

From Madrid - Greece, Austerity, Brexit: What might a Plan B for Europe look like?

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Following the European Union's coup in Greece, with the increasingly xenophobic response to the refugee crisis and business as usual response to the climate crisis, new trade deals which undermine democracy, what hope is left for the European project? Claire Fauset went to Madrid, Spain to hear about a Plan B being hatched by leftwing politicians and social movements from across the continent to strike a claim for a new Europe.

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This is a coup! Shouted the Twittersphere when Alex Tsipras capitulated to the demands of European Union (EU) elites and signed Greece up for a new, ever more punishing, round of austerity. With that a major blow was struck to the hopes and options of the indebted countries of southern Europe. But Southern Europe has not given up. If anything the winds of change in Europe towards democracy and against austerity, are blowing strongly, and perhaps nowhere stronger than in Spain.

Since the crisis hit Spain hard, a new popular movement occupied the plazas in the major cities and announced the power of the Spanish people to affect change. A wave of 'municipalism' has brought radical mayors into power in major cities and recent elections gave Podemos, the new left party, a major role in deciding the balance of power for the country challenging the power of the previously dominant and irreparably corrupt right wing Partida Popular.

Which makes Madrid the ideal location for a birthplace of a Plan B movement to democratize Europe and to bring some of the energy of the new politics being developed in occupations, social movements and new political parties and coalitions into a Europe where, as the President of the European Commission Jean Claude Junket said, 'There can be no democratic choice against the European treaties.'

The headline speaker of the conference is former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, who has recently established the Democracy in Europe Movement: 25 - a 10 year plan to transform EU institutions. With a capacity of 1,500 and 3,000 people registered in Madrid's Matadero, the rather spectacular ex-slaughter house on the banks of the Manzanares River, now converted into an impressive arts and cultural space, was packed to the rafters. An impelling soundtrack, caught somewhere between the urgency of a news bulletin and the heroism of Pirates of the Caribbean, dominated the atmosphere in the room as the audience, many of them middle aged people who, in their youth, will have struggled for the transition from the Franco dictatorship, take their seats on the opening night. As Yanis Varoufakis comes onto the stage the audience rise to their feet in a standing ovation to the man that stood up to the European establishment and their imposition of crippling austerity, and to raise an iPad and net some likes on their Facebook feed.

But interestingly Varoufakis is not the headline speaker tonight and he takes his place in the second row amongst some 30 people who would speak over the course of the conference. We hear from a panel of mainly women speakers, who successfully exemplified the organizer's aim of putting issues of feminism, ecology and migration at the centre of the discussion alongside issues of debt, austerity and institutional change. My concern that these issues may feel 'tacked on' is allayed, although my hopes that the conference will give me an exciting experience of the kind of 'new politics' of participation and direct democracy are somewhat crushed by session after session that is an expert panel with minimal opportunity to speak from the audience, despite hearing a lot of rhetoric about building from the bottom up.

Brexit - To flee, or to organize an uprising

All this takes place with the backdrop of David Cameron's negotiation of a new position for the UK in the EU and the announcement of the date for the UK's 'Brexit' referendum on leaving the EU. As campaigners and activists grappled with issues of how to wrest democratic control and self-determination back from unaccountable European institutions, the UK is negotiating downward in terms of human rights and financial regulation, and its right wing are campaigning for the British people to vote out in the referendum, leaving the left wing in the uncomfortable position of having to vote for an undemocratic cartel or join forces with the right. Nick Dearden from Global Justice Now and Another Europe is Possible characterized the decision facing people in the UK: 'On the one hand you have the European Union run by an unelected commission, crushing the Greek people as they are gasping for air, and pushing corporate deals like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Agreement. And who would want that. But on the other hand you have some Little England nationalists that essentially either are living in a fantasy world where we still have an empire or simply want to turn our country into an offshore tax haven owned by corrupt billionaires and oligarchs from around the world. It's not a very attractive choice.'

