnered considerable attention and support during the early days, and the group’s Facebook wall became a site of contrasting and diverse views about the movement’s objectives, purpose and strategy.

2.2.7 WOLF

The Forest Conservation Group, hereafter WOLF, is an environmental and conservation movement with a specific interest in the protection of Slovakia’s natural or evolutionary forests that had disappeared in the past, had been replanted and were now in need of
protection and conservation. It possesses a national profile for its civic and legislative activities undertaken in pursuit of this and regards its guardianship of nature as transcending (organised) politics. WOLF possesses an identifiable leadership, well developed formal structure, undertakes fund-raising and campaigning activities, and is capable of supporting a small group of paid staff. For these reasons WOLF does not constitute an obvious ‘fit’ with an anti-austerity and Occupy cluster, and represents something of an ‘outlier’ in relation to the other case studies. Its inclusion within this cluster is nevertheless deemed appropriate given that a core strategic aim of the group is to limit government and corporate influence over the environment. Like the other case studies in this cluster, WOLF possesses an avowed concern to foster solidarity and inclusiveness among its grass-roots membership, while also rejecting orthodox or institutional forms of political organisation and practice.

WOLF’s membership runs to over 600 across Slovakia and as a national organisation it is well developed enough to possess a regional structure. Rejecting more orthodox organisational hierarchies as contaminated by the communist past, its organising structure, together with its name, is taken from the practices of native North American Indians. Instead of a ‘chair’ its leader is defined as ‘head chief’, while the national organisation is divided into seven regional ‘tribes’ named after Slovak mountain ranges. Each tribe possess its own ‘chief’ and functions as an autonomous unit within what is a wider federation. Each tribal chief, in turn, sits on the Council of Elders and a group of Eternal Wolves, which includes the founding and other long-standing members, is responsible for resolving internal disputes. WOLF’s structure is formal, but also open and democratic. There is no obligation on any member to obey the instructions of another member simply because of their position or function, but the influence of the ‘chiefs’ and Elders is nevertheless considerable. Only around 10 per cent of WOLF’s 670 subscribing national members pay full rates and are willing to undertake sustained engagement with the movement, although all members pay a small subscription fee. The 10 per cent of full members are thus involved in the organisation to a greater degree than the other membership, where they can become members of the group’s inner circle and have voting rights.

3. Key Findings

3.1 How do young people inhabit, interpret and own their organisations?
This first question seeks to synthesise case study findings of young people’s own interpretations and experiences of their respective organisations. Understanding these experiences and the meanings that young people attach to their activism requires attention to such questions as their organisations’ internal practices and hierarchies; how young people see themselves as relating to these and their sense of ‘fit’ with them; how they understand their relationship to their organisation as others see and understand it; and their sense of their organisations’ future development and purpose. Given the very strong focus of this cluster on organisations with an explicit (ostensible) commitment to participatory forms of organisation, this produced a strong set of findings related to movement structure and organisational forms. This generated four
core concepts that will be discussed in turn: Organisations and Movements as Assemblies; Grass Roots Movements; Open Movements; and Leaderless and Horizontal Movements.

3.1.1 Organisations and Movements as Assemblies

The concept of the ‘people’s assembly’ (Indignants, LO, PAB, OC) represents involvement in their organisation as the manifestation of a pervasive and deeply held popular democratic sentiment. This was expressed by PAB and LO activists in terms of ‘a spirit’, the possession of a sentiment or ethic of personal liberty and public freedom the commitment to which was made tangible in their participation in, and organisation of, their movements. This framing of their organisations as assemblies of the people could involve a self-conscious identification with the anarchist (PAB, GI, OC) and/or left-libertarian and syndicalist (LO) traditions of self-organisation and autonomous political and social movement, such as the Wobblies. It was further explicit in a GI activist’s association of their movement with, ‘The “ecclesia” [The People’s Assembly in ancient Greece] where we gathered and everyone could speak, to get the microphone and state their views, their problems, to tell everyone how they think that we should move on’. However, regardless of the presence or not of these connections with identifiable doctrines or political traditions, the organisation of all case study movements involved a conscious rejection of much of what they saw to be an exhausted, ineffective and failed political orthodoxy. What this concept expresses instead was activists’ participation in movements whose politics was inescapably inscribed in their organisational forms as participatory, communitarian movements (IP, LO); and where the creation of assemblies and other participatory democratic forms were both their organisational raison d’être and a central source of political efficacy (PAB). This ethos was also evident in the more traditionally structured assemblies of SMB. Even with WOLF as an outlier case study within this cluster, its adoption of communally oriented organising structures and practices, ones derived from the nation of North American Native Indian tribes, can be seen as constituting a further inflection of this popular spirit and its rejection of ‘orthodox’ organisational designations (e.g. ‘Chair’) and structures (e.g. hierarchies, committees etc.), ones that in this instance were regarded as irredeemably tainted by their associations with a communist past.

3.1.2 Grass Roots Movements

Closely related to ‘people’s assemblies’ as a concept containing the rejection across the case studies of established organising forms and the embrace of (experimental) new ones, is the related synthesis of ‘grass roots movements’ (LO). As assemblies of and for the people, ‘grass roots movements’ covers activists’ understandings of their organisations as originating in a rising wave of popular and widespread discontent made up of ‘ordinary’ people like themselves who felt a deep disarticulation from the mainstream. Without the means to represent their grievances and frustrations, or address their perceived needs, there was a conviction that what was necessitated was a politics from below. As one LO activist put it, there is a need to ‘build institutions that are democratic, from the bottom ... I mean, I just don’t understand how else you might do it ... I want people to ... do it for themselves’. Similar sentiments were expressed in other case studies, albeit in different ways, for instance in the ‘idea to create a citizens’ movement because the Barreiro is a place with extraordinary potential’ (PAB), or in the tracing of their organisation’s origins to the informal beginnings of shared anxieties among ‘a group of friends that studied in the same university in Lisbon’ (IP).
This concept of ‘grass roots movements’ (IP, LO, OC) also captures the understandings of their organisations as somehow more authentically democratic. Activists could see in these ‘bottom-up movements’ (LO) a ‘realness’ otherwise absent in the democratic and political process, examples of ‘real’ democracy as evidenced by their composition of people hitherto excluded or alienated from more traditional political and protest forms; and where the conspicuous expression of democracy could be located in the act of participation itself. As one Danish Occupy activist explained:

[OC] encompasses a broad selection of people – a real grass roots movement. For me a grass root movement is one where people can shout about all the problems of our world, but you should not expect them to have the answers. It is the first phase of awakening, when you discover the problems.

Their existence as grass roots movements was, for some, also linked to the spontaneous and voluntary nature of their association (GI, OC, LO, PAB). Of particular significance to these activists was the assertion that no-one had been obliged to attend their initial gatherings and protests, particularly as they lacked organisation and planning had been rudimentary, and at first possessed little programmatic or practical content. Nevertheless, activists pointed to the large number of people who turned up (in the case of GI, very large numbers) and then returning, sometimes for long periods of time (LO, OC, GI), as further vindication of their grass roots authenticity as popular and democratic movements of the people. There were also positive references to the ‘simplicity’ (GI), and in the case of LO and PAB the ‘beautiful’ simplicity, of this spontaneity, a sublime effortless and clarity not just evident in the absence of the usual paraphernalia and bureaucracy required to organise protest movements, but also in the natural expression of the human ‘need’ for democracy and cooperation.

Further allied to this grass roots spontaneity was the emphasis activists placed in some case studies on their importance as voluntary associations. This certainly comprised their faith in the willingness of a ‘demographic of everybody’ to turn up to support movements whose form and content was at the outset imprecise and unclear. As one LO activist remarked:

Yeah, right, we’re here, this is a statement we’re going to make. I, see, the understanding of why we’re here, there’s no leaders, it was horizontal, it’s voluntary, it attracted, as it was right in the heart of the city [name] with a high public profile, it attracted the attention of a demographic of everybody and those that showed the most commitment had a, had a variety of reasons [for turning up].

Yet, the importance of their organisations as voluntary associations extended further into their emergent forms of existence. This, to begin with at least, constituted a reluctance to allocate designations and responsibilities within their movements, or to let others do so without some sanction by the assemblies of which they were a part. As we shall discuss below, this was voluntary association as ‘loose organisation ... [where] there are no leaders, but everyone can take the initiative’ (OC). But in their form of loose associations, it also involved an acceptance that the members of this ‘demographic of everyone’ could freely choose the nature of their association, perhaps as reticent observer, nervous articulator of haphazard thoughts, passionate and articulate critics and advocates, energised activist, or skillful and consummate political performers (GI, LO, OC, PAB). To this was added the
conviction that this voluntary relationship could be transformative and that by choosing to enter into a noncommittal relationship with others there was much to be gained. ‘You know, there’s this exchange process which is, to me, what interests me most’ (PAB), is how one Portuguese activist put it, an ‘exchange process’ that other case studies also identified as allowing the nervous to find confidence, the reticent to discover their voice, the less-skilled to become more proficient and the knowing to revise and refine their views.

I knew Paula, Afonso as well, but [it was] not a group of friends or a more restricted or closed circle of friends who took the [allotment] project forward, [but] the very people who [one] got to know through the project, was the project itself, itself that was gathering and people were making more friends than they were, or even friends at all […] This in my opinion turned out to be interesting, [it] was the project itself in itself, not so much, not so much the previous relations that existed. [It] was the project itself, itself that made people. (PAB)

There are important limits to this synthetic value of the grass roots concept within the cluster, however. Compared to both the Occupy movements and the allotment movement, the SMB case study included research examining a student faculty assembly that existed in the formal sense of possessing a more proscribed existence within a formal institution (the university), together with a formal relationship to the wider PUDUP student movement in Barcelona. Nevertheless, for some student activists too the assembly embodied the commitment to ideals of open and egalitarian participation and a diverse and representative membership, and contained within this was a potential to build trust and solidarity. And they too spoke of participation in their assembly as a ‘constant learning experience and the most direct form [of student activism] of all’ (SMB). Interestingly, in the case of IP the fieldwork took place soon after its members made the decision to move from a grassroots movement to a formal association. This transformation indeed required a long and detailed process of deliberation and self-critique, from which emerged the commitment to formalisation in the name of improved efficacy. To this end, IP instigated a series of changes involving the creation of a board of directors, and the designation of clearer lines of accountability, duties and responsibilities.

We started to think that the way we were operating as a movement was unsustainable. People were getting tired of that system. The responsibilities of each one of the people involved weren’t written down and there were always some that were taking-on more responsibilities, whether because they were more available or because they had more experience or more political competence. All the work was falling into the hands of the same people. With this change of structure, the board has that responsibility and the legitimacy to enforce the decisions. (IP)

3.1.3 Open Movements
In the synthesised concepts considered above, claims to organisations defined in terms of their openness and diversity already feature but their significance and strength merit their treatment as a further specific concept. Indeed, all case studies involved activists speaking of being attracted to their movements because of its openness to: a diverse membership,
plurality of views and opinions, levels of commitment and participation, uncertainty and ambiguity, and modes of organisation.

In invoking these dimensions, contrast is made with their involvement in, or perceptions of, other left-wing or radical protest movements. Often this contrast avoided simple binaries and many spoke of revolutionary and socialist movements and parties, together with the labour and trades union movement, to be among their ‘greatest allies’ (OC, LO, GI); and many activists had themselves been active in or members of these movements and parties. Nevertheless, there was a strong perception that the platforms and practices of radical left organisations had become irrelevant, anachronistic or ineffective. One IP activist noted ‘that it is a common thing among the left to spend more time denigrating other left sensibilities than trying to work with them’, while a LO activist also noted the suspicion with which left activists viewed the Occupy movement: ‘[be]cause a lot of the regular lefties that would go to the Marxist groups, that would be involved in union activities, they felt actually quite dismissive of it [Local Occupy] because it was, it wasn’t rooted in a militant struggle.’ As one GI activist commented, ‘It’s what I told you before that from a point onward, it was the leftists that kept repeating the same old theories. This thing became too obvious and it started to disrupt the whole situation.’ (GI). And again, ‘they are always busy “classifying people”’, whereas Occupy meant ‘loose organisation [...] there are no leaders, but everyone can take the initiative’ (OC).

