

Transeuropa: Agency Beyond Borders In Alter-European Activist Networks

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Declaration of authorship

I, Antje Scharenberg, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed :

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Abstract

European nation-states are facing a deep democratic crisis. In the age of planetary challenges related to climate change, migration and rampant inequalities perpetuated by neoliberal globalization, many people experience a sense of powerlessness over the decisions that affect their everyday lives. Brexiteers' cry to "take back control" is but one of the most illustrative examples of this wider lack of agency. In the midst of this contemporary political crisis, this thesis offers an ethnographic exploration of emerging forms of agency beyond borders in alter-European activist networks.

Conducted in the years between the UK's vote to leave the EU in June 2016 and the European Parliament elections in May 2019, this engaged ethnographic project follows alter-European activists taking to the streets, roads and parliaments all across the European continent. Drawing on data gathered via participant observation, interviews and alternative media texts, the thesis takes the reader on a journey to a number of protests, activist meetings and political events in different parts of Europe, including to a townhall in the South of France, a feminist workshop in Madrid and a caravan trip across the former Iron Curtain. Here, in the shadows of mainstream media headlines and Brussels institutions, is a movement whose acts transgress not only geographical but also thematic and institutional boundaries.

Paying particular attention to alter-European activists' collective identity formation, the movement's nomadic (media) practices and its relationship with municipal movement parties, the thesis argues that in order to understand transnational social movements today, we must centre not the notion of the network, but the concept of agency. To this end, this study develops the idea of *transversal agency*, which works across *struggles*, *scales* and *sites*. The thesis ultimately suggests that contemporary movements' capacity to address global challenges depends on the ability to translate between different registers of action.

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“2018 is not 1848... Faced as we are with a more fractured and heterogeneous political landscape, it is not so easy for us to imagine a globally united revolutionary force.”

(Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%*, 2019, p.60)

“only very few people have real agency regarding our future... until we invent political forms of agency that are equal to the forces which shape our world.”

(Marsili and Milanese, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 2018, p.4)

“What binds me to a Roma, a Palestinian, a *sans papiers* migrant or a Greek or Spanish unemployed youth is not membership of state, Europe or humanity but a protest against a meaningless European citizenship, resistance against fake economic orthodoxy, against a false ethnic mono-culturalism.”

(Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*, 2013, p.207)

Prologue: a note on (personal) history

The girl on the photo is almost two years old. Sitting on her mother's lap, she heartily bites into a nectarine, burying her small face in the yellow fruit. The dress she wears suggests that the photo must have been taken in the summertime. Her mother's hairdo is a clear indication that it was the 1980s, 1989 to be precise. With her mother working as a kindergarten teacher, her father being employed as an electrician at the then state-owned local tram company and her brother later becoming a carpenter, the girl will become the first person in her family to move abroad and go to university three decades later. At this moment, however, all of this is entirely unthinkable as their world is split in two: a capitalist West, which they have no access to, and a communist East, which shapes their everyday life. Indeed, the star of the photo is neither of them. The special occasion of the photo, taken at the time when coloured film was rare and expensive, is, in fact, the yellow fruit in the girl's hand. For nectarines did not usually make it across the 1,4000 kilometres of wall, fences and patrolled border zones, unless visiting relatives from the West brought them over or sent packages, which decisively smelled of fruit, coffee and soap. The nectarine, and all the injustices, ambiguities and pleasures it represented was her first taste of the world to come. A few months after the photo was taken, the Berlin Wall fell.

The story of my first nectarine is a popular tale that is retold frequently at family gatherings as the respective photo gets handed around alongside other stories from when Germany was divided. Historically, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, as many commentators have argued, marked the beginning of a new era. Beck recalls how "many thought that the end of politics was nigh as we entered an age beyond socialism and capitalism" (2000, p.1). For others, like Anderson, the *fin de siècle* is better understood as the beginning of a new world *disorder*, marked by collapsing empires, world markets and mass migrations alongside "deep economic, social and cultural forces at work here, over which political leaderships even in advanced 'democratic' states have only tangential control" (2002, p.269). Finally, the end of the old world also coincided with the beginning of what some have called the "network society" or "information age" (for instance Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998), as 1989 also marks the birthyear of the World Wide Web.

For me personally, the fall of the Berlin Wall had at least two implications that have shaped my life significantly since. On the one hand, my German passport alongside

Article 50 in the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union gives me the undeserved privilege of freedom of movement within the EU and privileged access to many other countries around the world. On the other hand, as a person born in a country that does not exist anymore, it is precisely my lived experience that this was not always so, that has made me somewhat suspicious of the supposed permanence of the nation-state, knowing that the national order does not necessarily have to be the *natural* order, and that borders can shift around you and rights can be altered dramatically. My own position in this world has subsequently been one of an in-between, feeling, perhaps rather ironically, as if permanently positioned on the fence between East and West.

Unsurprisingly then, it was the erection of a new wall that got me into activism. The historical irony of a fence being erected at Hungary's border with Serbia in 2015 – that is, in the very country which contributed to the German border coming down only a few decades before – now in order to keep out migrants and refugees who were trying to reach Europe via the so-called “Balkan route”, made me write an outraged article for OpenDemocracy. Of course, I was not alone with my outrage at the time. For Douzinas, the “new world order” already ended in 2011 as unpredicted waves of “[p]rotests, riots and uprisings have erupted all over the world” (2014, p.80). History has returned and we now live, he claims, in the “age of resistance” (p.79). It was around the same time that I got involved with the transnational activist networks in this thesis.

I am beginning this thesis with the story of my first nectarine and my own path to activism not because it deserves particular attention in itself. Indeed, as this thesis will show, many of the activists who feature in this thesis have their own stories to tell, each of them complex and fascinating in their own right. However, I begin with my own story because I believe that it helps to situate my perspective in this thesis as well as situate this thesis within the wider historical moment in Europe during which it is written and in which it is thus, necessarily, deeply entangled. As I write this preface in October 2019, I find myself on the edge of a historical cliff once again: the UK, where I live today, is leaving the European Union almost exactly thirty years after the Berlin Wall fell. “Brexit”, as Britain's vote to exit the European Union has come to be known, will mark a re-installment of an internal European border on the continent for the first time in the history of European integration. As the clocks of history are being set back to nationalism all across Europe, the question of alternatives to both nationalism *and* the neoliberal status quo – as the activists in this thesis put it – arguably becomes more important than ever before.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research subject: alter-European activism and the question of agency

1.1.1. Research field: “you can be in power without actually having the power to change things”

It was after a busy day of meetings with local activists in preparation for Transeuropa Festival that Antonio and I sat down in a café near Madrid’s City Hall to talk about how he got involved with alter-European activism. Antonio, an Italian activist in his mid-thirties, was one of the founding members of European Alternatives, the transnational civil society organisation and activist network behind the biennial festival, which takes place in a different city every other year. As the title of this year’s edition suggested, the festival’s aim was to create “convergent spaces”, that is, to bring together different actors from various parts of Europe in order to discuss alternatives to the crisis-ridden status quo. Indeed, the people I encountered over the next few days came from a variety of backgrounds: an environmental activist from Austria, a Spanish journalist, an academic from Kiev, a photographer from Athens, an Italian feminist, a Polish city councillor, and a Guinean performance artist. In a series of workshops, art performances, panels and assemblies, festival participants discussed possibilities for an alternative European refugee politics, the idea of the commons in building a new society, or the role new municipal platforms might play in enacting a radical politics, starting from local institutions.



Figure 1: "Refugees Welcome" banner at Madrid City Hall, Madrid, October 2015; Source: Wikimedia Commons

Madrid presented a timely location for the festival participants to learn about such topics. In 2015, the citizen platform *Ahora Madrid* – a coalition of social movements, individual citizens and left-wing political parties – had taken some of the demands and practices from the Spanish “Indignados” or “15-M” from the streets to the institutions. The big black on white banner reading “Refugees Welcome” that was still installed over the entrance of the townhall, not far from where Antonio and I met for our interview, was illustrative of how radical municipalities in Spain and other parts of Europe were ready to resist national policies that were set out to construct more borders and walls (Figure 1). Thus, besides assembling a variety of different actors from all across and beyond Europe in Madrid, the festival was co-hosted in partnership with local groups and actors, including a grassroots anti-racist organisation, different actors from Madrid’s municipality and cultural centres such as *Matadero*, as well as the then still occupied social centre *La Ingobernable*. In these autumn days of 2017, however, Madrid had also been a site where the nation-state flexed its muscles, as national police forces had violently beaten down the attempt of a Catalanian independence referendum only a few days beforehand (The Guardian, 2017; BBC, 2019b).