Throughout the conference the fear of the right, and the responsibility not to allow the crisis of European legitimacy spark a descent into fascism, was articulated by speaker after speaker. Marina Albiol, spokesperson for the Plural Left delegation in the European Parliament spoke of 'striking a claim for the Europe that overcame fascism'. Yanis Varoufakis was clear in his opinion that the UK should remain in the EU and sees a democratic reclamation of EU institutions as the only way forward. 'Nobody loathes the EU more than I do, but the disintegration of the EU we are now witnessing will bring to power Le Pen, Golden Dawn and the forces of darkness. We must fight that through the democratization of the EU.'

Nick Dearden sees the potential of a British exit as contributing not only to the empowerment of the right in the UK but also of deepening the split between Northern and Southern Europe. 'At the height of the Greek crisis the German/Greek division went very deep into those societies. It was frightening and reminded us of things that have happened in European history. I think if we don't transform the European Union to be honest, god knows what the future is going to look like and the possibility that Britain could be a little island out of it isn't going to make any difference. It is still going to be as awful. You can already see the beginnings of that in the way that migration is being dealt with. It shows that we have got a lot of work to do in really convincing the mass of people in Europe [to ask] "What kind of a society do we want to live in? And if you go down this path where in the hell do you think we are going to end up?"'

But the question of whether reform of the EU is even possible was a common one. French economist Cedric Durand is skeptical about the opportunities for reform within the system but more optimistic about the power of the people. 'How much can the EU be transformed? For the EU to be a battle

ground we need to have some openings of power that we don't have. The EU is not a battleground, it is a prison, and when you are in prison do you flee or do you organize an uprising. We the people is performative, no one can resist popular power.' Miguel Urban of Podemos echoed this sentiment, 'We have to see politics beyond left, centre, right, but from below. If we move, the people on the top will fall.'

Six ideas towards a democratic Europe

Beyond the rhetoric of '*si se puede!*' or 'yes we can' of the podium speeches, behind the scenes and in the workshops a lot of work was going on to develop ideas of how we move toward a more democratic Europe. Taken largely from the summary of the different strands of the conference, here are six ideas toward democratizing Europe. Some first steps in what could well be the beginnings of a new European movement.

1. New 'International Brigades'

'I think we all let Greece down. In a way it is the responsibility of all of us that [the Greek] government didn't succeed... When the referendum happened and the Troika decided that they were just going to [impose austerity on Greece] anyway, then that would have been a time when we through our links could have started making mass protests happen around Europe. Like we used to do when the WTO met or the World Bank met. So that Berlin or Athens becomes that mass site of protest. I think it would at least have given pause for thought.' – Nick Dearden, Global Justice Now

Yanis Varoufakis's call in his Plan B speech for a new version of the international brigades, in reference to the tens of thousands of foreign volunteers who fought fascism in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, was certainly playing to his audience. But the need for joint strategies, actions and proposals, for finding allies towards the centre of the political spectrum, and building a bottom up power base in Europe through connecting movements was echoed by speaker after speaker.

So many of the issues we are dealing with cannot be tackled if we stick behind national borders. Climate change is a major structural problem that can only be dealt with through international co-operation and popular resistance. Similarly a progressive response to the 'refugee crisis' requires not the militarization of borders but a new internationalism. International solidarity and popular power across Europe could make the imposition of austerity politically untenable. The Blockupy movement is an example of this, having made the European Central Bank in Frankfurt a major site of protest.