The consequence is that perceived attempts by left organisations to unduly influence their movements was inimical to these case studies’ core concern to (re)build their organisations as democratic ones. For the Occupy case studies this was expressed most clearly in their claim that, ‘We are the 99% [which] meant that no one or no voices – by principle – should be excluded from participating’ (OC). Activists in other case studies also spoke of the desire to create ‘a really brilliant communal environment and that was a nice thing about it. Just this way in which there was just no boundaries between people, everyone was open to everyone else, even new people’ (LO). In this way, their movements allowed experienced activists to rub shoulders with, listen to and converse with novice protestors: ‘So, we had those people [i.e. experienced activists] but I think the majority of [Local Occupy] was people that had never participated in anything openly political or activist-y or, so I, I found that quite refreshing, as much as it made it difficult’. Alternatively:

We like that everyone can come and tell what they are thinking, because usually they are not allowed to do this elsewhere – there are no other places where people want to listen to your thoughts and opinions. Most other activist groups, you know, they always have a clear goal or direction. They are either oriented towards the left or the right wing. (OC)

This openness also extended to ideas and the best ways to express them. ‘Certainly you could speak, take the floor and speak, you could say anything and direct democracy was revived to a great extent’, was how one GI activist put it. The organisation of ‘open microphone’ (OC, LO, GI) meetings allowed many and diverse contributions and others the chance to listen to new opinions. In Syntagma Square, ‘everyone had brought microphones, loudspeakers, each one rose up saying what he wanted, what solution [they] may wished to suggest, I mean, the whole thing had started to be very, very organised’. Similar sentiments can be detected in the student assembly and its claim that previous student movements
had, intentionally or otherwise, built organisational forms that were exclusive and closed. In contrast:

The faculty assemblies are always open and want people to come, always. Someone who participates in an assembly is always going to be happy if someone comes to participate in it. It is much easier to join a faculty assembly than a well-established assembly, one that has been working together for a long time. The faculty assemblies are constantly changing with the people. (SMB)

This category of openness also covers the quality of a movement’s practices. To give substance to the Occupy movements’ claims to openness required processes and structures capable of transcending boundaries and divisions, movement forms that possessed efficacy as ‘exemplars’ of their democratic commitments. These forms may have come about in ad hoc and uncertain ways, a mixture of trial and error combined with serendipity and good foresight, but they needed above all a willingness to participate and tolerate the efforts and views of others. It was this that was ‘one of the really remarkable things [about Local Occupy], because it was such a diverse group of people, um, with lots of different agendas ... it was being open enough to listen to all the madcap ideas’. Elsewhere it was remarked that at its best their movement has managed to establish ‘a really brilliant communal environment’. This was an environment that was perceived to offer something truly transformative, where ‘there was just no boundaries between people, everyone was open to everyone else, even new people, that was the best thing, and that was the aim of it really, to be this exemplar of what we can do with spaces’ (LO).

I liked the structure and the climate; most of all I liked the structure in the sense that there was a people’s assembly which was completely open there were neither predefined frameworks nor anything like that, an open process with specific time limits and voting on specific issues rather than voting on a huge theoretical framework as was the case in the university assemblies. (GI)

The downsides to this, however, were also recognised and the concept of open movements must also be alive to activists’ understandings of its limits. One perceived problem was that openness and diversity could be bewildering. ‘Some said that Occupy [Copenhagen] was leftist. I would say that it would be a very imprecise description. [laughter] There were simply way too many forms of ideas and ideologies.’ It was also the case that openness meant the prospect of giving legitimacy to outlandish or offensive views, such as conspiracy and other related theories (LO, OC).

More practical problems to openness arose from the difficulties of remaining inclusive when so many people wanted to participate. This was a problem particularly significant to the large-scale demonstrations and protests that took place in Syntagma Square, when groups of a hundred or so people turned into meetings involving thousands. Victims of their own success, perhaps, there were nevertheless, ‘problems due to the size of the assembly. Three-four thousand people cannot express themselves freely. That is why the process was often chaotic and lengthy People were getting tired. But they kept on participating’ (GI). Not only did their openness make it difficult to provide all who wanted one a platform to speak, but further problems arose in combining these many varied voices into something more coherent.
And this is of course the problem that such a massive assembly has, that consists of various components, right? It isn’t possible for a very specific decision to come out; this can’t be done with 20 people. What will come out, say, with two thousand? (GI)

To this could be added the problems of ‘intermittence’ (OC) or selective involvement, and the difficulties they posed for some of the smaller movements. In Local Occupy, for instance, people could contribute to General Assemblies or workshops without any recourse to the implications of their interventions for the movement. Sometimes strangers or passers-by would become involved, but were never seen again. Fluctuating levels of involvement also posed problems and at times their encampments or local assemblies suffered from inadequate participation (LO, OC, GI). This was in contrast to those other less open case studies who benefitted from a more stable core of activists.

(...) one thing we’ve already learned to do was not to despair with the comings and goings. It’s a characteristic of the precarious condition: one time they have a job, other (times) they don’t. Sometimes they are more available to action, sometimes they are not. It’s the ‘activist zapping’. We try to go against this, but we do not expel or ostracize people that participate less or disappear for some time. Some organisations do that, we don’t. We’re always available to welcome and integrate everybody. (IP)

3.1.4 Leaderless and Horizontal Movements
A further related concept under this question is that of leaderless and horizontal movements, which, as one Occupy activist put it, constitutes the ‘golden thread’ (LO) that united Occupy across international boundaries. Interestingly, this interest in horizontal forms of movement organisation extended beyond the Occupy case studies, where one PAB activist noted: ‘There is no relationship of any kind of superiority.’ In contrast to other political and protest movements, these Occupy groups self-consciously rejected the development of organisational hierarchies and the representative principle in how decisions were made, preferring instead leaderless, horizontal and directly representative democratic organisation: ‘you know that this is a leaderless movement and it’s, it’s voluntary, everybody comes here and it’s, there’s no specific person organising this, we’re just all here saying we’ve got a message, we want to protest’ (LO). The perceived advantages of this are that horizontal and leaderless movements are considered as necessarily consensual, since decisions need to be made through agreement which, in turn, requires the deliberation process to be creative. To quote a pamphlet from Occupy Copenhagen:

We address a problem, ask for participants’ enthusiasm, ideas and concerns about it and compose a proposal that best serves everyone’s vision. We carefully listen to everyone’s opinions and weave them into a whole – this is a living proof that each of us is important. But to get consensus to function, we must also be flexible, and sometimes be willing to let go. Consensus means that your opinion is heard, but that does not necessarily mean that you will get your will. When everyone is involved in drafting of an action, we all have a sense of commitment and responsibility. Unity is not unanimous, and in consensus democracy there is room for disagreement, for objections, reservations, for people to step aside and not participate.
The practical organisation of this was sometimes complex. The best illustration of this is once again the large-scale Occupation of Syntagma Square, where each day constituent groups undertook discussion and voting on agendas, ballots for speakers, and the communication of decisions or suggestions sent to assembly. ‘The good thing was that it was a new structure based more on synthesis, that a lot of people participated in the decision-making [...] it wasn’t the job of the leadership voting beforehand, to take decision and do whatever they liked’ (GI). Involvement in these horizontal processes could also constitute an educative and creative experience in which, ‘many opinions were expressed, I talked with people I would never have talked to, I heard things I would never have heard, there was a very strong communication’ (GI). Elsewhere, these democratic and organisational experiments provided something tangible that could also serve as a guiding example: ‘everybody’s got to be governing themselves at the local level, that’s, that’s, that’s the, that’s the, the endgame, that would be the endgame’ (LO).

There was, however, awareness of the limits to the emphasis on leaderless and horizontal organisation. It was not uncommon for activists to remark on attempts by individuals or groups to assume some leadership role within their organisations and how this became a source of tension (LO, GI). It was also felt that many activists who supported their flat and leaderless structure would in practice leave it to others to assume responsibility. Moreover, maintaining this could require large amounts of effort and thus proved difficult to sustain. A number of case studies note how in the early stages of these movements the excitement and enthusiasm of activists provided the momentum to sustain these organisational experiments (OC, LO, GI). Nevertheless, it quickly became apparent that the sheer effort needed to maintain this proved difficult to sustain and that individuals, intentionally or unintentionally, emerged to assume greater prominence. For some activists this meant their movements were prone to ‘cliques’ (LO) or to ‘informal hierarchies’ that grew to exercise a considerable influence:

What the Occupy movement does is not to recognise the need for appropriate structures. Because of that they get shadow structures. They are very, very powerful, like an informal network of agreements and mutual understanding among key players, who control everything. (OC)

An interesting perspective on the concept of leaderless and horizontal movements is provided by the Inflexible Precarious case study. A grass roots organisation established by university friends, as their movement grew IP activists felt that their original flat and leaderless structure has become ‘unsustainable’. The absence of clearly designated responsibilities and lines of accountability meant that some individuals become overburdened, ‘because they were more available or because they had more experience or more political competencies. All the work was falling into the hands of the same people’. A long process of reflection was then entered into and after some months the decision was taken to restructure the organisations along more traditional movement lines. This involved the creation of a Board to run the organisation, but with regular activist assemblies to maintain accountability and democratic participation, and workgroups of activists to work on specific issues. Not all IP activists welcome this development and some associated these changes with a further decline in rates of participation. Others, however, identified this more formal structure as marking a return to the principles of a flat organisation. ‘I think
that now, with the workgroups working this way, we are finally being able to return to the horizontal organisation we once were’ (IP).

3.2 How Do Young People Experience their Own Activism?
This section considers young activists’ understandings and experiences of their activism and the organisations in which they participated. Five concepts were generated that expressed meanings and experiences of activism organised around the understanding that activists were creating physical and political spaces for liberty and freedom; that the meanings attached to activism could be uncertain and indeterminate; that their activism was, at least at first, experienced with great excitement and intensity; that expectations of activism and the demands that were placed upon them could be extensive; and that activists had clear understandings of the barriers they faced in becoming and remaining active.

Table 2. Forms of Activism By Case Study

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Activism</th>
<th>GI</th>
<th>PAB</th>
<th>IP</th>
<th>SMB</th>
<th>LO</th>
<th>OC</th>
<th>WOLF</th>
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3.2.1. Spaces of Liberty and Freedom

The concepts of democracy, openness and participation included in Section 3.1 lead directly into consideration of what these ideas and commitments mean for the young activists. One concept that captures this is the understanding of activism as directed towards the creation of autonomous and free spaces, or what one PAB activist described as the creation of ‘spaces of liberty ... because it is important to have this space, which are spaces of freedom’.

In this instance, PAB activists’ creation of a community group, at the heart of which was collective allotment, was understood as space to bring their the community together in the face of the adversities of austerity, through talks, debates and cultural events (e.g. a community cinema) and that this could be combined with their ecological sensibility and a practical embodiment of their beliefs (by growing food).

Undoubtedly the clearest example of this concept is provided by the Occupy case studies and the centrality encampments had to understandings of their activism. All three Occupy case studies involved activists committing themselves to supporting an open-ended occupation, for Greek Indignants Syntagma Square, for Occupy Copenhagen City Hall Square and for Local Occupy close proximity to significant civic buildings before this first camp was voluntarily relocated to another, far less conspicuous, central location. For all of these Occupy case studies, therefore, a defining element of how their protest against austerity was understood was through the formation of a prominently located alternative community. This was a tactic which they regarded as creating spaces for ‘peace and freedom’ through the commandeering of small areas of public space that could be (temporarily) claimed for more progressive purposes. As one OC activist remarked, ‘We like that everyone can come and tell what they are thinking, because usually they are not allowed to do this elsewhere – there are no other places where people want to listen to your thoughts and opinions’.