Discussing such and other topical issues during the interview, Antonio began to explain how he initially became active with social movements politics. He told me about his first experiences of transnational activism in Genoa's European Social Forum in 2001, which he attended in his teenage years. Since then, and now with *European Alternatives*, Antonio has been active in alter-European activist networks for more than a decade. Reflecting on his experiences in these networks, Antonio then said something that - as I later came to realise - summarises well what the alter-European activism at stake in this thesis is essentially about: "we ought to do something to contribute to constructing a pan-European political agency." He elaborated:

"We need a supranational democratic community if we want to control – "take back control" to quote Brexit – over some of the great global transformations of our time... The experience of Greece is that you can be in power without actually having the power to change things." (Antonio, October 2017)

It was this last sentence in particular that struck me: "you can be in power without actually having the power to change things." Antonio was referring, here, to the experience of Syriza, the radical left coalition which took power in Greece in the aftermath of the occupation of squares all across Europe in 2011, taking the struggle against austerity into the national parliament. Despite being elected on the back of the promise for an end to austerity, however, Syriza eventually bowed down to austerity measures imposed by what came to be known as "'a 'Troika' of lenders (the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and European Commission)" (della Porta, Fernández, Kouki and Mosca 2017, p.35). Thus, in Antonio's view, despite having made it into government, Syriza found itself unable to act against the more powerful actors of international capital. Consequently, for Antonio, getting a radical left party elected into national government was not enough: in order to actually have agency in today's world, he told me, "we have to reinvent politics, political mobilisation at a pan-European level". Put differently, addressing contemporary challenges required a sense of agency across borders.

The aim of this ethnographic investigation is to understand how alter-European activists seek to "reinvent politics" and enact *agency beyond borders*. At the heart of this investigation is the question what it means today, using Antonio's words, to have "the power to change things" in Europe, that is, how to exercise agency on a trans-European basis. The thesis argues that for alter-European activists, in the face of today's border-crossing challenges, agency can only be exercised by finding ways of acting across

borders. What this brief vignette of my time at Transeuropa Festival in Madrid in 2017 begins to illustrate is that this sense of agency is not exclusively located in any one place or institution, but operates through modes of weaving together a variety of actors, places and contexts, including radical municipalities as well as other actors from all across Europe. In this thesis, I refer to this form of activism as *alter-* rather than *pro-*European precisely because its complex set of actors and acts cannot be captured in the binary categories of a mainstream discourse that focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of being *in* or *out* of “Europe”, a “Leaver” or a “Remainer”, pro- or anti- EU. Indeed, as we will see, rather than located primarily in the proximity of Brussel’s institutions, alter-European acts need to be understood as moving across a variety of contexts.

My investigation draws on data gathered throughout three years of engaged participant observation, thirty semi-structured interviews and a qualitative analysis of alternative media texts, collected between the UK’s EU referendum in June 2016 and the European Parliament elections in May 2019. The starting point for data gathering is an engaged ethnographic collaboration with *European Alternatives*, a transnational civil society organisation and activist network of more than 1,000 individual members and affiliated organisations, through which I was able to access a wider network of alter-European activists. As I will show throughout this thesis, Transeuropa Festival is but one event in a wider range of actions, campaigns and alternative media that contribute to a trans-European sense of agency beyond borders.

Before I can further dive into the details and politics of such actions, however, in order to fully understand Antonio’s remark regarding the possibilities of enacting social change today and why it is necessary to rethink agency beyond borders, it is important to situate alter-European activism within the wider political context into which it seeks to intervene. Three recent crises are particularly noteworthy here to illustrate the status quo against which alter-European activists struggle: Brexit, the Greek bailout and Europe’s so-called “refugee crisis”.

1.1.2. Research context: the European crisis of agency

When I woke up at six o’clock in the morning on June 24th, 2016, I had hardly slept for two hours. I had stayed awake until late the night before to collectively watch the UK’s

EU referendum results come in with fellow activists with whom I had spent the last few weeks campaigning for a progressive “Remain” case. Believing that “Another Europe Is Possible”, the campaign stated that both the UK *and* the EU needed to radically change in favour of a “Europe for the many” (a nod to Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour campaign slogan “For the many not the few”), but that in order to do so, Britain needed to stay in the Union, not least to protect a series of fundamental rights otherwise at stake under a Tory government¹. Thus, the campaign was opposed to both the nationalism and toxic xenophobia that often accompanied Brexiteer’s call to “take back control”, as well as the economic “scaremongering” (Douzinas, 2017, p.165) of the mainstream “Remain” campaign led by David Cameron, which essentially worked to maintain the neoliberal status quo. After weeks of campaigning in the streets of the UK’s capital city and now unable to keep my eyes open any longer, I left the fairly jolly “watchalong” at a point when things were not yet looking quite so bad, still having to cycle all the way back to South London across the moonlit river Thames. Only a few hours later, I found myself waking up to what the BBC described as nothing less than “history in the making”: “Well, at 20 minutes to 5 we can now say the decision taken in 1975 by this country to join the common market has been reversed by this referendum to leave the EU... The British people have spoken, and the answer is: we’re out” (BBC One, 2016, online). More than three years, two prime ministers and one defeated deal after this fateful morning in June 2016², British MEPs eventually vacated their seats in the European Parliament in January 2020. It was the moment of waking up to the news of a narrow majority of British voters having decided to leave the European Union, however, that several activists later described to me as yet another “wake-up call” – an urgent reminder to get up and *act*.

¹ I will further illuminate the complexity of these activists’ relationship with “Europe” in Chapter 4.

² After David Cameron resigned as Prime Minister as a consequence of the UK’s EU referendum results, Theresa May took over in July 2016. The deal she negotiated with the European Union representatives was repeatedly defeated in Parliament in the following years. May eventually stepped down in June 2019, handing over to the current Conservative prime minister Boris Johnson.



Figure 2: Protesters at People's Vote demonstration, London, October 2018; author's photo³

What took place on Brexit morning was certainly unprecedented. After European integration had been steadily progressing since the end of WWII, Brexit marked a historical moment of disintegration in the political European project⁴. In these years, much can and has been written about Brexit and what it might tell us about the state of contemporary politics in Britain and Europe today. Brexit is deeply situated in the UK's specific historical, cultural and political context, brought about by a combination of different, complex and intersecting factors, including, amongst others, Britain's imperial and colonial history, a deeply Euro-sceptic media landscape, years of austerity and cuts in public services as well as Britain's specific cultural and political relationship with the European Union⁵. At the same time, however, what I want to highlight here is that Brexit

³ Where images are not my own, they were either drawn from public sources or have been included with permission of the respective photographer.

⁴ With the exceptions of Algeria, Greenland and Saint-Barthélemy, whose relationship with the EU or its predecessors changed following independence from colonisation or change of status as overseas territories, Britain is the first former member to trigger Article 50 and formally withdraw from the European Union.

⁵ For a comprehensive analysis on different factors contributing to Brexit, see Seidler's *Making Sense of Brexit* (2018). For a comment on the role of Britain's media landscape on the result of the vote, see Fenton (2016c).

also stands for an ongoing crisis in Western democracies that cuts much deeper and that is perhaps most vividly illustrated by Brexiteer's cry to "take back control": the question of agency and how people might actually be able to influence decisions that affect their everyday lives.

In the view of the activists from *Another Europe Is Possible*, whom I campaigned with in the months leading up to Brexit, neither the European nor the British status quo actually gave the people living in both Britain and continental Europe the power to act on such decisions. Thus, Brexit marked an opportunity for these activists to show how contemporary issues for people living in the UK, such as workers', migrants', environmental and civil rights, are deeply entangled with numerous border-crossing forces, thus requiring border-crossing actions rather than a retreat to nationalism (see Figure 2). In other words, they refused to accept the UK's EU referendum as a binary choice between a neoliberally governed EU and British, or indeed English, nationalism. As *European Alternatives*, the activist network and collaborating organisation of this ethnography, to which *Another Europe Is Possible* is affiliated, put it in one of their print publications:

"We want to open the often narrow discourse on the future of Europe and criticise the false dichotomy between nationalism on the one hand and a neoliberal version of Europe on the other. We still believe in a third option: A Europe made by and for its citizens." (Büllesbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017, p.10)

This option, that is, to discuss what kind of Britain or what kind of Europe people wanted, however, was not on the ballot paper. As Douzinas put it, Brexit "was the wrong answer to a wrong question" (2017, p.162). In other words, as Antonio – the activist I interviewed in Madrid – implied, Brexit did little for people's capacity to enact agency, that is to *actually* "take back control" of the decisions affecting their daily lives the face of contemporary challenges.

Almost exactly one year before and more than two thousand kilometres further South, another EU-related referendum brought up the question of agency, albeit in a somewhat different context. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, the burst housing bubble and the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the US subsequently spiralled into a global economic crisis and a sovereign debt crisis in Europe (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, pp.149-151; della Porta et al., 2017, p.30), of which the Greek debt crisis became one of the most

prominent cases (see, for instance, Douzinas, 2013, 2017). As Flesher Fominaya summarises, “[t]he political response in the US and Europe was to bail out banks at a huge cost to taxpayers and the imposition of harsh – and some would argue, punitive – austerity measures by international financial institutions” (2014, p.150). It was in this context that Syriza, a coalition of the radical left, came to power in Greece on the back of an anti-austerity programme that put the “Troika”-imposed austerity measures to a people’s vote. Although a majority of the electorate voted “Oxi”, deciding against the austerity programme, Syriza eventually implemented even harsher austerity measures which ultimately led to detrimental effects for the Greek population, including skyrocketing unemployment rates, especially amongst young people, as well as cuts in pensions, salaries, health and social service provisions, and “an unprecedented rise in suicide rates” (della Porta et al., 2017, p.36).

