

Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit public discussion

The Politics of Squares

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LSE events

Suggested hashtag for Twitter users:
#lsesquares





Swarm Intelligence? Occupy & co. in Germany

Helmut K. Anheier

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London School of Economics and Political Science



An Explorative Research Project

Phase I: Mustering and mapping the entire field of subterranean politics: weighing groups by set of criteria:

- New or newly emerging
- Subterranean, not affiliated
- Relevance (*google insight*)

Phase II: In-depth Case Study: ,Wutbürger' & Occupy

- Extensive media content analysis & comprehensive research review
- Structured interviews with Occupy activists
- Participant observation in Berlin



An Explorative Research Project

Are the recent European protest activities about austerity only? Or is there a subterranean crisis of (representative) democracy in Europe?

Considering the German case:

- Growth: 2011 by 3.0%; projection for 2012 is at 0.9%, higher for 2013
- Budget deficit: 1.0% complying with Maastricht criteria for the 1st time since the crisis.
- Unemployment: 7.4% in February 2012; November 2011 was the best month in employment figures since early 1990s



Findings: *Wutbürger*

- „Word of the Year“ 2010 in Germany: *Wutbürger* – ‚angry citizen‘
- **What is it?** spontaneous public expressions of opposition to formerly non-controversial **infrastructure projects** – train station in Stuttgart; airport in Berlin. Subsequent organisation and politisation, media resonance
- Legitimacy through administrative process being challenged; how much popular vote needed?

Example: Stuttgart 21

- **Who they are: educated** (more than 70% hold university qualifying high-school degree); **not that young** (75% were older than 35 years); **dominantly male** (59,7%)
- **A new generation?** 60% have rarely participated in protests prior to Stuttgart21, 16 % never at all. When they protest, they protest a lot (**80% at least once a week**)
- **Why they turn out:** 66.3% feel not adequately included in decision-making;
- 80% are dissatisfied with the current political and social situation even though they are satisfied with their own
- Note: Popular Referendum approved Stuttgart 21!

Findings: Swarm Intelligence Groups

Swarm Intelligence **online**

Example: Guttenplag



- Forced resignation by Minister of Defense Theodor zu Guttenberg after uncovering that his doctoral thesis was full of plagiarism;
- Guttenplag was website established to systematically track sections of plagiarism in the thesis: **decentralized, nonhierarchical and transparent**



Findings: *Occupy*

Occupy: Swarm Intelligence on the street – Movement without crisis?

- Activists have ascended on the public stage since 15 Oct. 2011 (international action day)
- Occupy is label for various groups: *Echte Demokratie Jetzt*, *Campact*, *alex11*, *aCAMPada*

Forms of protest:

- demonstration marches
- *asambleas* in public places / occupation of public spaces (incl. camping)
- *Carnival of the disgusted*: ironic 1% protests / rich people's flash mobs,
- Political education for empowerment
- Frankfurt activists founded *European Occupy Central Bank*



Findings: *Occupy*

- **Actors**

- Majority is between 25-35 years old, in some groups majority is male
- Diverse background: mostly educated, students and self-employees, retirees, employees and unemployed people – also: homeless, student activists, employees
- App. half of activists had been active before: for peace, against nuclear energy, for a basic income, or for global justice

- **Motivations**

- Consistent message: No sense of adequate political representation in established institutions;
- Strong disapproval of political actors, processes and institutions
- Sense of urgency, desire to participate and practice alternatives



Findings: Occupy

- **Issue Framing**

- No coherent agenda formulation – seems presumptuous to many
- *“There is no need to come up with specific topics, since there are enough pressing issues as it is”*
- Europe does not feature prominently in discussions

- **Modes of Interaction**

- Adhere to strictly democratic procedures
- Three pillars: **non-violence, transparency and the absence of hierarchies**
- **The swarm:** *“Occupy rejects the concept of a small circle protecting their knowledge*
- *“everything works based on the division of labor: everyone participated the way they could and wanted to”*



A Debate on Europe?

- A debate on Europe is absent in many groups and activities
- Among activists: EU viewed as proxy for a disdainful style of politics – but solidarity across Europe
- **Global and European governance challenges vs. conspicuous localism**



Summary And Questions

- **Germany is a strong case for Subterranean Politics:** it goes beyond traditional social conflicts and captures sense of alienation and discomfort with regards to established actors, processes and institutions
- **The practices of subterranean politics in Germany aim at more participatory, transparent, basis-democratic and web-based modes of governance, which activists are eager to employ themselves.**
- **The debate on Europe is at a critical turning point:** conspicuous localism should worry supporters of the European project and policy makers
- **Scope and scalability** of Occupy and ‚Wutbürger‘: new activists, but small numbers?
- Is this a **social movement** after all?
- **Swarm intelligence** as a genuinely new feature?

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