GI activists understood the occupation of Syntagma Square in similar terms. Some remarked that their occupation had served to ‘empower them as free citizens’ through creating a
space where they could ‘share with others problems and difficulties’. All emphasised how the Square’s occupation had produced in them a ‘strong and enthusiastic engagement’ with the issues and how their presence in the Square seemed to exercise a tangible force over those who went there: ‘It is then that I felt my power as people, as voter, as free citizen. It is then that I understood that we have a voice’. In the case of GI, however, the huge crowds attracted to the Square raised important questions about the degree to which this commitment to freedom could be realised. Crowds in excess of 5000 protestors were in part responsible for the formulation of the assembled activists into working groups and neighbourhood assemblies, so as to preserve and extend the occupation’s desire to create free spaces that had a meaning and purpose. ‘Beyond a certain point you could neither hear nor express yourself [...] in the local squares, say those of the municipalities, it was much easier …’, was how one activist put it, while another remarked that, ‘in the local ones, yes it was more substantial [...] It was more practical, it was easier, it was better. You could discuss issues very easily. While after a certain point this was very much complicated in Syntagma’.

Thus, the Syntagma Square occupation also highlights the existence of division as well as freedom within their spaces of liberty, as the Syntagma Square occupation took on a highly differentiated form. Corresponding to the physical organisation of the square, a political divide quickly appeared between the ‘upper square’ (pano plateia) and the ‘lower square’ (kato plateia), with each one corresponding to different forms of mobilisation and protest. In the GI case study report this is referred to as the ‘two faces of the square’, where activists occupying the ‘upper square’ understood themselves to be both more militant and indignant, and motivated by a more explicit nationalism. Activists in the ‘lower square’, in contrast, saw themselves as possessing a greater collective orientation and more interested in developing strategy and formulating demands. As one ‘lower square’ activists put it: ‘The upper part was a mob who shouted, cursed, targeted the Parliament with laser lights, shouted ‘thieves’; the lower part we had a purpose, we were determined to do something’.

3.2.2 (In)determinate Meanings

In all case studies activists were motivated to varying degrees by their opposition to austerity or to the undue influence of government intervention into those things that they cared most passionately about. However, beyond this sense of injustice and lack of faith in existing political structures and processes, a notable division existed between those movements and organisations with a clearer sense of purpose and identifiable goals, and those characterised by greater ambiguity. For this reason it is possible to discuss the case studies in terms of the concept of ‘(in)determinate meanings’, where alongside the strength of activists’ commitments to protest and opposition, and to specific outcomes and goals, there sometimes exists a conspicuous uncertainty regarding what they or their organisations represented beyond support for more abstract notions of democracy, freedom and participation as noted above.

The case studies where movement meanings and goals took a more clearly determinate form included WOLF. As a single-issue environmental organisation, activists in WOLF understood that central to their activism was the preservation of virgin forests and, more generally, the conservation of nature. As one activist
remarked, ‘The atmosphere is perfect. There is some kind of solidarity, some kind of very friendly atmosphere within WOLF. We like nature and we try to reach the same [objectives]’. For another activist the reason for membership was similarly clear: ‘WOLF has tried to save our forests and it is good idea and feeling. That is why I am a member of WOLF. It makes sense because I have a good feeling that I belong to the people who are trying to realise a good idea’.

Also included in the determinate part of this concept are SMB and IP. Like the other case studies, IP activists proclaimed their opposition to austerity and what they regarded to be a corrupt political class, and their endorsement of public services, social welfare and greater equality. However, the insistence on the need for ‘a radical change of regime’ was also focused upon building their movement around the single issue of mobilising precarious workers including, if possible, an ‘International Precariat Organisation’. To this end, activists shared a concern to engage in consciousness raising activities directed at precarious workers, the trades unions and other social movements, combined with (co)organising demonstrations and protests targeted at employers and recruitment agencies. For the SMB activists, there was also a clearer sense of determinate purpose, notwithstanding vigorous discussion on how these could be achieved. Nevertheless, activists understood that the goals of their organisation had been set by the activities of previous student movements, but that these had now acquired new significance with the onset of austerity. Activists thus shared a commitment to defending the public university system through mobilising student opposition to its restructuring and where possible influencing university policy: ‘the goal of the movement right now, I suppose that, well, that it is to stop the cuts, stop the layoffs, university access for everyone.’

The other case studies, however, occupied the indeterminate end of this concept and for most their activists understood this as a self-conscious decision. To some extent this was the product of a social movement emerging already in possession of significant levels of support, but with little sense of what it was that bound their protest together. Opposition to austerity and the perceived failure of liberal democracy were common themes – or, agreement that ‘capitalism being a bad thing’ as one LO activist summed it up – but there appeared little consensus on the origins of these or agreement on the most effective forms of protest. But what activists understood this to mean in practice was less certain, in large part a consequence of the difficulties in finding shared meanings and understandings within such a diverse activist group. Thus, ‘ordinary’ activists coming to the occupation of Syntagma Square to show their solidarity and to participate in the debates would find themselves alongside ‘factions referring to Marxist-Leninist theories’ or ‘the parliamentary and extra parliamentary left and of the anarchist movement and other radical movements, but this does not mean that it was like a university assembly, there were too many people’.

Perhaps the much smaller-scale Local Occupy illustrates one of the most conspicuous examples of activists’ indeterminate understandings of their movement. The spontaneity with which the movement came into existence meant that many diverse views and political positions were included among participants. As one LO activist remarked:
Basically for the first four weeks all and sundry came, homeless people came, conspiracy theorist nuts came, Marxist, lefties came, people that were just interested came, people, it was such a, like a mixing pot of people came that there was no discrimination.

This indeterminacy of activist views and understandings was understood to be both a strength and weakness. As a protest movement that was ‘open to just anything’, its strength was understood to lie its value as a place where people could come to listen to the diverse views of others and also to contribute their own. As one activist commented, ‘one of the really remarkable things’ about Local Occupy was it ‘being open enough to listen to all the madcap ideas ... the big conspiracy theories or anything like that ... basically to hear what people were saying and their grievances and what their understanding was.’ Activists nevertheless also recognised the difficulty of holding such a diverse group of views together and it was for this reason that they placed such emphasis on their movement as a place of discussion ‘as a group, in order to come to conclusions which you can all get behind.’ Others nevertheless recognised that establishing such ‘conclusions’ could be challenging because,

[there are] loads of things you can’t get consensus on, err, and that may or may not be important. In the end we, we genuinely felt that it wasn’t important because if we could get consensus on a range of things, maybe even a small range of things, maybe even if we can get down to one or two or three issues, um, then we’ve got something really powerful to work with and we’ve got some powerful arguments.

3.2.3 Emotional Activism

A further concept of significance to the cluster is its emotional dimension. More specifically, being active and participating in their protest movements, for some, could be experienced as an exciting and sometimes exhilarating emotional experience. Caution is needed here, however, because this concept also generates important negative translations within the cluster. For three of the case studies (OC, LO, SMB) the emotional excitement associated with activists had an identifiable presence in the data, whereas for the remainder of the case studies it did not feature in a conspicuous way in their analysis of the meanings and understandings that activists possessed.

Where it was present, this excitement can be understood as having more than affective significance, since activists usually identified their excitement as having an object. In feeling excited, activists spoke of being thrilled, inspired or animated by the success of their movements in mobilising sometimes-large numbers of disparate people into a seemingly coherent movement. They spoke of the joys of ‘togetherness’, where the discovery of many other people who understood the world in similar ways, or whose experiences of life more or less coalesced around shared points of focus, provided sources of elation, especially during the initial phases of their involvement. As one GI activist put it, ‘I was so moved that I wanted to cry, the massiveness of the gathered crowd was unbelievable. There were incredibly too many people; I have never witnessed so many people in any rally. The crowd
was unexpectedly vast; the whole thing was too moving.’ The feeling of involvement as something intensely moving was also evident elsewhere: ‘it was really exciting at the start because you know here were all these people who had no reason to be together other than what like that they’re angry, but they also want to be together, they want to be joined by something’ (LO). For one OC activist, ‘Then the Occupy demonstration comes along [...] a bunch of people think it is interesting. [...] The exciting part was that we were dealing with a movement that was asking a lot of questions, but did not have the answers’.

The excitement of others was added to by the belief that their movement offered an important source of corroboration. In relishing their chance to combine with other like-minded people, activists spoke of how their excitement was given further impetus by a strong sense of relief that their movements seemingly offered tangible proof that the ‘left-left field views, opinions and outlooks’ they had long professed now seemingly seemed substantiated. ‘It felt like, yeah I guess I felt like vindicated because you know, I’m not crazy, you know, the world is in this fucked up state and like I’m not the only person who can see that’, is how one LO activist put it. In another example, the coming together with people holding what seemed to be corresponding sentiments and outlooks could produce a thrilling, almost surreal, feeling of liberation.

Yeah, that’s massively it, it’s like, you know, it gave people in a way an ideology, like it gave them empowerment ideology just sort of a critical like, I mean I use the critical theory, but yeah, for everyone, do you know what I mean, so it’s not like, we sort of joked sometimes that we’d wake up in the mornings and start talking about critical theory and say we’re like a Swedish film [...] that’s what the occupation was for me as well, it gave everyone sort of access to that kind of stuff and that’s really exciting [...] (LO)

This concept of emotional activism does extend beyond the Occupy case studies, albeit in a limited way. In the student movement case study, there are a number of allusions to the emotional dimensions of activism and particularly to the pleasure and delight that activists could derive from their participation in their movements. It was the excitement associated with a movement that seemed so diverse and engaged that made one young student activist join the assembly, while for another the movement’s ‘togetherness’ and the opportunity it presented to participate with a disparate group of others seemed to offer a thrilling prospect. As one SMB activist remarked,

[…] in the assemblies maybe you have people who are much farther to the right or left than you or people that are not very politicised or people that only want to work on the issue of the public university or who are looking for other angles or for change and horizontal models or whatever[…] but this is exactly what makes it strong and fun.

3.2.4. Expectations and Demands

We had really exciting meetings, but the problem was that it quickly became a bit too intellectual and vague instead of talking about solutions [...] The meetings became very slow and lasted for hours, which caused many to leave the movement. The stubborn ones who kept showing up were all the loonies. All
of these conspiracy people [...] People talking about Chemtrails, New World Order and Illuminati and I could keep going [...] (OC).

Included in the above quote are a number of themes that have been used to substantiate the conceptual analysis hitherto developed, including a further reference to the excitement that activists could derive from their involvement. Nevertheless, the quote also illustrates another concept; the expectations and demands that activists understood their involvement to require. Being active was certainly understood by many as an exciting, intense and exhilarating experience, but what was also evident was the reality of activism’s considerable day-to-day demands and the sheer effort often required to sustain participation.

Again, the translation of case studies around this concept does reveal exceptions. In the case of WOLF it was commonly accepted that the extent of their involvement was purely a matter of individual judgement and that there were few standards against which this was judged. It seemed that few hard and fast expectations were placed upon members. As one WOLF activist put it, ‘It’s a free and liberal organisation by its own way. If you want you can, if you don’t want you don’t have to.’ And again, ‘Wolf is nice because of its informality, because of the enthusiasm of the people which is based on their stamina. Sometimes it looks like a wolf pack. And their openness. People in the WOLF say what they think roundly.’ This informality indeed seemed one of the organisation’s principal appeals, where ‘WOLF for me is the place where I rather relax instead of taking responsibility. I like doing things for WOLF but I don’t choose responsible things’.