Once again, what echoes here is the remark of Antonio, the Italian activist I interviewed at Transeuropa Festival in Madrid, who believed that the case of Greece showed that “you can be in power without actually having the power to change things.” For him, it is the way that European politics is currently set up, as the people of one nation-state are pitted against one another, rather than being able to unite against the EU-implemented austerity, that is the key problem here:

“...the citizens of Europe cannot exercise a political agency to transform policies at the European level. This is very clear when it comes to the attempt to divide European citizens across national lines regarding austerity, dividing the core countries of the North from the peripheral countries of the South... What the system of national division does is, instead, to pit the “working Germans” against the “lazy Greeks” so that that part of Germans that are on the losing end of current economic policies are unable to join forces with those parts of the Greeks or Italian or Spanish population that are on the losing end of this economic policy to create a counter power that proposes another set of economic policy.” (Antonio, October 2017)

In a similar vein, Fenton argues that it is the decoupling of market needs from political decision-making in the context of ongoing neoliberalisation that has led to a “political disjuncture”, in which “the ability to effect political change to systems of governance remains state-bound, yet states have lost the power to do much about it because they no longer have control over their economic means” (2016a, p.17). In this sense, the experience of Greece is a painfully illustrative example of a wider crisis of nation-states’

agency in a context of neoliberal globalization and international finance capitalism. Thus, for Antonio, in the face of border-crossing challenges arising after decades of neoliberalism and the liberation of global financial flows, it is not enough for the radical left to take power on the national level. Agency, he suggests, can only be built across borders.

As one of the countries where many of the 4.3 million people (Eurostat, 2019) who have applied for asylum in EU member states for the first time in the years between 2014 and 2018 have first arrived, Greece is also one of the key locations of my final example of how the question of agency has become one of the crucial challenges for politics in the 21st century. Of these 4.3 million, 28% have come to Europe in search of refuge from war-torn countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Others come to Europe to flee political prosecution, human rights violations or migrate in search for a better life. Compared to the 70.8 million people who are forcibly displaced worldwide in 2018 according to UNHCR (2019), however, of which 41.3 million are internally displaced, this number might appear relatively small. As Khiabany argues, “[c]ontrary to the ‘official’ stories and coverage, the overwhelming majority of refugees are hosted in developing countries” (2016, p.756). Thus, for Khiabany, “[t]he staggering numbers of those who are forcefully displaced within their own countries or those taking refuge in developing countries put the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in perspective” (p.757). Nevertheless, rather than finding a pan-European response to addressing the challenges arising in this context, much of European and national governments’ response has been to fortify its borders and outsource border control and the processing of asylum cases to the EU’s border countries (see Georgiou, 2018, on the role of media in this context). As Human Rights Watch criticises in a recent report:

“Instead of seeking a regional disembarkation agreement to ensure a fair and predictable system for sharing responsibility among EU countries, European leaders focused on creating so-called disembarkation platforms outside the EU where all rescued persons would be taken for processing of asylum claims. Egypt, Tunisia, and other North Africa states, and Albania were proposed as possible partners despite concerns about conditions, treatment, and meaningful access to asylum.” (2019, p.220)

Besides such efforts to “outsource” asylum claim procedures, the EU has also invested in fortifying its borders at the Union’s Eastern and Mediterranean periphery. Most recently,

in March 2020, for instance, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen promised Greece 700 million Euro – albeit not for the fight against austerity, but for Greece to continue to function as “Europe’s shield”, arguing that the Greek-Turkish border “is not only a Greek border, but also a European border” (Spiegel Online, 2020, online, my translation from the German). This desperate investment into a further fortification of European borders sums up the EU’s lethal failure to establish viable transnational answers to the challenges arising in the context of different migration flows to the European continent.

The absence of pan-European solutions has also further fuelled the rise of far-right nationalists that have been gaining ground in several European countries in recent years. For instance, far-right parties entered or gained strength in national elections even in founding EU member states such as Matteo Salvini’s Lega Nord in Italy in 2018, Marine Le Pen’s Front Nationale in France in 2017 and the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany in 2017. With most of the pressure to host newcomers outsourced to Mediterranean countries, far-right nationalists such as Italy’s former deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini began to single-handedly close harbours and ports for ships that have rescued migrants and refugees from drowning in the Mediterranean, such as in the case of the MS Aquarius (Weaver, 2018). There are, of course, also those who mobilised against Fortress Europe, such as the radical municipalities understanding themselves as “shelter cities” (Barcelona En Comú, 2019) or “cities of refuge” (Douzinas, 2017), as visible in the “Refugees Welcome” banner above Madrid’s townhall (Figure 1). Nevertheless, the agency of such actors remains dramatically limited by the power that is still largely situated in national governments (see also Georgiou, 2018, or Zaborowski and Georgiou, 2019, on media and migrants’ agency). Ironically, however, the increasing fortification of Europe and its nations does not only dramatically limit the agency of those who come to Europe in search of refuge or a better life. The millions invested in walls and border security also do little for everyone else in need of employment, affordable housing or accessible healthcare in Europe. As Brown (2010) has shown, while the building of national borders and walls is supposed to symbolise sovereignty and control, what walls and borders actually illustrate are the very lack thereof. Thus, without a way of exercising agency beyond national borders, argue the activists in this thesis, there is no agency at all. As two founding members of European Alternatives have put it in a recent publication: it is not migration that is the problem here, but our lack of addressing the

challenges arising in the context of people crossing borders. “If Europe is a fortress”, they argue, “we are all in prison” (Marsili and Milanese, 2018, p.118).

This, then, is the European status quo that alter-European activists are up against: a Europe of international institutions and national governments that largely have neoliberalism or nationalism, austerity and border security, on the menu, both of which have proven to be recipes for disaster and more suffering. The previous snapshot of the three recent and ongoing crises I have discussed in this section arguably only gave a broad sense of the inequalities and injustices of this status quo. Indeed, merely to list contemporary crises or point to their ubiquity is not of much use and risks distorting the very meaning of the term crisis itself (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). However, rather than providing a comprehensive, in-depth overview of these crises, my aim here was to draw out an underlying question that returns throughout all of them and that sits at the heart of the struggle at stake in this thesis: the question of agency. Brexiteers’ cry to “take back control” is but one of the most illustrative examples of a wider lack of agency that is felt by many across and beyond the European continent with regard to the decisions that affect their everyday lives (for instance, Wainwright, 2020). At the same time, for European Alternatives – the transnational civil society organisation with whom I collaborate for this research – this moment of crisis also bears an opportunity for alternative ways of acting beyond borders:

“Precisely the crisis of the EU and of global governance, at a time when more and more of our challenges have a clearly European or global nature, point to the need to deeply restructure our capacity to do politics beyond borders.” (European Alternatives, 2017a, p. 29)

Thus, more than marking the political context for the activism investigated in this thesis, the three crises selected here all point to one of the key questions of the contemporary political moment: how might it be possible to act in a world where many of the challenges we face cross borders, while our political agency is largely contained within the boundaries of the nation-state? This thesis contributes to answering this urgent political question by investigating how alter-European activists are experimenting with different possibilities of how agency might be exercised otherwise.

1.1.3. Research aim: investigating agency in alter-European activism

I began this thesis with my meeting with Antonio in Madrid, because his words in the interview aptly capture what is at the heart of the investigation in this thesis, namely: how can you “actually have the power to change things” today? In other words, what does it mean to have agency in a world in which many of the challenges we face cross national borders, while our institutionalised ways of acting – for instance legally in the shape of national citizenship (see Isin, 2008) – are largely confined within the borders of nation-states? I also started with Antonio’s words, because my aim is not to investigate agency in abstract, philosophical terms. Instead, I am interested in the agency of a very particular actor: alter-European activist networks. As such, I focus on an actor with a very particular aim, namely the aim to collectively work towards progressive social change. Isin, who has theorized *acts* in the context of citizenship studies throughout an extensive body of work (see, for instance, 2008, 2009, 2012) offers a useful distinction here, suggesting that “the essence of an act, as distinct from conduct, practice, behaviour and habit, is that an act is a *rupture in the given*” (2008, p.25, emphasis added), understanding acts as “those entities that *create a scene*” or “set something in motion” (p.27, emphasis added). In this sense, what I am interested in in this thesis, in contrast to habitual actions, are acts that aim to intervene into the status quo and bring about social change. Thus, I investigate agency in the context of a particular social movement’s acts and its capacity to bring about social change.

As we will see, the various actors in alter-European activist networks have different understandings of what it means to act in order to bring about social change. Here, agency is articulated in a variety of ways – from feminists’ intentions to change the politics of organising to direct actions, activists seeking to intervene in European institutions or the use of different media strategies to bring together a variety of actors across borders. Exercising agency can refer to the act of taking the power to narrate one’s own story as in the case of Afro-Europeans who claim a sense of belonging in the context of a continent that has historically rendered non-white people as non-European (Chapter 4). It can refer to the calling-out of patriarchal inequalities perpetuated even in activist meetings (Chapter 7). At the same time, agency is claimed when activists denounce the mediated power of nations-states through the development of nomadic media (Chapter 6). It also arises where activists take from the streets to the institutions in the context of the struggle for a more progressive trans-municipal migration politics (Chapter 7). The main aim of

this thesis is thus to trace such different articulations of agency as they are enacted in alter-European activism and to conceptualise how agency is enacted across a variety of borders in times of border-crossing challenges in this context. More than a unified way of acting, the common characteristic of acts, here, is their *transversal* quality, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis.