2. No to 'Debtocracy'

'There is a sovereign right of states to refuse any debt repayment before a debt audit is concluded and to expect other states to refrain from any act of coercion. People should not be subject to the repayment of a debt that is not their own, a debt not connected to public expenses or social welfare, a debt very often linked to corruption and large scale economic crime involving government officials.' Zoé Konstatopoulou, former Speaker of the Greek Parliament

'It is a dream world to think that we can pay the debt.' Miguel Urban, MEP Podemos

The austerity policies enforced on the likes of Greece, Spain, Ireland and Portugal since the crash, and which have long been the cause of misery across the global South, benefit the financial markets, banks and elites of Europe. As well as rejecting austerity as a solution to the debt crisis, it is necessary to also challenge the legitimacy of the debt itself. The idea that all debts should always be

paid and that there are no alternatives is deeply embedded. Debt Audits are one strategy for populations to assert which debts they believe are legitimate to pay and affirm their right to decide how to pay and how to balance debt payments with social rights. At Plan B experiences were shared from social movements in Greece, Italy, Belgium, United Kingdom, France, Poland, Ukraine, Switzerland and Spain, both at the municipal and state levels. And ultimately debt audits must take place at the European level.

3. Rebel cities and growing the alternatives

A host of alternatives exist in Europe to the neoliberal model of trade and investment. From cooperatives and the burgeoning social economy, to producer organizations of organic farming, through to initiatives to re-municipalize privatized utilities such as energy.

The new 'rebel cities' in Spain embody the hopes of many to change the rules of the political game. In 2015 radical mayors took power in many of Spain's larger cities, their power coming from citizen's platforms and unconventional alliances between social movements and political parties. Their aspiration is to test out the 'new politics' of direct citizen involvement in decision making that caught the popular imagination during the occupation of the plazas in 2011/12, to 'take back the city and its public institutions and put democracy back at the service of the people.'

While many of the goals of building economic alternatives to capitalism are ultimately beyond the scope of these localized initiatives. They are real, replicable, networked and growing.

4. Fight against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Agreement

There is growing opposition in Europe to the policies of economic globalization and this is exemplified by the highly networked Europe-wide resistance to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Agreement (TTIP). Hundreds of thousands of people have taken part in marches against TTIP; hundreds of municipal and regional governments and parliaments have declared themselves 'TTIP free zones'. Continent-wide resistance in Latin America to the Free Trade Area of the Americas and its predecessor the North American Free Trade Agreement was a major factor in the strengthening of social movements and the installation of, albeit flawed, left wing governments, and moves towards participation and the renewal of social rights.

5. Defend Freedom of Movement

The flow of refugees fleeing war, human rights abuses, poverty and the impacts of environmental destruction and resource extraction has led to the raising of ever higher walls around 'Fortress Europe' and a crisis in its open internal borders policy, tearing apart what was arguably one of Europe's biggest achievements. While the mainstream discourse is quick to paint migrants as a danger to repel or as humanitarian victims, it is less keen to see them as political subjects with rights, aspirations and their own demands. It is a discourse that fails to acknowledge the role that foreign policy, military intervention and economic globalization have in pushing people into exile, or the lucrative business to be made from immigration policy: for mafias, for companies that manage border security and for those employers who exploit the casualization of an abundant migrant workforce.

Defending freedom of movement for all means re-thinking the idea of European citizenship to be inclusive of all the people that live in Europe, and sharing a vision of a Europe where human rights, democracy and the dignity of peoples take precedence over corporate or geopolitical interests.

6. Change the Model

While economists for progressive parties such as Podemos in Spain and Esquerda in Portugal wrestle with the uncomfortable dilemma of whether they are aiming to stay in the straightjacket of the Euro or leave and create yet another annoying Grexit/Brexit-style compound noun, it is vital to plan the kind of economic policies that would be needed to create the Europe that we want. What would be the necessary economic reforms to protect the dignity of people, change the production model to one based on renewable energy and social welfare, where living conditions are the ultimate measure of the value rather than GDP, in which issues such as work to be dealt from the perspective of what jobs are socially necessary, where the movement of capital is controlled but not the movement of people, where credit fulfills a social function? How can an economy be built that puts life in the centre, and how do we build the popular power to enable this to happen despite the fiscal pacts and memorandums of understanding of the Eurogroup?

Claire Fauset

P.S.

* "Greece, Austerity, Brexit: What might a Plan B for Europe look like?". New Internationalist. Published on March 11, 2016:

<http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2016/03/11/greece-austerity-brexit-what-is-a-plan-b-for-europe/>