The absence of clear-cut expectations was apparent among activists in the other case studies and others too spoke of the latitude that went with their involvement. As one student movement activist commented: ‘A lot of times I have seen how being involved in the assembly didn’t mean you needed to spend a lot of time, otherwise it would be hard to get involved. Right now it is hard for me to get involved with the assembly at my faculty because some days I can and others I can’t [...]’. Nevertheless, the same student activist acknowledged that, ‘[...] to a certain extent, it requires a lot of time for many people. And availability, obviously’. These themes were repeated across the other case studies as activists commented upon the often-considerable demands and expectations that went with their activism.

Some, for instance, spoke of the physical toll that being active exacted. One student activist spoke of ‘The exhaustion from all the accumulated effort, from all the dedication’, while another framed this effort in terms of a ‘sacrifice but it’s a sacrifice I consider I have to take’. After the initial excitement and enthusiasm, this activist continued, ‘what remains are the conscious responsibilities of the necessity of the SM and you have to work on it. For me it’s neither a job. At least, I don’t think of it that way. However, you do know that you should put time on it’. One IP activist confessed to being ‘mentally tired’ from the effort and another felt that ‘sometimes the activism overwhelms me’. In other case studies activists were clearly aware about the broader implications of the demands that were being placed upon members. One Local Occupy spoke about her own disengagement from the movement as a consequence of ‘activist burnout really kicking my arse’ while in IP there were concerns about the possibility of high rates of activist turnover.

The comments of these two activists also suggest that the demands of being active were felt most acutely in the case studies of smaller movements. Indeed, one of the motivations for
IP’s restructuring into a more formal organisation was the concern that the same people were taking on most of the organisational responsibilities. In Local Occupy a small core of activists had emerged to take on the lion’s share of maintaining the movement as a functioning occupation and this was also the case in Occupy Copenhagen.

We have a core of 10-15 people that are the ones who are really active and besides that there are really a lot of people. [...] I went on working while some others were like [...] got out of it. They were on their travels. And so I tried to be the one who helped keep the threads together. Now let’s do these things, let’s get on! But no one did anything, so we’re just about 4-5 people coming to the meetings [...] and only two of us who did something real.

3.2.5. Becoming and Remaining Active

The effort and demands of being active in these case studies also constitute one example of the obstacles that activists faced to their continued and long-term involvement in their movements. A further concept to emerge from the synthesis of the case study data thus deals with the barriers to activism that respondents felt they encountered, both in terms of the willingness and ability to join their movements and also their capacity to sustain their involvement. What is clear is that beyond their genuine commitment to creating open and democratic movements (section 3.1.3) and spaces of liberty and freedom (section 3.2.1), many activists reported difficulties and problems with becoming and remaining active despite their inclination to get involved.

Some activists linked the uncertainties they experienced around whether or not to join their movements to their perceptions of its exclusivity. They had to confront, as one IP activist put it, the fact that, ‘[p]eople have an enormous suspicion of collective movements. When I say I am an affiliate of IP people immediately say that it is like a political party, that I’m looking for a job’. Elsewhere there was a feeling that these movements could be dominated by small interest groups or cliques (see 3.14 above), so that activists needed ‘to be very convinced, it is difficult to join the assembly, it was hard for me to adapt to it’ (SMB). Another student activist also initially felt that the student assembly was controlled by a small and exclusive group and so, ‘[a]t first I was reluctant to join the assembly even though I saw that they organised things [...] I had the prejudice, well I had heard and I thought because of their discourse that it was very much occupied by the SEPC [Catalan Countries Student Union]’.

The perception that their movements were, or had become, internally insular and exclusive was also a reason for activist disengagement. After the initial frenzy and excitement of Local Occupy’s first days, one activist detected the emergence of a narrowness of spirit and organisation that was felt to have tainted its original purpose and vision. This, it seemed, took on particular significance with the voluntary relocation of the encampment to a second site and then preparation for a longer-term occupation. With this move the movement seemed to have become more ‘cultish’:

It was like you were involved or you weren’t involved and if you were the outside person, it became more that you would prove your way in, you would have to. You’d be invited in if you seemed like an important person but just
random people walking round the streets, like youths, I think they had a less of a
great reception from certain people [...] that sort of, sort of turn to egotism [...] but in [site of first Local Occupy camp] I don’t think that would have been possible. (LO)

For some activists this ‘cultish’ development seemed difficult to avoid, particularly where informal relations and friendship networks provided an important base for a movement. In the case of the student assembly, it was felt that ‘just as some people stay because they have friends there are also people who leave because there are groups of friends, or, it is something that you have to be careful about [...] What you have to watch is that it doesn’t become a barrier for many people’ (SMB). Another student activist also commented that the pathways into the student assembly were ‘fairly closed despite the will of being open’, with the consequence ‘that it is fairly complicated for a good segment of the students to enter in these spaces once they are consolidated and have been developed’ (SMB). One IP activist concurred but explained a tendency towards insularity as a possible consequence of the effort that activists were required to expend: ‘With the shortage of time for other dimensions of personal life we find out that even our networks of social relationship are becoming tighter. That is not good for an activist’.

One further significant barrier to becoming and remaining an activist was gender. Young women feature significantly among participants in most of the case studies and most spoke enthusiastically about their movements’ sympathies towards women activists and support for feminist ideas (c.f. WOLF). The data from the case studies is more suggestive than conclusive on this matter, but it was clearly the case that for some activists their female gender was a significant consideration. As one female student activist remarked:

Something that is very important in my faculty, which to me is obvious, is that it is a faculty with 65 or 70 per cent boys and the rest are girls in the assembly of the faculty there is an even larger proportion of boys, so this is an amazing obstacle for women to join the fight and which is so important. (SMB)

More detail on these obstacles emerges from the case study of Local Occupy. Here female activists spoke of the additional problems that young women had in becoming and remaining active, such as the need to provide care for small children or the demands of combining their activism with their domestic and paid work responsibilities. For the younger women and teenagers, being active could also require convincing parents and guardians to allow them to sleep out with relative strangers in a central urban location and with little in the way of proper personal security. These problems could be compounded by the relatively smaller presence of young women in these movements to provide additional sources of solidarity and support. For one young female activist these constituted powerful disincentives for young women to become involved:

There was a lot of like young women who would come along and they would sort of, you know, agree with what’s going on but personally [...] if I was mindful of, of like you know, what it was actually, what it took to be there, I would probably be quite you know, wary. It was a very dangerous place to be thinking about it now because, obviously, it’s mostly men there, and it’s also uncomfortable because it’s mostly men there meaning that, you know, all the
things that you have to deal with as a young woman, you have to deal with by yourself.

3.3 What are Young Activists’ Perceptions of Politics and the Political?

This question examines the perception of politics and the political held by young activists involved in these movements. Five concepts emerged from the synthesis of the case study data that expressed the belief: that representative democracy had failed; that there had been a failure of the political class and ruling elite; that voting had little practical impact on the organisation of politics or on daily life; that (neoliberal) economic orthodoxy had come to exercise dominance over democratic politics; and that popular and radical protest such as the examples undertaken here were likely to meet with state surveillance and repression.

3.3.1 The Failure of Democracy

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the case study composition of this cluster, the crisis of democracy emerged as a significant concept. This crisis is already implicit in some of the concepts raised in Section 3.1 where activists inhabited and interpreted their own organisations in the name of creating new forms of participatory democracy. This concept thus further develops a number of themes implicit (and explicit) in this earlier discussion, while also adding new dimensions: lack of confidence or trust in the political system, the crisis of politics, a failure of democratic representation, and complicity in this among established political parties.

This sense of democracy as somehow of little interest or value is evident in the data from the WOLF case study, where there is little discussion on politics and the political system in Slovakia in general. Respondents generally appeared relatively sanguine about the future of politics in Slovakia but allusions to the difficulties they felt faced the political system were evident in activist concerns about apathy and inertia among ‘the people’. As one activist put it, ‘As far as I am concerned we can move on, but it depends on the people. But the people are not interested in that […] they all just complain and they do not want to do anything’. Another was more forthright in the assessment ‘that I see politics as something quite miserable’. Change, according to this person, would have to be instigated by ‘ordinary people, [t]hat they occupy themselves, I see it very positive[ly]. Because I think that if an important change was to occur, it will come from ordinary people, not from the politicians. I think it is naive to think that some politician will save us’.

Closely allied to this is a deeply held and pervasive view among many of the participants in the case studies that democracy is in crisis and has been so for a long period of time. As one student activist put it: ‘the current democracy is pathetic, but what I want to explain is that currently we do not live in a democracy, but that we actually live in the hegemonic illusion that this is the only possible democracy’ (SMB). This sense that the democracy and the political system is illusory is shared by other student activists and the feeling that, ‘[…] parliament does not represent me at all. I, for me, democracy is a place where I can participate, not delegate my vote to someone and that this someone uses it as he wants’.
The feeling that a significant disarticulation between the people and the political institutions and parties that were supposed to represent them had taken place was also evident in other case studies (LO, OC). One PAB activist termed this, ‘a huge distance into which people have fallen’ while in the Local Occupy case study activists frequently lambasted what they regarded as the continuing pretence to democracy in the UK political system.

More specifically, common to a number of the case studies was the belief that the political system and machinery of government in general was incapable of representing the interests of the people. ‘It doesn't represent us’ (PAB) or ‘there was nothing to represent me’ (GI) were thus common refrains. For activists in LO this failure of representation could be articulated in terms of a breach, or failure, of the democratic bargain constituted between the people and those who claimed to represent their interests. As one activist remarked, ‘You know, we look on the state as this contract, you know, it’s, it’s a tet-for-tet [sic] situation in a sense that you are given something for your involvement. Now how many people regard that as being, you know, irrelevant I don’t know?’ Other activists in LO traced this breach to the repudiation of the general election commitments of the UK Liberal Democratic Party in their haste to form a coalition government with the Conservative Party in 2010. ‘You know, they’d given their vote to Clegg [UK Deputy Prime Minister] and thought they’d found someone politically that was going to represent them, and that hadn’t happened. (LO). Elsewhere, Greek activists also identified this lack of representation with the failure of particular political parties to give substance to their claims or to provide a meaningful alternative to current orthodoxy.

There was nothing to represent me. We used to talk about socialism and the first thing I tell them is that socialism is a very good idea, perfect for me, only that I have not seen socialism in Greece. I mean who has experienced socialism to say something about socialism? There was just a party which originally stated that we are capitalists and another party stating that it is socialist but acted as capitalist. So there was not anything to represent me. [...] Yes, I would say that 80 per cent of my generation is politically inactive because we do not trust anyone, for we have seen that being involved is a waste of time (GI).

The belief that democracy had failed, as the quotation from this Greek Indignant activist also illustrates, was also linked to the erosion of popular trust in the political system. ‘Distrusting the system’, as one OC activist put it, was a commonly articulated view of the relationship between the people, government and state, one whose consequences were felt in the further erosion of respect for politics and politicians. According to one GI activist, ‘there is no trust in this thing [i.e. Greek democracy]. I do not see any political system that currently inspires respect. It is a totally rotten, exhausted thing that will end and must end, at least as it exists now’. For others, those who chose to participate in this decaying and iniquitous political system the experience could be intrinsically corrosive and ‘[t]hat accession through the system, it corrupts you. You rot, lose your humanity and the touch with society outside of parliament’. (OC)
3.3.2 The Failed Political Class

Closely linked to the failure of democracy is the concept of the failed political class. This concept expresses a clear sense across the case studies that politicians and the ruling elite had lost much of their popular authority and in the process had become alienated from the people. The political class, it was felt, were self-serving and self-interested, although this sentiment did not result in a blanket rejection of orthodox politics or politicians. The concept thus also expresses a set of more ambiguous sentiments in which doubts about the political class existed alongside continuing commitment to engagement with orthodox politics.