In order to understand and trace different articulations of agency, my ethnographic investigation of acts in alter-European activist networks is broken down into different aspects of agency, namely the actors themselves (Chapter 4), their media practices (Chapter 6) and their relationship with established political institutions in particular (Chapter 7), and is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) Who are the key actors in alter-European activist networks and how do they constitute themselves as a collective actor?
- (2) How do alter-European activists' (alternative) media practices contribute to their ideas of agency?
- (3) What is alter-European activists' relationship with established institutions and how do they understand political agency?
- (4) How might the acts of alter-European activists help us, more broadly, to better understand agency in the contemporary European context?

To help me capture, understand and conceptualise the different registers of action that can be observed in my empirical findings, I also draw on interdisciplinary scholarship and theories of action, including, most notably, media and communications studies, feminist theory, migration and citizenship scholarship and articulations of agency in social movement studies. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, these different theoretical approaches have defined the concept of agency in different ways across the social and political sciences in numerous ways. As contrasted by Kuus (2019), social science scholarship tends to highlight the level of the everyday and how agency relates to social structures, while the political sciences often focus on the dimension of political agency, exercised via political institutions. Definitions of agency thus range from what Fenton calls the "politics of being", that is, "the lived experience of the political" to the capacity to "be political", meaning practices relating "to a conventional political system" (2016a, p.130). As I will show in this thesis, alter-European activists do not understand agency in a narrow sense, but experiment with different forms of agency across a similarly wide-

ranging spectrum of acts. The aim of consulting various theoretical conceptions of agency from different academic disciplines and to blend them with the ethnographic findings is thus to help me to capture, measure and observe different types of acts and registers of action in order to understand how they constitute alter-European actors' agency.

Finally, the consultation of existing literature on agency also importantly highlights that alter-European activist networks are not the first to attempt to find ways of acting across borders that are able to cause an intervention into the existing power relations of the contemporary status quo. One of the most notable examples is the case of the alter-globalization mobilisations around the turn of the century. Antonio's question what it takes to "actually change things" in a world of border-crossing challenges, echoes, for instance in Pleyers' account of the alter-globalization movement, in which he asks how it might be possible "to become an actor in this global age? How to have an impact on the world's affairs when even elected politicians are bypassed by decisions taken by transnational companies or by experts at international institutions?" (2010, p.12) As this quote illustrates, in order to understand what an analysis of agency in alter-European activism can contribute to our understanding of contemporary social movements, it is important to situate contemporary alter-European activist networks into a wider history of preceding mobilisations across borders. It is with reference to these previous mobilisations that it will become evident why an investigation of contemporary transnational movements should be approached from a media and communications point of view and needs to acknowledge the role of digital media and the idea of the network paradigm in how these transnational movements act as well as how they have been understood.

1.2. From networks to agency: contributions to knowledge

1.2.1. The role of networks in the study of alter-globalization movements

Of course, alter-European activists are not the first to attempt to build a bottom-up network of actors who collaborate across borders. Workers, feminists, peace activists and anti-colonial subjects have been organising on a transnational level all throughout and long before the 20th century, as Berger and Scalmer have shown in their historical account of the figure of *The Transnational Activist* (2017). An important moment in the more

recent history of transnational social movements and a good starting point for a contextualisation of the struggle of alter-European activists might be the Zapatista's call for a global revolution against neoliberalism and the movements it subsequently inspired (see, for instance, Graeber, 2004; Nash, 2004; Juris, 2008a; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). What was particularly noteworthy about the Zapatistas, according to Juris (2008a), was that they identified neoliberal globalization and free trade agreements as part of the origins for their local struggles, an analysis with which many different activists across the globe were able to identify. Consequently, subsequent demonstrations and events organised by the People's Global Action and other groups, including the famous anti-WTO protest in Seattle in 1999 and the World Social Forums in the early 2000s, gathered people from a wide variety of struggles, including anti-capitalists, feminists, trade unions, anti-racists, anarchists, environmentalists, indigenous and migrants rights groups under the slogan "Another World Is Possible" (see, for instance, Juris, 2008a). Different scholars interpreted these formations as an emerging "globalisation from below" (della Porta et al., 2006), "the possibility of democracy on a global scale" (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p.xi) or the basis for a "new insurgent cosmopolitan politics" (de Sousa Santos, 2006, p.xi).

In academic scholarship, the emergence of the alter-globalization movement, or movement for global justice, has not only been understood with reference to a wider discourse on issues of globalization, but also in relation to the further development and increasing accessibility of digital technologies throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s (see Chapter 3). In these years, the role played by different media technologies has become an important part of understanding transnational social movements. The Zapatistas' "pioneering use of digital technologies" (Juris, 2008a, p.12) was highlighted as a "movement of movements" emerged alongside the "network of networks". The notion of the *network* has since become an important analytical tool for understanding how transnational movements operate (see Barassi, 2016). Most notably, it was the work of Castells and his idea of the "network society" (1996), which proposed the network as an analytical frame, arguing that new networking technologies carried the potential for new forms of global resistance (2012). As Juris has shown at the example of alter-globalization networks, the "cultural logic of networking" (2008a, p.5) featured not only in activists' use of information technology, but also in their ways of organising and thinking about politics. Since then, however, more recent scholarship has also pointed out the limitations of the network discourse. Barassi, for instance, argues that the network has

become an empty signifier in that it “has focused too long on Western meta-narratives of technological positivism”, which suggest that technological process automatically carries the potential for liberation, thereby risking to obscure or conceal the continuing existence of “different, and context-specific, political visions” (2016, p. 424). The point raised here, is that “networks should not be romanticized” and that the network as such is not “*necessarily* democratic or egalitarian” (Juris, 2008a, p.17, original emphasis). Indeed, scholars like Juris have also reflected on what it means for activists to use the very “logic of information capitalism” (p.11) to challenge corporate globalization itself.

By the mid 2000s, the alter-globalization movement’s cycle of contention came to a preliminary end. However, some of the key questions raised during this cycle of global protest remained unresolved and continue to be relevant to more recent and contemporary forms of transnational mobilisations, including alter-European activism. For instance, Flesher Fominaya points out that “the concerns, issues, practices, discourse, tactics and tensions between Institutional Left and autonomous actors of the GJM [Global Justice Movement] are alive and kicking” (2014, p.80). Similarly, de Sousa Santos draws out a list of ongoing challenges in the form of three central questions: “*the questions of efficaciousness*” (2006, p.184, original emphasis), which he relates to the differences between old and new understandings of exactly how social transformation might be brought about on a global scale; “*the question of representation and organization*” (p.185, original emphasis), relating to issues of internal democracy, leadership and hierarchy; and “*the question of how to combine the celebration of diversity with the construction of strong consensuses leading to collective action*” (p.185, original emphasis), that is, the question of common political objectives. In other words, while clearly opposed to the institutions of global capital, one of the central questions remaining is how transnational movement networks might effectively organise and exercise agency in a more sustained way and what role more radical institutional actors on the left might play in the context of the wider struggle against neoliberal globalisation and global finance capital. These questions became all the more urgent a couple of years later, when global finance crashed, and another cycle of contention began.

1.2.2. *The movements of the squares and the limits of the network metaphor*

In the second decade of the 21st century, resistance continued to spread across geographies as a new wave of protest took people to the streets and public squares all across the globe in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008. Preceded only by Iceland's so-called *Saucepán* Revolution in 2009 (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p.148), this cycle of contention might initially be understood as a Mediterranean wave of protests (see Solera, 2017). First was the so-called "Arab Spring", with people taking to the streets in Tunisia in 2010 and Egypt in 2011, followed by Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Bahrain (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Next were the Northern Mediterranean and Southern European countries, where the "outraged" *Indignados* and *aganaktismenoi* took to the public squares in different parts of Spain and Greece (see Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Douzinas, 2013, 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Their call was eventually echoed across the English Channel, the Atlantic Ocean and other places across the globe by Occupy Wall Street protesters in 2011 (Halvorsen, 2012, 2015; Taussig, 2013; Matthews, 2018, 2019). Subsequent occupations such as those of Taksim square in 2013 (Douzinas, 2014) or the French *Nuit Debout* protesters in 2016 (Gerbaudo, 2017; Felicetti and della Porta 2018) are proof that what was at stake here was more than merely a "year of the protester", as Time magazine entitled the year 2011 (see Gerbaudo, 2012).

After the "year of the protester", however, began the time of making sense of the protests (Castells', Gerbaudo's and Mason's accounts of the movements of the squares were all first published in 2012), which, according to Mason and Castells, few had anticipated. Once again, various scholars highlighted the role of media and digital communication technologies. Indeed, the mobilisations of the "Arab Spring" have been dubbed – and thus simplified – by journalists as "Facebook" or "Twitter revolutions" (see Gerbaudo, 2012, p.2) and were described by some commentators as "global revolutions" (Mason, 2012). More generally, besides the particular role of digital network, the network metaphor as well as Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the rhizome still play a role in how these movements are understood today (for instance in Castells, 2012; see also Flesher Fominaya on the "continued relevance of the movement "network" in the digital age", 2020a, p.300). At the same time, however, many scholars also moved on to focus less on the notion of networks and instead highlighted the importance of understanding the limitations of how social media work within these movements as well as stressing the movements' particular local, cultural and spatial "embeddedness" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p.5). This includes the role of assembly (Gerbaudo, 2012; Butler, 2015; Hardt and Negri,

2017), territory (Halvorsen, 2012; Matthews, 2019) and protest camps (Frenzel, Feigenbaum and McCurdy, 2014) as well as the importance of bodies themselves, whose very presence, argues Butler (2015), might be understood as a defiant form of resistance against austerity.

In Europe, besides this focus on the movements' spatial logics (Routledge, 2017), however, there is another dimension that emerges towards the end of this protest cycle in the context of Spain and Greece, which marks a clear distinction to the alter-globalization movement: a willingness to take the struggle from the streets to the parliaments. Two of the perhaps most well-known examples are the cases of Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, which have initially been seen as signs of hope for radical left politics in Europe. Both took a notable number of seats in their respective parliaments four years after the movements of the squares first occupied the nations' public spaces, largely inspired and arguably carried by the momentum that these movements produced (see Errejón and Mouffe, 2016). The cases of "movement parties" (della Porta et al., 2017) or "hybrid parties" (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, b) like Syriza and Podemos and what Flesher Fominaya calls a wider "democratic turn" or "electoral turn" (2020a, p.232) have since been much discussed by scholars with an interest in radical politics and social movements (see also Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; Fenton, 2016a; Douzinas, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2019). As becomes visible in respective debates, much can be learned from their possibilities and limitations regarding how movement-related parties might transform demands for more democracy and less austerity into a programme that gathers popular support, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7. Yet, another actor that emerged in the aftermath of the movements of the squares has surprisingly received significantly less attention. For the spirit of the movement of the squares did not only reach national governments. It was also transformed by what I want to call in this thesis "municipal movement parties", of which the case of Barcelona En Comú and its radical mayor Ada Colau might be the most popular example (Barcelona En Comú, 2019). As I will show in this thesis and in particular in Chapter 7, examples of radical municipalities can be found all across and beyond the European continent. Such radical municipal actors, this thesis argues, do not only play a crucial role in alter-European activists' quest for agency beyond borders, but can also contribute valuable insights to the wider ongoing discussions around the relationships between movements and parties in the 21st century.

1.2.3. Towards a conceptualisation of agency in alter-European activism

What, then, is it that this investigation of agency in alter-European activist networks contributes to existing knowledge of transnational social movements and to media and communications studies in particular? Indeed, throughout the years during which this research took place, emerging scholarship has begun to centre the concept of agency, thereby illustrating the urgency and topicality of investigating this issue. The aforementioned “democratic turn” (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, p.232) in social movement scholarship can be read as just that: investigations of how movements become parties matter precisely because they have something to tell us about how movements are seeking new ways to exercise agency in the contemporary moment, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7.

Similarly, in and beyond media studies, several scholars have begun to show that a consideration of agency is particularly meaningful and urgent from a media and communications perspective. Rustin (2019) argues that after “the liberal enlightenment version which sees education of individuals as the route to progress, and the socialist one which locates agency in the organisation of the working classes” (2019, p.58), the information age requires us to ask if there are new paradigms of agency emerging. According to Rustin, this is not least because the latest information technologies have made it “possible for groups to be gathered together, protests to be mobilised, even revolutionary moments to be created, in very short periods of time, sometimes almost instantly.” (p.60) Rustin’s observation is shared by other scholars in the social and political sciences, like Isin and Ruppert (2015), as well as media scholars like Kaun, Kyriakidou and Uldam (2016) and Kavada (2016), who would agree that agency, today, needs to be considered as a matter of media and communications. Indeed, in recent years, different media scholars have investigated how social media in particular play a role in social movement’s capacity to act, pointing out both their limiting, individualising tendencies (Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Fenton, 2011) as well as, for instance, “possibilities opened up by digital traces” and “bottom-up data practices” (Milan, 2018, p.507). Taking a media and communications angle also reveals that an investigation of agency in the digital age is particularly urgent as digitally mediated sites for agency are owned by powerful multi-national companies such as Google and Facebook, who “control and manage these infrastructures to their own profit-seeking advantage” (Rustin, 2019, p.60).

Consequently, as Barassi (2015) has shown, further ethnographic attention is required to how activists negotiate the everyday politics of digitally mediated acts.

This thesis contributes to these discussions through an analysis and conceptualisation of how contemporary alter-European activist networks act towards social change on a transnational level. Rather than focussing exclusively on alter-European activists' media practices, however, I take a broader view of agency, conceptualising their acts by building on and expanding Isin's theoretical framework of *acts of citizenship* (2008, 2009, 2012). Isin's proposed framework for understanding acts is particularly useful for my own conceptualisation of agency, because it investigates acts from different angles, taking into consideration different aspects of agency. In the context of globalization, he argues, new subjects of action have emerged alongside "new sites of struggle and new scales of identification" (2008, p.16). Isin thus suggests investigating acts along the lines of these three dimensions: (1) an investigation of acting *subjects*, that is, to focus on the actors themselves, whether they be "individuals, states, NGOs and other legal or quasi-legal entities that come into being through enactment" (2009, p.371) - in my case the grassroots groups, civil society organisations and individual actors I met in alter-European activist networks; (2) a consideration of *scales*, that is, how acts "stretch across boundaries, frontiers, and territories to involve multiple and overlapping scales of contestation" (p.371), which amounts in the case of alter-European activism to a nomadic logic, as I will argue in Chapter 6; and (3) *sites* of contestation, which might include "[b]odies, courts, streets, media, networks and borders" (p.371), but also, as I will argue in Chapter 7, more formal sites of institutional politics, such as in the case of municipal movement parties.

Applying Isin's framework to my own context of alter-European activist networks throughout this thesis, I dedicate one chapter to investigating each of these three dimensions, as indicated in the respective chapter titles. I discuss alter-European activist networks with regards to the different *actors* (subjects) in these networks (Chapter 4), the *scales* across which their actions operate, from EU-Europe in Brussels to local actions all across the continent (Chapter 6), and their *sites* of struggle, including different media practices (discussed most notably in Chapters 3 and 6) and focussing in particular on how they negotiate the role of political parties and institutions – from the everyday politics of feminist organising to institutional actions and the transnational connections made between municipal movement parties (Chapter 7).

Throughout these chapters, I develop the idea of *transversal agency*, arguing that agency, in the particular context of alter-European activism, is neither exclusively located in any one thematic struggle (subject/ actor) or geographical location (scale), nor is it exclusively attached to either everyday, mediated or more institutional forms of acting (sites). In sum, what this approach to understanding agency in alter-European activist networks reveals, is that rather than situated in any one particular struggle, scale or site, what stands out as a common, driving characteristic in the acts of the alter-European actors followed in this thesis is their *transversal* quality, that is the move across a variety of conceptual and physical borders between struggles, scales and sites, in an attempt to translate between different registers of action.

As I will elaborate further in the thesis' conclusion, the idea and discussion of *transversal agency*, which this thesis puts forward, contributes to contemporary media and communications scholarship in three distinct ways, aiming to advance both media studies scholarship as well as the interdisciplinary scholarship of transnational social movements more broadly.

Firstly, pointing to the limits of the idea of the *network* when it comes to understanding contemporary alter-European activism – for instance with regards to their relationship to digital networks (Chapter 3) and political institutions (Chapter 7) – the thesis argues that if we want to understand contemporary movements, we need to consider not only how different media technologies enable activists to come together in *networks*, but the extent to which these networks might enhance activists' *agency*, thus requiring us to qualify the different meanings of agency in this context. This contribution speaks in particular to a body of media scholarship that investigates social movements, radical politics and activism in relation their use of media and communication technologies (for instance Fenton, 2011, 2016a, b; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017, 2019; Mattoni and Treré, 2014; Barassi, 2015; Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Jeppesen et al., 2017; Postill, 2018). More specifically, I contribute here to recently emerging scholarship that explicitly employs the concept of agency in order to better understand social movement politics in the digital age (Kaun, Kyriakidou and Uldam, 2016; Kavada, 2016; Milan, 2018).

Secondly, besides this more general, conceptual contribution that invites scholars to shift our view from the network to the concept of agency, my discussion of agency in alter-European activist networks draws out the particular nomadic logic according to which alter-European activists' media practices operate. This discussion of *nomadic media* (Chapter 6) contributes to media scholarship on the relations between media, diaspora, migration and transnational media (for instance Morley, 2000, 2017; Georgiou; 2006, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Verstraete, 2010; Madianou, 2016, 2019; Smets, Leurs, Georgiou, Witteborn and Radhika, 2019; Zabarowski and Georgiou, 2019). Rather than starting with a *migrating* subject, however, my exploration of how alter-European actors seek to enact agency beyond the borders follows Isin's (2012) approach of focussing on an *acting* subject who explicitly sets out to challenge the boundaries of nation-states and, in this case, nation-focussed mainstream media (see, for instance, Berlant, 1993; Morley, 2000; Curran, 2016).