‘In my opinion’, as one PAB activist explained, ‘there is a big frustration with the political class. Because we feel that people are unable, or party X or the party Y, it is unable to change the things we are living right now.’ Contained within this remark is the widespread sentiment among activists that the people had become exasperated, despondent or angry with the existing ‘political class’ and their incapacity or unwillingness to confront the major problems facing society. Many activists judged this malaise to be pervasive and well-known, and regarded it as a source of growing popular resentment. ‘I think that there is a growing fraction of Portuguese society that hates the political parties, their members and the games of interests related to them’, related one IP activist. ‘This means that there is a growing discrediting of the political regime and respective institutions (IP). A student activist put this more directly: ‘Now you can see a lot of corruption cases, you can see that the political class is useless [...] and I think, deep down, that responds to much deeper dynamics and a lot more about the system’ (SMB).

Of particular importance was the view that the political class had become alienated from the needs and views of the people, in part a consequence of the changing character of orthodox politics as a practice. Not only were members of the political class generally viewed with suspicion and disdain, some activists equated this with what they regarded to be the professionalization of politics. Contrasting the past, where ‘people had a long path into politics and [were] very experienced’, one activist felt that, ‘now political parties are dominated by people from youth branches [...] People that have never had a proper job, a profession’ (IP). To this was added a view of the political class as self-serving, a self-perpetuating group of privileged people divorced from everyday issues and out to benefit themselves and those of their kind. Examples of this included the Old Etonian and public school dominated British coalition government mentioned frequently by activists in Local Occupy and the ‘two families, two parties, PASOK and New Democracy’ in Greece. ‘For me [there is] no real difference between them, I always consider them identical’ in their pursuit of a neo-liberal agenda and their disregard for social welfare’. As a result, it was felt, there had been the steady hollowing-out of democracy. As this GI activist continued, ‘It is just party politics and replacing parties with other parties [...] it means new corruption, corruption on corruption, It does not change anything for me’ (GI). And again:

I believe that, in the first place this is a poison that has been instilled by the two-party system from the restoration of democracy onwards, that political parties are places of clientelism. Right? PASOK and NEW Democracy basically. They taught the people that this is it for many years. (GI)
Belief in a self-serving political class could also broaden into concerns about a self-serving elite. Activists from the Occupy case studies were particularly likely to articulate their belief in the existence of tightly knit connections between key players in the political class and those running major corporations, social welfare provision, the media and the cultural industries for their own and their friend’s interest. Elsewhere, this was expressed as the belief in the existence of ‘an unholy alliance between powerful people representing the political system, the financial (economic) system and the media. In some cases politicians are also seen as the marionettes led by cynical capitalists’ (OC). As one GI activist put it, ‘Politicians often profess things that will accomplish for the good of the people but in the end they become pawns of the ruling class, the economic elite of the country and their own interests, only for their own benefit and to maintain this situation’.

Importantly, the critiques offered in both this and the previous section (3.3.1) did not simply comprise the crude dismissal of either democracy or politicians. On the contrary, both concepts were also inclusive of a more nuanced opinion that it was precisely because of these deficiencies that ‘the people’ needed to become both more democratically aware and more politically active. There was also recognition that disillusionment with democracy and politics could lead to deep and unhealthy alienation and disengagement among the people. ‘There is a risk that people devalue, discredit politicians but they should not discredit politics’, said one GI activist, and she continued that politics was too important for it to be conceded to the interests of an inefficient, corrupt or self-interested political class. ‘It is one thing the politicians and another thing is politics. Politics is the only protection for the weak in the society. Politics is to institutionalize humane systems and in order to have equal access to all things concerning a decent life for all with equality. Politics is the only thing that can do it’ (GI). These sentiments were shared by one IP activist who felt that, ‘I think that we cannot conceive politicians as if they are all alike. That’s a mistake. After all, all of us are politicians in the sense that we are involved in politics and doing politics.’ (IP)

3.3.3 Voting Will Not Change Anything

Notwithstanding this continuing commitment to democratic ideals and values, a further concept of voting will not change anything illustrates the deep reservations that many activists held about the current political system. Common across the case studies are activists remarking that voting in organised elections ‘was not going to change anything’, that ‘I think there is a huge distance in which people feel absolutely unable to a vote, it is not going to change anything’ (PAB) or the popular refrain of, ‘if voting changed anything they would abolish it’ (LO). The existing system of parliamentary elections were thus regarded by many with great cynicism and suspicion, feelings ‘that parliament does not represent me at all [... for me] democracy is a place where I can participate not delegate my vote to someone and that this someone uses it as he wants’ (SMB). Voting once every few years was held by many activists not only to be of limited value, but also to offer the political elite a mode of managing the sentiments of the people. Elections, as one PAB activist put it, constitute a parody of democracy, ‘It is a total perversion of the principle. In this institutional framework it is hard to think that people are elected, that [they] will be exercising the people’s interests’. And for a Greek Indignant activist, voting in parliamentary elections had become a means to sideline people from having a say in real decisions affecting their lives:
[...] it is not enough to vote once every four years and some people to take our lives in their hands as if we know what will become next. OK? And the result is that we become spectators in a play. The government, any government, either follows certain interests or it is pressurised by certain funds and we are just spectators in all this. (GI)

Some activists also regarded politicians’ eliciting of votes with major misgivings. Politicians, it was felt, were ready to take advantage of periodic elections to drum up support when seeking their own re-election and without genuine commitment to delivering the pledges they had committed themselves to. This perceived lack of accountability and vote buying by politicians could produce concerns that the political system was easily gamed or open to cynical misuse. ‘My fear is that they want to take advantage of this. Thee is always a promiscuous relation between their need for voters and popular support if they are to get elected’ (PAB).

The cynicism surrounding electoral politics was, in part, associated with the demoralization of the people. A number of activists spoke of what they regarded as the popular disillusionment with elections as part of a broader social and cultural disquiet affecting many people; one that had progressively demoralized and weakened the electorate. This was a view particularly evident among IP activists, where, ‘Portugal has a big cultural and cognitive deficit that allows the status quo to maintain itself: [leading to] a population that submits itself, the patronage relationships, a striking social inequality’. Another IP activist felt that a ‘culture of individualism’ and ‘lack of social participation or civic engagement’ had contributed to the weakening of democratic participation, while another linked antipathy to voting to how politicians had brought about the active ‘demobilisation of the people’. This ‘cult of individualism’ had become wedded to a ‘cult of cynicism, of hypocrisy, of permanent distrust. Cynicism is the currency and the perfect response to immobility [...] This comes at an enormous cost to Portuguese society. Trying to dismantle this takes an enormous effort’. (IP)

Once again, however, this concept expresses a more complex set of understandings than a simple and unequivocal rejection of voting in local or parliamentary elections. Activists from a number of case studies linked their more general concerns over the efficacy of voting to their own personal dilemmas. On the one hand elections could be dismissed as largely meaningless, where ‘According to the reality perhaps it doesn’t matter if the people vote, simply it’s very difficult to choose, at least in Slovakia’ (WOLF). On the other hand, however, activists spoke of voting in more complex terms that stressed the limitations and deficiencies of the electoral system, but which also retained a sense of its strategic or symbolic importance. When asked if he voted, one PAB activist replied, ‘Sure. It is crucial [to] vote. Although I do not agree with those in power or the opposition or whoever, we live in a democracy where voting is what moves [things]’. The feeling that by not voting they may abrogate their democratic right was similarly expressed by a number of activists in Local Occupy, although they too would qualify this commitment by adding that ‘I vote but without any illusions’. Another PAB activist also remarked that he too voted despite feeling that none of the available options were in-tune with his own political views. One WOLF activist justified his voting in more prosaic terms:
I think that they [the people] should vote because if you want to grumble and you don’t vote, it doesn’t make sense. Because when a man says I cannot do anything and 5 million people say that so 500 thousand people vote and then we have a regime of a couple of politicians who represent only the minority of the people (WOLF)

3.3.4 Economics Dominates Politics

A further concept to emerge under this question of young people’s perceptions of politics and the political was the dominance of the economic over the political. Certainly, activists from a number of case studies alluded to their understanding that economic interests had corrupted the public interest and the democratic process, and that in doing so the economy no longer worked to serve the people (LO, GI, OC). Activists commonly identified the problems facing democratic societies as one brought about by the impact of neoliberal economics, so much so that ‘When the two systems are mentioned at the same time, it is because these systems are closely linked’ (OC). This was a sentiment particularly evident among activists involved in IP. As one remarked, ‘Our rights are going backwards because the [neo-liberal] political consensus recently established says they are too expensive for our small economy’. For another the whole progressive political and social reform agenda had been turned backwards after it has been ‘captured by the neoliberal tide’.

The power of economics and the neo-liberal agenda was such that some activists felt it had eviscerated some of the core capabilities of democratically elected government. Governments, according to a Local Occupy activist, were now incapable of giving substance to their democratic pretensions when faced with the power of (multinational) corporations, while these same corporations were either unwilling or simply uninterested in fostering more democratic ways of life. ‘[G]overnments can’t, corporates won’t’ was how he put it. Data from the Occupy Denmark case study also spoke of the perception of ‘an unholy alliance between powerful people representing the political system, the financial (economic) system and the media. In some cases politicians are also seen as marionettes led by cynical capitalists’. A SMB activist who held the view that ‘the system is fundamentally determined by the economy’ expressed a similar view.

Many activists who claimed the dominance of the (neoliberal) economy over their political systems and processes were further convinced that the influence of the economic elite extended across international borders. It was not just that their own government’s and society’s were prevented from giving expression to the democratic needs of their people by nationally based economic interests, but what they saw as transitional elites and multinational corporations held major influence over the political process at a global level (LO, OC, SMB, GI). The failure of democracy and the political system in their own countries was thus often seen as just one moment in a global system of neoliberal domination. In the case studies of IP, SMB and GI in particular, activists were especially alert to the view that the policies adopted by their political systems were in large part externally imposed, by the International Monetary Fund or the Troika of the European Central Bank, the European Union and the IMF. The priority, they claimed, was ‘to save the capitalist system’ (GI) through the ‘enforcement’ of policies that were neither decided nor wanted by the vast majority of the people. In the words of another GI activist: ‘Politicians often profess things
that will accomplish for the good of the people but in the end they become pawns of the ruling class, the economic elite of the country and their own interests, only for their own benefit and to maintain this situation.’

3.3.5 Surveillance and Repression
A further concept to emerge under the question of young people’s perceptions of politics and the political was the surveillance and repression that protestors felt they faced. In all case studies activists commented on how their protests had brought them into contact with the police or other legal authorities, whether this was as a consequence of the direct action of WOLF members, the taking over of public space by the Occupy protestors, or the protest actions of the Student Movement of Barcelona or Inflexible Precarious activists. From the very outset, for instance, moves to create Occupy encampments were met with an immediate police response. In the case of Occupy Copenhagen, ‘a few times the police called on the protestors to leave the Copenhagen camp without success, until the police finally cleared the camp early morning 21 December, 2011’. Local Occupy activists reported being similarly policed during their first few days, although they spoke of this relationship in more benign terms: ‘the council came, who own the land, the events manager came who organises events on the [place name], local businessmen came, the press and media came, the police came, the environmental health came, everybody came’. The feeling was that the police were initially uncertain how to respond to their tented presence and activists saw early calls for them to dissipate as either half-hearted or uncertain. Some LO activists spoke of how they had tried to build good relationships with police and how the police and local authority had actually organised a protective cordon around the camp in the face of a large demonstration by a nationalist organisation. As one activist reported, ‘the police really liked us being there ‘cause they could barricade off all of the [camp site] and channel them in the name of protecting us’. Senior police officers were also reported to have taken a constructive role in negotiations to relocate the encampment to the second site.