Finally, the thesis contributes to media scholarship that is not necessarily merely interested in the particular case of social movements politics but in progressive politics, issues of power and inequality and the future of democracy more generally (for instance Curran and Couldry, 2003; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Curran 2016; Fenton, 2016a, b; Davis, 2019; Davis, Fenton, Freedman and Khiabany, 2020). As we will see, a consideration of acts in alter-European activist networks leads us not in the first place to EU-Brussels, but to radical actors all across the continent, including to the important role played by municipal movement parties. It is with regards to this latter point, where Isin's (2008, 2009, 2012) framework, which is situated largely outside of the realm of institutional and parliamentary politics, has to be expanded to include the level of institutional paths to agency, in order to fully understand agency in alter-European activist networks. While various social movement scholars have already begun to investigate the changing relationship between movements and parties in recent years as this research evolved (for instance Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; della Porta et al., 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a), the case of municipal movement parties has been given curiously little attention by comparison beyond the perhaps most well-known case of Barcelona En Comú and its radical mayor Ada Colau. In Chapter 7, I argue that the case of movement parties on the municipal level – and how alter-European activists seek to connect these efforts across nation-states through a variety of actions and media practices – is a case in point for an articulation of agency beyond border that deserves further attention. In order to fully understand the changing relationship between movements and parties, I hold that

those in search of a radical revision of European politics should not only look to Brussels' institutions or national governments, but also pay attention to radical changes emerging in municipalities and grassroots activism all across the continent. Importantly, such developments and the investigation of agency beyond borders in alter-European activism are not only relevant to media scholars – as well as social movement scholars in other disciplines. They matter in the context of a wider and much-needed public debate on how it might be possible to act for social change in an age of border-crossing challenges.

1.3. Methodology

My interest in researching alter-European activism and the starting point for this thesis is the recognition that we live, today, in a deeply unequal state of neoliberal globalization that is playing out on the economic, social, cultural and environmental level. I follow a set of scholars, here, who understand today's global political moment as an overlapping of “multifaceted crises” (Fraser, 2019, p.8) or “converging crises” (Venn, 2018, p.1). This includes struggles against hetero-patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, neo-colonialism and the injustices perpetuated by neoliberal globalization, the free reign of global finance and data driven capitalism, and the planetary ecological crisis (see also Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019). For Bourgois, for instance, we live in a “global state of emergency,” where “globalization has become synonymous with military intervention, market-driven poverty, and ecological destruction” (2006, p.x). Similarly, Juris and Khasnabish describe the contemporary situation as

“a historical moment defined by an ever-more rapacious form of global capitalism and empire, a temporally and spatially unlimited “war on terror,” and a geopolitical order defined by white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, ecological crisis, and vast social and economic inequality.” (2013, p.369)

As different scholars have argued, what is required to address these intersecting crises are new epistemologies, perspectives and ways of thinking about politics (see, for instance, de Sousa Santos, 2006; Douzinas, 2013; Venn 2018). It is from this starting point, then, that the thesis contributes to the search for alternative ways of thinking about political agency that are as intersectional and transnational as the crises we are facing today.

Thus, starting from the urgent need and burning desire to make sense of and intervene into our current political moment, and, more specifically, to address the European crisis of agency with which I began this chapter, this thesis is situated within a long tradition of engaged academic scholarship. I draw inspiration in particular from radically engaged activist ethnographers, such as Juris’ “militant ethnography” (2007, 2008a; see also Juris and Khasnabish, 2013) or Scheper-Hughes’ “militant anthropology” (1995). Key to such approaches, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, is the ethnographer’s engaged participation as both activist *and* scholar. In line with this engaged methodology, I have not only made observations in my field of study, but also actively contributed to the political struggle at stake in numerous ways. This included the organisation of local meetings and events, speaking at and moderating panels, writing articles for alternative media platforms, taking notes at meetings, translating texts, carrying out research related tasks or carrying placards at protests. I also attempted to offer different kinds of spaces for collective reflections on the movement’s strategies, ideas and approaches, including formal and informal conversations, collective video calls, and a blog⁶, where I distributed tentative findings and academic output. Despite stepping away from active engagement and organising for the time of writing up this thesis in the final year, this knowledge transfer and my engagement with some of these groups and activists will continue – in line with my ambition for the collaboration to not only be academically rigorous, but also useful to the movement itself – even beyond the formal end of this research project.

The organisation to which I contributed the most within the framework of a +4 ESRC scholarship was *European Alternatives*, the transnational civil society organisation and activist network which organised Transeuropa Festival in Madrid, with which I began this chapter. European Alternatives is legally registered in four European cities (Berlin, Rome, Paris and London, where it was founded in 2007), while also active in various local groups in many more (including smaller) cities across and beyond EU-Europe. As such, the organisation works as a network of more than 1,000 individual members and affiliated organisations, one of which is Another Europe is Possible, with whom I went

⁶ In line with the collaborative nature of this project and an ongoing effort to share and discuss the knowledges produced by this study, earlier versions or excerpts of some of the chapters in this thesis have appeared on a blog that was available to view for research participants between February 2018 and August 2019, which is available at: <https://transnationalimagination.wordpress.com>. I also published a series of articles and blogposts in other platforms as part of this collaboration, some of which are earlier versions of respective sections in this thesis, or draw on similar ethnographic or interview data, where permission was given for publication (for instance Herr et al., 2017; Scharenberg 2017a, b, c, 2018a, b, 2019a, b, c, 2020; Shaaban and Scharenberg, 2019).

out to leaflet as part of their progressive “Remain” campaign mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. When I proposed the collaborative research project to European Alternatives, I had already been active in this network as an activist myself, as I will explain in Chapter 2. While most of the data used in this project was gathered via access facilitated through my involvement with European Alternatives, however, it must be stressed, that this is *not* an organisational ethnography that focusses on one particular group. Indeed, I do not want to claim that this thesis offers a comprehensive account of all that European Alternatives does and stands for. Rather, I am interested in the wider networks which I was able to access through my engagement with European Alternatives. Like in Juris’ study of alter-globalization networks, “my focus was not really a specific network, but rather the concrete practices through which such networks are constituted.” (2008a, p.5) Applying this to my own context, rather than taking alter-European activist networks as a given entity, the thesis looks at how alter-European activist networks constitute themselves as a collective actor with the power to contribute to social change.

The main methods of data collection in this ethnography are three years of engaged participant observation, dating between two important political events – namely the UK’s vote to leave the European Union in June 2016 and the European Parliament elections in May 2019 – as well as interviews and the qualitative analysis of key alternative media texts. In the first year of the research, I started out contributing to and observing participants at key events or campaigns organised by European Alternatives (see Appendix B), such as Transeuropa Festival in Belgrade (Chapter 2), Madrid (Chapter 1 and 3) and Palermo (Chapter 8) and the “Campus” workshop, which brings together activists and other political actors from different parts of Europe to work towards common goals (Chapter 7). I also attended topical protests in London, Rome and Berlin that were organised in the context of ongoing Brexit negotiations in 2016 and 2017 by either European Alternatives themselves or in collaboration with one of their partner organisations, such as Another Europe is Possible. As my fieldwork progressed and I had developed a better understanding of the network as a whole, I decided to focus on particular events or campaigns that would allow me to access different parts of the movement and which offered new perspectives on the struggle at stake. This included a trip to the European Parliament in Brussels with the campaign “Charta 2020” (Chapter 6), as well as fieldwork in London, Florence and Kiev in the context of the “School of Transnational Activism” project, and a trip with two activist caravans from West to East, across the former Iron Curtain, and from South to North, which allowed me to better

understand the importance of municipal actors for alter-European activism's sense of agency. In sum, the participant observation part of the research took me to gathering data in eighteen cities (Bad Ischl, Belgrade, Berlin, Brussels, Casekow, Florence, Friedrichshafen, Kyiv, London, Lyon, Madrid, Marseille, München, Palermo, Paris, Rome, Saillans, Warsaw) in ten countries across the European continent (Appendix A). Besides engaged observation, I also drew data from key media texts produced and distributed around the events I attended (Appendix D). This included keeping in touch through videocalls, emails and bi-weekly European Alternatives' newsletters, as well as reviewing flyers and brochures, online and print magazines and books (see Chapter 2 and Appendix D). The analysis of key media texts primarily served to summarise and preserve key issues discussed at respective meetings and to complement and add to my overall findings from the participant observation. Finally, the thesis draws on thirty semi-structured, audio-recorded and transcribed interviews lasting for about one hour on average, which were conducted with activists from different parts of the movement and hailing from more than a dozen countries throughout three years of data gathering (see Chapter 2 and Appendix C).

1.4. Chapter outline

This thesis can be read as a journey through Transeuropa – a transversal political space which does not understand Europe alongside the borders of its nation-states, but alongside the connections made between activists in different locations. In line with this theme of a political journey, each chapter travels to different sites of struggle, investigating the various articulations of alter-European activism. Having already moved from Transeuropa Festival in Madrid to London, the heart of the Brexit debate, in this chapter, this thesis further travels South, North, East and West – from Saillans in the South of France (Chapter 7) and Friedrichshafen in the South of Germany (Chapter 5) to Brussels, the self-ascribed “heart” of EU-Europe (Chapter 6), going eastwards to Warsaw (Chapter 6) and beyond EU-Europe to Kyiv (Chapter 4) and Belgrade (Chapter 2), before reaching its tentative final destination at the Mediterranean Sea (Chapter 8).