Even where relationships with the police were good, a deep-seated suspicion of their motives, together with those of the authorities in general, was evident. As the quote above from the Local Occupy activist also demonstrates, even when the police were claiming to help or protect them some activists interpreted this as the consequence of ulterior motives. In Occupy Copenhagen it was noted that, ‘Many of the activists also explicitly express a lack of trust in authorities’, a repertoire of feelings equally evident among many LO activists. By exercising their democratic right to protest, a LO activists could express concerns that they were marking themselves out for surveillance and scrutiny from the police and the security services. Some indeed held onto the more abstract conviction that involvement in radical causes like Occupy would lead to close surveillance, a feeling compounded by the reporting in the news media of high profile cases of police infiltration of protest movements during the time that Local Occupy was in existence. It was felt that the police and the security services have:

always got hidden agendas. If you become a profound member of a, a protest then you’re going to be looked at more, scrutinised, and any wrong thing that they’ll find about you they’ll try and infiltrate you and they’ll try and break you down from the inside, divide and conquer […] If you’re going to start a protest
then you’ve got to bear in mind that you might get hit by a police officer, you might get hit by a normal person ...

This lack of faith in the police and authorities was further evident in the conviction that protest would most likely lead to repression. In the words of one SMB activists, ‘[...] that ends in repression, it ends with people being evicted out of the universities by the police, it ends with police charges and it ends with trials’. This meant activists could not only face expected ‘criminal charges for disturbances, damages, disobedience, damaging real estate property, that’s more or less what people have been charged with’, they could also face more repressive measures such as being ‘charged with illicit association’. This ‘carries weight’ both because it was aimed at the more active student assemblies and also because it was acknowledged that such tactics could be detrimental to the movement. ‘[I]t took a toll on the organisations that remained because the assemblies remained but more inactive, more deactivated, the organisation to which I belong, for example, in that moment had to dedicate a lot of effort to manage the repression’ (SMB).

Undoubtedly, activist concerns about repression were most acute among the Greek Indignants. Activist tactics of non-violent direct action aimed at blocking parliament in order to prevent Greek MPs voting on austerity measures, together with their participation in large-scale mobilisations and general strikes, were met with ‘unprecedented ‘ levels of ‘police repression’ including the extensive use of tear gas, flash grenades and baton charges to clear the protestors from Syntagma Square. Activists termed these confrontations with the police as ‘war’ and a ‘battlefield’, where there was ‘too much beating and too much aggression from the riot police, and too much tear gas, too much, too much hatred’. Some activists could not comprehend such treatment believing that ‘we are here demonstrating peacefully so they will not attack us with [...] flash grenades and the tear gas and everything and the chemicals and everything’. As another GI activist recounted her experience:

They throw him down, and they throw me down too, and I see that one of them was keeping him down, another one had stepped on his chest and another one was hitting his legs with the baton. I start shouting ‘NO! NO!’, my friends who heard me started running as fast as they could, because, then, it was everyone for himself. And I was so tense that I grabbed and blocked the baton of the cop who was hitting my boyfriend’s legs and I hit my head and got a bump here, and I wouldn’t let him move. The other cop comes from behind and hits me on my back, I don’t feel the pain and then he hits me hard on my hands and I turn and say to him, ‘Why do you hit me? I could be your sister’.

3.4 How Are Young People’s Activism, Attitudes and Everyday Lives Shaped by the Past and the Present

This question was designed to explore how young activists understood and experienced the political heritage of the past. This included attention to social memory, motivations and intergenerational and peer influences. What is notable about this question is how little data emerges from this cluster relevant to this question. Consequently, the concepts that are synthesised under this question are more impressionistic and less substantiated compared to those generated in response to the other questions. What follows, therefore, is the
discussion of concepts in which activists discuss their sense of themselves and their politics in relation to understandings of history; and how these in turn are influenced by the transmission of a (family) political heritage across the generations.

### 3.4.1 Products of My History

What did emerge from the case studies was the perception among many activists that their family background did have an impact on their politics; mainly as a positive experience, but also in acting as a negative force. Interestingly, many activists also spoke about this background in terms of its class composition. One notable aspect of the concepts so far synthesised has been, particularly under sections 3.1 and 3.2 has been the absence of a politics articulated in explicit class terms. Class has, at times, been an explicit dimension of the understandings of politics and activism expressed by IP activists and to a lesser extent GI activists as well. But elsewhere a class politics has been more an implicit or low level dimension to understandings of politics and political activism (GI, LO, OC, PAB, SMB), or in the case of WOLF it has been absent.

Class, however, emerges with greater salience in activists’ discussion of how they understand the past to have shaped their lives. Here the past is understood as a positive influence on their political sentiments and commitment to activism, particularly through reference to family backgrounds identified as working class. Sometimes this was felt to have exerted a compelling force, where respondents explained that, ‘Well, I’m marked by my family history, a working class family, implicated in the political movements, my father [being] a militant in the PSUC and all that’ (SMB). This feeling that the ‘marks’ of a family history steeped in understandings of class and class politics were writ large on their own activism, was further evident elsewhere as other examples of parents identified as left-wing activists or professionals (e.g. lawyers, party or trades union officials) were identified as significant influences through ‘socialisation’ or as providing a ‘left wing environment in my home as I grew up’ (IP). One LO activist, as a major influence on his own trajectory, identified the informal politics of working class community actively practiced by his mother. Another student activist put the historical influence of a family infused with class politics in more explicit terms:

> [...] my motor, well they say the motor of history is class warfare. I come from a family that has suffered badly as working class and in the end we have been able to recover and this affects me a lot and I don’t want anyone, other families, to have to suffer like that. This is my daily driving force, for saying no

If many activists spoke about the past in terms of families and the class politics that they had practiced or espoused, others mentioned how both family and class had exerted an influence over them, but this time in more negative terms. Here the ‘influence of my family on my activism choices was by opposition’ (IP), where their own politics was identified as a rejection of, for instance, professional parents who held a more conservative outlook. This rejection could have been a gradual one, where the force of religion and a relatively privileged conservative family background meant that ‘due to this influence the first time I voted was for a right-wing party’ (IP). Among the activists in Barreiro there were also suggestion of early influences of class and religion, followed by their active rejection. As one
activist explained, ‘I was born in Barreiro and my parents are Jehovah, making them conservative people, but maybe because I was born in Barreiro and having studied there I grew up with leftish ideals.’

3.4.2 Memories of the Past

In identifying their own political outlooks and activism with close family influences, this sense of the past was also invoked to both frame and account for more recent societal phenomena. The second concept to arise from this question therefore seeks to capture activists’ understandings of the past and the influence these are held to exert on the societies and communities in which they now lived. This concept is offered as a tentative synthesis since the data on political heritage and memory are inadequate to make this assertion with great confidence. Nevertheless, the data is suggestive that the past, particularly transmission of living memories of life under dictatorship, has been a formative experience for some of the young activists.

This is most evident in the Spanish case study although it is alluded to elsewhere (IB, GI). In the Barreiro, for instance, one activist spoke briefly of the ‘spirit of labour’ that he had inherited from a past under dictatorship (PAB), but this sense of the past as something significant for the present was most clearly apparent among the Spanish student activists. Here they identified with seeming pride how parents and grandparents had been politically active in the socialist, communist and trades union movements, often under conditions of great insecurity threat. One activist recounted how, during the Spanish Civil War, ‘My great-grandfather hid for three years in a melon plot in Córdoba because he was the PSOE’s treasurer. One of my grand-uncles belonged to the republican side and he ended in a German concentration camp [...]’. The continuing influence of the Civil War on other students was equally apparent and how this had been transmitted across the generations: ‘Yes, well, my grandfather for example always talked about the [Spanish Civil] War, how bad it was and how you absorb that and I don’t know [...]’ (SMB).

Experiences and memories transmitted by grandparents and parents was only one part of how the Spanish activists acknowledged the influence of the past. For another student activist, the historical ‘baggage’ that they saw themselves carrying was also a product of societal and historical forces in which the people had actively fought to propagate ideas and ways of living that were both worthy of remembering but which were also worth continuously struggling for. As this activist put it, ‘[...] I think that it is important to say that I have baggage, not from my family, but historical.’ They continued, ‘I am the inheritor of the ideas and of a people that fought for certain things and the least that I can do, my political responsibility is to work that all this doesn’t end up in vain’ (SMB). And yet there is also the suggestion from the data that this view of the past was neither sanguine nor blinkered. Student activists were aware that the past was cable of being misused, as people looked to occupy a history to which they were not entitled: ‘There are a lot of myths. When they did the Transition [to democracy] I think that a lot of people got on the bandwagon with the idea of “yes, I was running from the police”, but there were only four people running from the police’ (SMB). Another student activist was also concerned about how the past could be used selectively: ‘[...] it’s that in this country the historical memory is something that is in a bad state [...] and there are countries that have taken a lot of measures around historical
memory but here [...] we have Falangist parties and nobody talks about them, to give one example’ (SMB).

3.5 How Do Accounts and Understandings of Austerity and Crisis Feature in Young People’s Accounts of their Political Activism?

In this final section the cluster specific question exploring activists’ understandings of the crisis of 2009 and the consequent turn to austerity are explored. This question produced a number of concepts that synthesise activists’ understandings of the significance of the crisis of 2009; who bore responsibility for this crisis and the resulting programme and policies of austerity; the costs of the crisis and austerity on their societies and communities, and their impact on individuals; and their sense that crisis and austerity had engendered a new popular sensibility towards politics and the political that offered new opportunities for radical or progressive social movements.

3.5.1 What is the Crisis?

‘The crisis’ of 2009 emerges as a significant issue within the cluster, although it does not emerge with any significance to the WOLF case study. This concept thus explored how activists understand ‘the crisis’ and these will be considered in terms of their equation with events of cataclysmic significance and force. In doing so, it further becomes evident that the destructive force that activists equate with ‘the crisis’ points to a clear perception that what has taken place in their respective societies and communities, and what they see as the case across much of Europe, involves a destructive process waged by those in positions of strength against others in less powerful positions.

There is no doubt, however, of activists’ sense of scale of what emerged following the events of 2009. In speaking of the crisis and its impact, activists drew upon metaphors of war and conflict, or similarly near-apocalyptic images, to describe its significance, terms that were held to readily summon up the on-going catastrophic and epochal importance of what had happened. As one GI activist put it, ‘For me, what happened in 2011 was the beginning of the Third World War, not with bullets or guns, but in another form of warfare, an economic one’ (GI), while a field note of a conversation with another GI activist notes that ‘the current situation resembles a war’. LO activists also invoked similar terms to describe the crisis panning out across large swathes of Europe, such as ‘catastrophe’, ‘carnage’, ‘disaster’, ‘calamity’ and ‘destruction’. Another LO activist evoked the ‘crisis’ in terms of the effects of a catastrophic explosion, a ‘point zero’ that wreaked destruction following the unsustainable highs of the previous years: ‘the more intense the high is the more intense the low is, and we’re coming up to a very intense low’.

To develop this analysis a little further, it is worth quoting in full a field diary entry from one of the members of the Greek research team:

I asked him [i.e. the respondent] if he believes that the current situation resembles a war. He replied that of course it is war, but now it is a financial one, with the economy, not with armies and weapons. I asked him who are fighting in this war in his view and he replied that they are fighting, the rich and the poor;
Germany and wealthy Europe are fighting against the peoples of Europe. With the excuse of the crisis they are trying to benefit themselves and to take everything from the poorest. Of course, he said, not all Germans are to blame for this because many Germans are poor and have problems; but their government and the bankers, they make war with the people to serve their interests. I ask him how he thinks that things will end up, where this situation will lead to. He says that Greece has already been destroyed, and he does not know where things go. However, nothing good will come out of this crisis. That’s why the group is doing solidarity actions - to help the community in this state of war.’ (GI)

These themes of war and destruction are again evident in this quotation, but what it also clearly illustrates is the use of these metaphors as explanation for the crisis. Here the calamity that the crisis is regarded to represent is equated with the belligerence of the more powerful ranged against the poorer and the poorest. What has occurred is ‘making war with the people’ and metaphors of ‘conflict’ (LO), ‘attack’ (SMB), ‘brutality’ (PAB), ‘assault’ and ‘destruction’ (LO) used by many other activists similarly carry their understandings that something of great force and momentum is begin actively pursued by one group(s) deliberately against the interest of (an)others. The crisis, thus, was not just simply a matter of economics but ‘it [involves] a political subjugation of people and of countries, too’ (SMB).