The journey across Transeuropa is conceptually set up in two parts. Its first part, entitled “Understanding Alter-European Activist Networks” lays out my methodological approach (Chapter 2) and the theoretical context necessary to understanding alter-

European activism (Chapter 3), while also introducing some of the key actors in alter-European activist networks and how they constitute themselves as a collective actor (Chapter 4). The second part, “Conceptualising Agency Across Borders” builds up towards a theorisation of *transversal agency* on the basis of my empirical findings of how agency is exercised in alter-European activist networks. I start, here, with a literature review of how agency has been understood in different academic disciplines (Chapter 5) before analysing how alter-European activists’ alternative media practices (Chapter 6) and their work with political institutions (Chapter 7) point to an understanding of agency that transgresses struggles, scales and sites, drawing in particular on Isin’s theorisation of *acts of citizenship* (2008, 2009, 2012). The concept of transversal agency and how it contributes to existing scholarship of transnational movements is further summarised in the thesis’ conclusion (Chapter 8).

Deeply rooted in its engaged ethnographic approach, the first part of the thesis commences with a chapter outlining my methodology (Chapter 2). Here, I describe in more detail how I got access to my chosen research field, while introducing the thesis’ collaborating organisation, some of its key actors and my methods of data collection in more depth. The chapter also explains the epistemological framework that underpins my engaged ethnographic approach, understanding the knowledges produced here as *contextual*, *corporeal*, *contradictory* and *collective*, which founds the basis for the empirical discussions to follow.

Next, I situate my study within existing literature on transnational social movements (Chapter 3). Here, I will show how the term “globalization” and the metaphor of the “network” have been key to understanding social movements in recent decades alongside the emergence of digital media technologies. While respective concepts and discussions have significantly advanced our understanding of contemporary social movements, such as the alter-globalization movement and the movements of the squares – and continue to remain relevant until today – the chapter begins to show that there are some aspects that the idea of the network does not capture as readily, including: the question of agency.

Before I commence to further conceptualise my own understanding of agency based on the empirical findings from my work with alter-European activists, Chapter 4 further characterises some of the actors in alter-European activism and their motivations for participating in these networks in more depth, asking how this diverse movement

constitutes itself as a collective actor with a sense of collective identity. Here, I problematise the movement's complicated relationship with the idea and political institutions of Europe, arguing that EU-Europe is often curiously absent from the movement's politics. The chapter concludes by arguing that collective identity is best understood, in this context, as a process of translation between different *struggles* and their common quest for agency, rather than via a shared (European) essence.

The second part of the thesis then begins to conceptualise how agency emerges in alter-European activist networks. Chapter 5 starts this theorisation by reviewing how agency has been understood more generally across the social sciences and, more specifically, how the notion of collective action has been theorised within social movements literature. Despite existing theories of collective action and recent calls to consider the notion of agency, I suggest that agency remains a somewhat under-theorised concept in recent scholarship of transnational social movements. Consequently, the chapter additionally draws on feminist scholarship and migration and citizenship studies, such as Isin's (2008, 2009, 2012) theoretical framework of acts, applying it to the struggle of alter-European activist networks by theorising their acts along three registers of action: *struggles*, *scales* and *sites*.

Chapter 6 turns to alter-European activists' alternative media practices and the issue of scale, showing how alter-European activism operates across and translates between different geographies. Rather than situated primarily in Brussels, the heart of EU-Europe, alter-European activism consequently takes place everywhere across and beyond Europe according to a nomadic logic. Here, I discuss how the media practices of alter-European activists call into question the sedentary logic of nation-state-based media and politics. The chapter thus demonstrates how alter-European activists' alternative media practices contribute to the movement's quest for agency beyond borders.

Subsequently, Chapter 7 discusses the movement's engagement with political institutions. The chapter highlights the important role of local resistance and municipal movement parties for alter-European activism, discussing both the potential and the limitations of an emerging trans-municipal network of actors. One of the key tensions here is the translation between the movement's feminist principles and the workings of established institutional politics. As this chapter shows with regards to the case of municipal movement parties, the movement's capacity to enact change does not only

depend on acting across and translating between geographical and thematic, but also institutional boundaries. Thus, bringing together this chapter's argument on the role of institutional *sites* with key findings from previous chapters, I conclude by highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of the idea of *transversal agency*.

Finally, Chapter 8 summarises my key research findings and offers a reflection on my engaged methodological approach and possible avenues for future research. The chapter ties together the concept of *transversal agency* which I develop throughout this thesis and demonstrates how it contributes to existing academic scholarship on transnational movements. This thesis ultimately suggests that focussing on the question how agency might be exercised beyond borders is not only a crucial issue for scholars with an interest in understanding transnational social movements, but marks one of the most important political questions of the contemporary moment. The epilogue closes the thesis' story by arguing that alter-European activists' quest might matter more than ever in times of closing borders, as phenomena such as climate change, neoliberal globalization and Covid-19 cannot be contained within nation-states. In centring the question how agency might be exercised across different scales and registers of action, alter-European activist networks can provide illuminating insights for how we might begin to address such urgent challenges in the 21st century.

Part I: Understanding Alter-European Activist Networks

2. Methodology: practising engaged ethnography with alter-European activists

2.1. Introduction

Starting from the urgent political challenges I outlined in the previous chapter, this thesis is written from a politically engaged perspective with the aim to better understand crucial aspects of our contemporary political moment from within a specific social movement. Thus, before I can start discussing how agency might be understood from the perspective of alter-European activists, I want to first of all describe how I went about investigating this question and problematise some of the challenges that come with an engaged perspective. To this end, this chapter explains my methodological approach, including a more in-depth introduction of my research field, methods of data collection, and the epistemological framework on which my engaged approach and the findings in this thesis rest.

This methodological chapter starts with the question of access. I begin, here, with the story of how I first encountered European Alternatives, the collaborating organisation of this engaged ethnography, and how this prior engagement as an activist subsequently provided access to my field of study. This first part also introduces some of the actors I follow, whose acts determine the scope of my research field, as I will explain. The second part of this chapter discusses my research methods, namely engaged participant observation, interviews and the analysis of key alternative media texts. This part describes how I collected and analysed the data gathered in the years between the UK's EU referendum in June 2016 and the European Parliament election in May 2019. Finally, the third part of this chapter lays out the epistemological framework which functions as a foundation for my engaged approach and helped me to navigate the field throughout this research project. Reflecting on my own experiences of what it means to do engaged research, I discuss some of the possibilities and challenges of my engaged perspective. I draw, here, in particular on the work of other activist ethnographers from different social science disciplines (for instance, Juris and Khasnabish, 2013) and scholars advocating for 'militant' forms of research (for instance Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Juris, 2007, 2008a).

Before I became a scholar of alter-European activism, however, I started off as an activist. In order to fully understand the rationale for my engaged ethnographic methodology, I thus have to begin with the story of how I first encountered alter-European activism

myself: at Transeuropa Festival. This time, however, I travelled not in Madrid, where the previous chapter began, but across the borders of EU-Europe to Belgrade, where the nomadic festival took place in October 2015.

2.2. Research field

2.2.1. Access

I first heard of European Alternatives in the spring of 2015, which should later be remembered as the year in which Europe's so-called "refugee crisis" began to unfold. Having already attended a local European Alternatives event in London and being deeply concerned about the suffering at Europe's borders, I decided to buy a plane ticket to Belgrade in order to participate in Transeuropa Festival. "TRANSEUROPA", read the accompanying webpage, "is a festival of arts, culture and politics... The festival is transnational in its fabric, concept and content. Its main objective is to create a temporary space for people from throughout Europe to exchange, co-create and find common ground for future actions to call for democracy, equality and culture beyond the nation state" (European Alternatives, 2015, online). I was not entirely sure what to expect from it, but what I was hoping to find was inspiration on alternative ways of thinking and acting to respond to the challenges arising in the context of the ongoing crisis. Indeed, the temporary camp that was set up near a train station, where I later met some of the many people on their way to Europe who came from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq and who were now temporarily stuck at the EU's periphery, was illustrative of the urgent need to find progressive European alternatives to "Fortress Europe". Before I met some of the people in the camp, however, I was to learn more about Belgrade's local history and contemporary struggles.