3.5.2 Who Is Responsible for the Crisis?
In describing and explaining ‘the crisis’ as an assault by the strong(er) on the weak(er), the activists also look to allocate responsibility. Thus, in this concept we find a synthesis of activists’ accounts of origins and root causes of the crisis that, for many, could be traced to the success of members of a self-serving elite in carrying out a deception on the population of massive proportions. In perhaps the most conspicuous examples of this, in two of the Occupy case studies some activists demonstrated an enthusiasm for conspiracy theories. The most extreme and insignificant of these, at least as far as their influence over their respective movements were concerned, involved ‘people talking about Chemtrails [trails of airborne chemicals designed to pacify the population], New World Order [a powerful elite (on the point of) exercising global control] and Illuminati [another theory of a controlling global elite in which, in some versions, control is being exercised by an alien species] and I could keep going […]’ (OC). Similar arguments were evident among some of the fringe activists involved in Local Occupy.

The majority of activists in both Occupy and the other case studies were much more inclined to identify responsibility for the crisis with those exercising the levers of power. This could include a belief that the notion of a crisis as a problem of inadequate resources or low productivity, particularly among the case studies in Southern Europe, was somehow manufactured to serve a vested global interest. In the words of one PAB activist, ‘This crisis is a lie, is lobbying for someone, for someone to fill their pocket’ (PAB). A second PAB activist expressed a similar sentiment, ‘that crises are manufactured, are managed, are inflicted’ and that the political and economic ‘interests’ responsible for this use their ‘ informational mechanisms to control masses [and which] are then employed to manage these crises’ (SMB).
We have already seen in section 3.3 that activists held responsible the political elite for the crisis in democracy: ‘[…] we realise very well what the plan of government is, from my perspective it is quite clear. And I think it involves a brutal devaluation of labour power […]’. It is thus unsurprising that belief that politicians and the political elite bore a great deal of responsibility for the crisis contained the parallel view that business and economic elites were equally, if not more, culpable. It was ‘bankers’ and the ‘banks’ that Occupy activists (LO, GI) held responsible for the crisis, while other Occupy activists looked to apportion blame on ‘the money system’ (LO, OC). One PAB activist explained that, ‘I do not see this crisis as a crisis of people, this is a crisis of companies, and economic, is a crisis that is proving that the system is wrong’ (PAB). ‘I think the system is fundamentally determined by the economy’ was how one student activist saw it, where, ‘a little part of the population who concentrates [i.e. owns/controls] the means of production, the media concentrate all these devices that generate power […]’ (SMB).

For IP activists the crisis of the economic was much more closely associated with a ‘crisis of capitalism’, and its attendant processes of social reproduction, whose main purpose was to return the rights of citizens to the pre-revolutionary era. For them the crisis was equated with the neoliberal desire to withdraw labour rights through deregulation, the diminution of welfare rights and the reversal of ‘social progress represented by the legalization of abortion and same-sex marriage’. This meant ‘the whole notion of the social contract is changing’ (IP), which another activist explained in detail as involving:

The crisis has helped to bring an enormous backwardness to Portuguese society. At the work level we have been witnessing a victory of Capital over Labour, with the deregulation of labour relations, precariousness, and reduction of collective contracts and negotiation. In education, all children go to school but part of them not properly fed because their families do not have enough resources. Even in social matters, we take one step forward and two steps back. If we think about feminism and equality we had a victory with the legalization of abortion but the wage difference between genders is enormous, sexual harassment is still a significant problem, domestic violence also. We approved marriage between people of the same sex but our society is still tremendously homophobic. (Carla)

3.5.3 The Costs of the Crisis

Thus, activists’ understandings of the crisis, its causes and those responsible for it, lead to the consideration of their perceptions of its impact. This has already begun to emerge in the concepts discussed in the previous section (3.5.2) but the consequences have been articulated at a fairly high level of abstraction. In contrast, the concept of the costs of the crisis begins to articulate in more detail activists’ understandings and perceptions of the consequences of the crisis, especially the implementation of programmes of austerity, as they have impacted upon themselves, their families and communities.

Of particular salience here is the impact of the crisis at the level of work and employment. In the Southern European case studies activists, unsurprisingly, expressed significant concerns about unemployment and insecurity of work and employment, and pointed to what they regarded to be unprecedented levels of emigration, particularly amongst the young. For IP activists, precarious working predated 2009 and was, for some, an inherent quality of
working life under capitalism. For one respondent precarious was no ‘child’ of the crisis, because ‘precariousness and especially the great difficulty young people have [establishing] sound integration into the labour market is a problem [...] the recent crisis only takes the problem deeper and [more] widespread’. ‘People feel precariousness on their skin’ was how another IP activist saw it, while the assessment of another was that, ‘We are [now] much closer to an economic regime based on precariousness and unemployment’ (IP). Activists from the other Southern European case studies also pointed to what they regarded to be the now ‘unsustainable’ problem of unemployment and particularly its deeply damaging implications for the young (SMB).

Another direct cost of the crisis was its equation with the further denigration of other forms of living, more specifically linked to the programmes of austerity that governments have sought to implement. In Local Occupy, for instance, activists spoke of the growing problem of homelessness brought about by unemployment, low pay and insecure working, together with the greater pressures it meant for family life. This was also the case for Occupy Copenhagen activists, although we will introduce important qualifications to their perceptions of the situation below. Yet, once again, it was in the Southern European case studies that activists were most likely to trace through in some detail what they saw as the destruction that the crisis has wreaked on people’s lives. For these activists, what was taking place was on the scale of a humanitarian crisis, ‘as every day thousands of people are struggling with unemployment, poverty and the disappearance of any social policy’ (GI). As another GI activist explained:

Someone who does not know what it means to live in Athens for the last two years, how people live here, how difficult it is to make ends meet, they could not imagine, say, how difficult things are, what unemployment means, what does it mean not being able to buy bread to eat, to send my child to school with and empty stomach [...]'.

The role of the crisis in denuding people’s access to basic necessities, it was felt, posed a threat to the possibility for living a civilised life. One GI activist traced out what he saw to be the finer details of this: ‘Here we have dead people, suicides, we have people who have no money to get medicines, okay? Wherever the International Monetary Fund went, the average life expectancy plummeted; the standard of living went very low’ (GI). Another activist who had helped initiate a social clinic for hard-pressed Athenians, also explained, ‘As unemployment rises, many live without insurance so they cannot even be hospitalised in public hospitals, nor to buy medicines or do medical tests’. Commenting on his own situation, another GI activist admitted that, ‘it’s terrible, we barely cope [...] I literally have hit rock bottom’.

A small number of activists from two case studies (GI, PAB) further commented that despite the considerable difficulties that austerity has brought, much of the costs of ‘this war’ had been concealed. Many people, it was felt, were unaware of the extent and depth of the difficulties and privations that resulted directly from the policies and programmes pursued by governments, ‘an invisible war that we suffer’ as one GI activist explained. ‘But many people only think about things when they are actually affected by them’, was how a PAB activist put it, ‘they are almost in an individual bubble and only when they pose questions,
when they are directly affected by them [do they come to appreciate better the situation]' (PAB).

In the case of Occupy Copenhagen, there was also a feeling among some activists that they and their country had been relatively isolated from both the crisis and the political turn towards austerity. This, it was felt, might be one reason why support for Occupy Denmark had been relatively muted. As one activist explained, the rapid dissolution of the ‘enthusiastic atmosphere’ that accompanied the October 2011 Occupy protests ‘had completely disappeared’. He continued:

Maybe it’s because most Danes basically do not feel the severe economic crisis on their own body. Although unemployment has increased, the general atmosphere here seems much less critical and people are just less rebellious than in the southern parts of Europe like Spain and Greece. It’s boring. But perhaps it is also because of the weather - dull grey skies, and they have promised rain during the day [...] [laughter] (OC)

3.5.4 (Young) People Have Been Politicised by the Crisis

It is experiences like these that, in part, clearly account for the (continuing) politicisation of case study participants. This concept builds upon accounts of politicisation by examining activists’ understandings and perceptions of the impact of crisis and austerity on the (ongoing) politicisation and political engagement of (young) people more generally.

For activists there was real concern about the progressive depoliticisation of people and the consequences of this for the future of democracy. As noted in section 3.3.3 above, some activists had identified a ‘culture’ or ‘cult of individualism’ as responsible for a growing disengagement from politicians and politics. Beyond this, LO activists spoke of their concerns about what they regarded to be the deadening effects of mass culture on both the willingness and capacity of ordinary people to offer dissent: ‘When I walked through towns like [name] or [name], it's just consumerism, consumerism, shopping, shopping, get drunk [...]’. Other activists saw ‘poison’ (GI) in political cultures and systems that others regarded as ‘exhausted’ and ‘rotten’ political system that had to bear responsibility for this de facto disconnection. A student activist put these concerns more directly by stating, ‘young people are very alienated. Our parents didn’t have it like that, people knew where they came from’. From the perspective of the present the picture was now very different:

now young people are very alienated. They don’t have information, they don’t look for it, they believe what the television says [...] I think they are not active because they are completely alienated [...] [But] the crisis has dealienated [sic] many people, that is clear, but we have to keep working to raise consciousness even more. (SMB)

Thus, alongside the concerns about the future of democracy and the limited possibilities for a vibrant and responsive political culture, some activists saw signs of hope emerging from the crisis. Looking around them they judged a perceptible change in people’s understandings of the possibilities of politics and political action, ‘a mood to react, [because] the people had begun to be infuriated, to be psychologically affected’ (GI). This
was as much ‘a need’ as ‘a mood’ (GI), signs of change identified in the increased interest in
and appetite for a new politics (LO), the ‘belie[f] that people are more interested, and in the
case of college students I would say definitely more’ (SMB). For this student activist the
signs of greater interest were still hesitant but nevertheless perceptible. As she continued,
‘[…] they are people that when you talk about politics, there will be a little bit of everything,
but they don’t make the “this has nothing to do with me” type of face and instead most of
them, regardless of their ideological postulates, are pretty open […]’ (SMB). For another
student, the crisis had given substance to what had hitherto been seemingly abstract and
unwelcome political arguments: ‘[…] with the crisis it is true that now they don’t think
“these guys are annoying”, now they even come and listen, attendance at the talks we have
organised has gone up a lot […] it is true that at least now people stop and listen to what we
say’ (SMB).
This feeling that there had been a perceptible change in people’s interest and willingness to
participate actively in politics and protests, it was felt, extended beyond the interests and
activities of students. As one student activist observed, the expansion of protest movements
across more sections of society ‘shows a little about what is going on outside of the
universities and society in general where there is radicalization and this has a mutually
reinforcing influence’ (SMB). Other activists pointed to the number and diversity of the
people who had visited or shown an interest in their protests as evidence of this growing
popular attentiveness to matters concerned with radical protest and a willingness to
countenance new ideas (LO, OC). For the Greek Indignants, further confirmation of the
radicalising influence of the crisis and austerity could be found in the huge number who had
turned out to protest and Occupy Syntagma Square, day after day and week after week.
These had been complemented by demonstrations and street protests involving
unprecedented numbers, while IP activists too took the similarly huge numbers who had
participated in their joint May Day protests and street demonstrations as vindication that
the political culture was undergoing change. More specifically, these same IP activists, like
many others across the case studies included in this cluster, felt they and their protest
movements could take some small measure of credit in bringing about a modicum of
cultural change. ‘[W]e have assumed a role […] and this is an achievement’, was how one
activist saw it.
Thus, amongst the deep concerns they had about the crisis and austerity, and the
implications of these for people’s ability to participate in society in meaningful ways,
activists saw in the political the potential for renewal. Evident in both their own experiences
and those they observed around them, for many activists across the cluster their
movements and others like them had contributed to a palpable redefinition of the
possibilities held out by politics (OC, LO, GI, SMB). But here too there was a notable
cautionary element. To quote a GI activist in some detail:

I believe that everyone who is intelligent and able to think should be politicized.
I have a political standing. I’m politicized and there is a danger here. There is a
risk that people devalue, discredit politicians but they should not discredit
politics. It is one thing the politicians and another thing is politics. Politics is the
only protection for the weak in the society. Politics is to institutionalize humane
systems and in order to have equal access to all things concerning a decent life
for all with equality. Politics is the only thing that can do it. (GI)
4. Conclusion

This report synthesises data from seven case studies under the Occupy and Anti-Austerity cluster. The focus of these case studies on a number of related protest movements and organisations provides a unique and distinctive insight into organisations not often subject to detailed and original research. These organisations are examples of the often informal organisation of recent social and protest movements, ones that are sometimes short-lived or which are characterised by the fluidity of their membership and organisational practices. Importantly, the case studies discussed here also provide examples of social and protest movements that emerged following the crisis of 2009, or that became further energised during its aftermath. With the notable exception of the case study of the forest conservation group WOLF, the analysis provides important insights into the political processes, organisations, understandings and meanings that young people have created in the context of profound political, economic and social change.

The synthesis presented above addresses five questions and the key findings from each are summarised below.

*How do young people inhabit, interpret and own their organisation?*

The synthesis of data to answer this question produced four related concepts dealing with young people’s understandings of the organisation and composition of their movements. These included the sometimes emphatic belief in their organisations as people’s assemblies, organisations that manifest a pervasive and deeply held commitment to participatory democracy. This drew self-conscious comparisons with left libertarian, anarchist and grass roots socialist organisations and a rejection of what are regarded as a tired and ineffective political orthodoxy. In doing so, activists regarded their organisations and movements as bearing the inescapable imprint of their commitment to participatory and communitarian forms of social and political organisation. Closely related to this was a second concept that expressed activists’ belief in the existence of their movements as ‘grass roots’ organisations. Building on a vast and growing upswell in popular discontent, these movements and organisations sought the building of new political and organisational forms from the ‘bottom up’, where ‘ordinary people’ were the active agents in the forging of new ways of doing politics. These movements and organisations were thus regarded as more genuinely democratic, authentic ways of organising politically that were both attractive and open to a plural and diverse constituency of activists and participants. This was in part a consequence of their spontaneous or informal creation, and their cherished commitment to voluntary association, organisations and movements that emerged out of a growing popular discontent with established political practice.

For these reasons the synthesis demonstrated the importance to these movements of ‘openness’ as both a characteristic and practice of their political existence. Being open meant being inclusive, defined both in terms of their demographic composition and the ideas and ideologies that participants espoused. In this respect, the synthesis reveals a clear attempt to create distance between themselves and more established left-wing and radical organisations, many of which were regarded as anachronistic and ineffective. The aim of political organisation, in contrast, was regarded as involving the
rejection of the predefined classifications, categories and ideologies characteristic of more orthodox left politics. What was required instead was the extension of the commitment to openness and tolerance to the very body of ideas that constituted political debate and discussion made real through inclusive forms of participation and decision-making. One prominent example of this was the belief in leaderless movements and horizontal forms of movement organisation. Through such practices accountability could be strengthened, participation given substance and deliberation and debate provide a focus for commitment and responsibility.

How do young people understand and experience their own activism?

Five concepts were generated under this question about the meanings and experiences that activists attached to their political activism. These included the belief that what was being created in and through their movements were spaces of liberty and freedom. This was most evident in the Occupy case studies, where a defining element of their activism was understood in terms of the claims they were making to public space as both a practical means of protest but also as a symbolic reassertion of public values over and against the privatisation of social life. These occupations were understood as a source of empowerment, spaces in which people could deliberate, cogitate and share with one another. Their very presence in these spaces was further felt to exercise a tangible force on both the protestors and their supporters, as well as on the forces against which they were aligned.

Division and indeterminacy were nevertheless apparent within the synthesis. Division was acknowledged and recognised within these spaces of freedom and liberty, as was awareness of the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the meanings their movements represented. Some case studies presented a clear sense of movement purpose and meaning that gave greater precision to both their analysis of, and solution to, the crisis and its attendant programmes of austerity. Yet equally apparent were feelings of uncertainty beyond a more generally held sense of discontent and opposition. In some respects this appeared an inevitable consequence of the uniqueness of some of these movements which had burst into the open already in possession of large-scale support but without an organisation or programmatic distinctiveness to match. Activists indeed understood this indeterminate quality to be both a strength and weakness. As protest movements were open to just about anything the movements contained a vitality and energy seemingly not possessed by movements elsewhere. Problems were recognised, however, in how to maintain and manage this energy and passion, particularly in the face of such a diverse membership and body of ideas. Being active in these movements was a source of excitement and anticipation, but what also emerged was the reality of activism’s day-to-day demands and the sheer personal effort that was often required to sustain an activist’s participation.

The synthesis further points to the difficulties of becoming and then remaining active. Barriers to becoming active involved concerns about the exclusivity of the movements they contemplated joining, as well as suspicion of the motives of those involved. Movements and organisations could be viewed as the preserve of small groups or dominated by cliques and as acting in exclusive and insular ways. Perceived as ‘cultish’ organisations, there was a strong disincentive for potential members and activists to become involved. Furthermore,
for young women activists there was a notable recognition that these organisations were often dominated and run by men. Female activists, particularly among the Occupy case studies, also pointed to the difficulties of a politics of sustained occupation that required taking up longer-term residence in relatively unregulated and informal urban spaces.

**What are young activists’ perceptions of politics and the political?**

Here five concepts emerged that expressed activists’ beliefs in the limits of liberal parliamentary democracy. Parliamentary democracy had clearly failed for these activists and its ensuing crisis had significantly eroded belief in its capacity to respond to the needs of the people. For this reason, claims to democracy from supporters of the current systems were little more than illusory, claims to a representativeness from a system that long ago lost its capacity to represent and which sought to stifle rather than encourage popular participation. A significant disconnection has thus emerged between established democracy and the needs and aspirations of ordinary people, a distance only widened by the lack of efficacy of the political machinery. People had also grown cynical in the face of empty or broken promises on the part of major politicians and their parties; acts that had only served to further strengthen distrust in the system and the motives of professional politicians. It was for these reasons that a further concept of the failed political class emerged. Here the political elite was regarded as a self-serving and self-perpetuating class, once more concerned with furthering its own vested interests and those it sought to represent, rather than giving voice and substance to the needs of the people. In seeking its own interests the political class had become, on the one hand, further alienated from those it claimed to represent while, on the other hand, had edged ever closer to serving the needs of other elite groups. As part of, or functionaries to, this self-serving elite, the political class was closely identified with those who ran the economies, corporations and the media.

A further concept expressed activists’ deep cynicism about the merits of voting. Periodic votes on a limited or predefined range of alternatives seemed to many a hollow version of democracy, perhaps even a perversion of its very principles. The eliciting of votes by politicians constituted a cynical exercise in self-preservation through vote-buying rather than an expression of democratic intent. Electoral politics, more generally, had contributed to the demoralization of the people and its consequent dangerous disregard for the importance of a vibrant political life. A further important contributory factor to this was the dominance of economics over politics and the subordination of democracy to economic and other vested interests. Neoliberal economics in particular constituted a pernicious and corrosive influence over political and social life. Such was the force of neoliberal economics that it had further eviscerated the core capabilities of governments elected in the name of democratic politics. Not only did this influence impinge on the capacities of national governments, but the presence of neoliberalism was now evident across borders and throughout the globe.

The final concept that emerged in response to this question was the growing intensity of political repression and surveillance. Surveillance was regarded as a routine response to dissenting voices, while open displays of defiance and protest were immediately met with the resort to law. Some acknowledgement was made of the fact that the very novelty of some of these movements, together with the fluidity and dynamism of their organisation,
raised new ambiguities and problems for their policing. Nevertheless, deep-seated suspicion of the police and security services, together with their hidden agendas and intrusive practice, was extensive. This was a set of concerns that were only deepened by the repression, violence and disproportionate and sometimes cruel responses that some activists believe had characterised the response to their protest and dissent.

**How are young people’s activism, attitudes and everyday lives shaped by the past?**

Perhaps the most impressionistic set of concepts to emerge from the synthesis of case study data relates to the question about perceptions of the past and its continuing influence. Here the data was as its weakest and the two concepts to emerge were largely suggestive rather than convincing. Nevertheless, interesting data emerged surrounding activists’ understanding of themselves as products of their history and it is here that class attains its greatest significance across the cluster. Activists invoked class as a means to both understand their past and to bring order to the present. Class marked their family histories through the imprint of manual labour, factory work and the politics of working class movements; ‘marks’ that they continued to display in their present orientations and dispositions. Others invoked class as points of rupture as the influence and views of conservative forbearers were consciously rejected in favour of more progressive means. These understandings of the past and present were consolidated within the more general understanding of history. This was a history of struggle against repression, dictatorship and authoritarian rule, and one in which their family members had taken an active involvement. It was the ‘baggage’ they felt they carried as consequence of these histories that many activists saw as the link between the past and their own political biography.

**How do accounts and understandings of austerity and crisis feature in young people’s accounts of political activism?**

In response to the final question specific to this cluster, four concepts emerged. The first of these captured understandings of ‘the crisis’ of 2009 as something of momentous significance, a series of events whose importance was viewed as analogous to war and conflict in terms of their scale and destructive consequences. War waged through the weapons of austerity had unleashed forces of great destructive power, engendered conflict and disharmony, and deepened division and discontent. As a descriptive term the use of metaphors of war underscored the intensity with which activists viewed the crisis and its aftermath. Yet, these metaphors of war and conflict were also regarded as containing explanatory value, as austerity was explained in terms of an offensive by the rich against the poor. Here the calamitous consequences of austerity were accounted for by the actions of a belligerent ruling (global) elite which had chosen to range all the forces they had at their disposal. Responsibility for the crisis and austerity thus was firmly located in the actions of those who exercised control and power. It was the political elite and their contemporaries in the financial sector who had embarked upon a brutal attack on the rights and services previously hard fought for by the majority of the population. Others pointed to the situation as a crisis of capitalism and attempts to resolve this on terms dictated by capital.
Whatever the descriptions and explanations proffered for the crisis and the subsequent turn to austerity, there was little doubt about their impact on the majority of the people. A further concept thus expressed in vivid terms the consequences of the crisis as the young activists saw it and played out in terms of mass (youth) unemployment, precarious working and the erosion of rights at work. Closely linked to this was the belief that the crisis had brought about a significant denigration of other forms of living, as homelessness, low pay and stressful family lives emerged as more generalised experiences. Furthermore, public services had been removed or attenuated, and basic necessities could no longer be guaranteed. Yet, amongst the narratives of crisis and austerity that invoked metaphors of devastation, looked to causality in conflict and division, and identified consequences involving serious and pernicious privations, a sense of possibility also emerged. Contained in the final concept under this question are activists’ beliefs that against the backdrop of crisis, austerity, turmoil and hardship possibilities for a new politics had emerged. This had been evident in the spontaneous emergence of their movements or in the energizing force that the crisis brought with it. More significantly, perhaps, activists also identified the beginnings of a perceptible change in popular sentiment, one that indicated that a general malaise with the existing political and social order has been sedimented into something different, the beginnings of a new structure of feeling that could offer the possibility of different future.
5. References


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