I remember arriving ill-prepared at the Nikola Tesla Airport, where I grabbed a taxi to take me to one of the hostels which European Alternatives had booked for those festival participants who did not live in Belgrade. It was already past midnight when the driver Miloš and I made our way through gorges of brutalist tower blocks in the district Neo Beograd, which reminded me of my own childhood in East Germany. One of the many differences to the place where I grew up, however, where a lot of the city scape has been renovated by means of a national tax since the fall of the Berlin Wall, was that, in

Belgrade, relatively fresh memories of brutal armed conflict were still materially visible. Here, architectural wounds were still gaping wide open from when NATO bombs had blasted holes into the city scape, following the killing of thousands and the displacement of more than one million Kosovo Albanians at the hands of Yugoslav and Serb forces during the Kosovo war in 1999 (Figure 3). Another one of the first things I noticed during this taxi ride through the night city was that street signs were displayed both in Latin and Cyrillic letters. Serbia was still a torn country, I was told by the young Serb whom I met when arriving at the hostel, with some people looking to Russia for political alliance while others look to the EU. As I would learn over the course of the next few days, attending different workshops and walking the city with local and other international activists, I knew shamefully little about this local history and the contemporary challenges on the Eastern edge of EU-Europe, some of which I would have hardly found out about otherwise, had it not been for my participation in the festival. This included the case of local activists taking to the streets to oppose the redevelopment of the Sava river waterfront and local corruption, which we learned about from those who were resisting it: the activists from “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” - “Don’t let Belgrade D(r)own” (Büllesbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017).



Figure 3: Bombed Yugoslav general staff headquarter, Belgrade, October 2015; author's photo

Besides learning about the local context, I also met other activists, artists and academics, who had come to Transeuropa Festival with similar motivations as myself. One of the people I met was Theo, an activist in his early twenties who was one of the many people volunteering to welcome newcomers in his South German hometown and who was similarly in search of a radically different European migration politics. Participating in various actions and events at the festival, we went to different discussions, for example hearing a philosopher, a theatre director and a lawyer arguing about some of the challenges activists face in digital spaces and took part in workshops on alternative cities and local political struggles. At night, we discussed some of these issues in and outside of the different festival venues – on a boat on the Sava river, in a local culture centre, or in an abandoned building outside the city – or further explored Belgrade walking with others (from Serbia, Bosnia, Germany, Spain and Greece) through the mild late autumn hours. We also went back to buy and deliver food to the provisional camp by the station, knowing that much more needed to change in Europe on a structural level. It was these few days and sleepless nights in Belgrade when the journey of this thesis began. Returning home to London a few days later, I felt both hopeful and curious. I began to wonder: were the people and ideas I had encountered at the festival able to change the status quo of European politics, and if so, how?

A few months later I decided that I wanted to investigate such questions in more depth and return to the field not only as an activist, but an activist-ethnographer. It was not least due to my ongoing involvement as an activist and the fact that I subsequently organised and contributed to other events, that European Alternatives were immediately up for collaborating on this endeavour. A year after Transeuropa Festival in Belgrade, I formally entered a collaborative ethnography research project within the framework of a +4 ESRC scholarship with European Alternatives.

2.2.2. *Actors*

Transeuropa Festival, with which I began this and the previous chapter, is a good starting point for understanding the wider network of alter-European activists, whom I follow in this thesis. Indeed, European Alternatives, my collaborating organisation and the main actor behind it, originated over the idea of holding a festival that brought together

different actors, based on the view that it was necessary to develop an alternative European politics from below. The first “Festival of Europe”, a series of debates organised by European Alternatives’ co-founders Lorenzo Marsili and Niccolò Milanese, was conceived as a response to the Treaty of Rome’s “official” 50th anniversary celebration in 2007, based on the premise that Europe needed to “radically change course” (European Alternatives, 2017c, p.9). As the organisation recalls in one of their publications:

“We started humbly in 2007 a group of like-minded individuals with almost no material resources, only our energy, ideas and our email accounts, but it became clear rapidly that there was a need for an organisation, a structure, an institution, a medium, to empower a new generation of Europeans to act for a different future in a multiplicity of ways... We see that all of our lives are politically and socially determined by forces which cross borders, and we can only try to have political agency by acting in a transnational way in solidarity with others who may be physically far from us but in a similar circumstance.” (p.9-10)

More than ten years later, with approximately a dozen members of staff working in offices in Rome, Paris and Berlin, and local groups in several other cities across and beyond EU-Europe, European Alternatives has grown into a transnational civil society organisation and activist network of more than 1,000 individual members and member organisations working towards the organisation’s motto of “democracy, equality and culture beyond the nation-state” (European Alternatives, no date).

While European Alternatives marks the starting and access point to my investigation of alter-European activist networks, it must be stressed, once again, that this is *not* an organisational ethnography that focuses on any one particular organisation. Thus, this thesis does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of European Alternative’s actions and actors. Indeed, this ethnographic project was initially set up to collaborate with another group called the “Young European Collective”. As this group was much smaller, consisting of merely a dozen members, and because it de facto disintegrated half way through writing this thesis due to a lack of funding (although individual activists stayed active within the wider networks of alter-European activism), the collaboration part of the thesis was eventually focused on working with events and campaigns organised by European Alternatives. This was not least because I quickly found that their work would provide a much richer and more in-depth view into the wider workings of alter-European activism. Nevertheless, what I am interested in, not dissimilar to Juris’

(2008a) study of alter-globalization movements in Spain, was not European Alternatives as an individual organisation, but rather how European Alternatives' actions contribute to the very constitution of a network of actors that is able to exercise a sense of agency beyond borders. Throughout this thesis I thus also draw on actions organised in collaboration with other groups, such as the local actors in Madrid mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter, or Another Europe Is Possible, the progressive "Remain" campaign based in the UK, which formally became a member of European Alternatives' network throughout the course of my research, and in which I was active as an activist myself before and during this research project. As I will show in Chapter 4, such forms of multiple or overlapping membership in different organisations is a common trait within the wider network of alter-European activists. As Juris puts it, "contemporary activist networks are fluid processes, not rigid structures" (2008a, p.5).

Besides connecting different organisations, the network provided by European Alternatives is open to individual membership, with many events and actions such as Transeuropa Festival open to participation from the wider public. Thus, the individual alter-European actors I interviewed and spent time with throughout my time in the field come to alter-European activist networks from a variety of different paths, motivations and backgrounds, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. These actors consequently have different approaches to social change. As I came to discover, some already had long standing experiences with the world of social movements, civil society and institutional politics. Mark, a British activist in his thirties, who had been politicised in the context of the anti-Iraq war protest, holds a position that was typical for respective activists:

"I think that I'm primarily a social movement person in the sense that I only do campaigning for the Labour party in general elections... I suppose it is a bit more of a coordinating between different organisations... and MPs. It's not so much at the grassroots level, I guess, if I'm honest... more at the point at which civil society meets politics." (Mark, December 2018)

While some took more of an NGO or civil society angle, coming, for instance with experience in lobbying international organisations, others, however, were more suspicious of established political actors, arguing that political change needed to start from the grassroots:

“I got a really amazing job at a migrants’ rights charity, they really mix the sense of community organising and building people’s power, really understanding that change will come from people who will find themselves in difficult situations and group together to pull their power and find their resource. I don’t think change is going to come from the NGO world.” (Audrey, December 2018)

“My idea of activism is something much more on the ground and much more with the people and much more with organising.” (Étienne, November 2017)

Thus, while I will refer to alter-European actors as “activists” throughout this thesis, I will demonstrate that there is a fairly wide-ranging scope of what “acting politically” means to alter-European activists. Indeed, some of them feel that the term “activist” itself does not sufficiently describe their ways of acting, which often combine a variety of aspects:

“I think it makes sense to have some label. I am an environmentalist, I am a civil rights activist, I am an anti-racist, anti-oppression activist, but I don’t know if I want to label myself in one way or another.” (Étienne, November 2017)

“My experience is very different from other Americans whose interface with politics is through that formal system. Mine was already coming from a more activist perspective... [However,] you start to question: am I not hardcore enough, am I not a legit enough activist?... Some people do very well to be the movers and shakers behind one organised movement with one specific mission, but I think you also need the people who are going from one to the other, to the other, sort of contaminating each other with ideas. That’s more were I see myself.” (Alexandria, November 2018)

Finally, alter-European activists’ different understandings of what it means to act politically is not only influenced by their varying relationships with more established political actors or organisations, but is, in some cases, also intimately tied to their different national backgrounds or the particular local contexts or thematic struggles they come from. While Antonio’s involvement in alter-European activism starts from the need for radically different economic policies in Europe, following the “Troika’s” harsh austerity measures towards Greece (as explained at the beginning of this thesis), Theo’s engagement started in the context of the so-called “refugee crisis”, as I learned when meeting him at Transeuropa Festival in Belgrade. Others’ engagement with alter-European activism was sparked in the context of different recent political events. Rosa, a German activist in her mid-twenties, was one of the activists I spoke to who described

Brexit as a kind of wake-up call. Reflecting on her worries regarding the rising far-right in Germany and how Brexiteers managed to mobilise on the back of xenophobic sentiment, she told me:

“2016, Brexit, was really the incisive moment for me. I remember waking up next to my boyfriend...checking my phone thinking “this cannot be true, this cannot be true.” I was taken aback, I felt really shit... But then there was also a sense of hope... I thought I had to do something.” (Rosa, March 2018)

Agnieszka, a Polish activist in her twenties, quoted a similar example. Her way into alter-European activism was driven by the search for allies against a conservative, nationalist government threatening to take away basic rights:

“With the change of the government in 2015, I think the society has started to see what can happen to democracy if it gets in the hands of the far-right...This government is against human rights as a framework as such, so [for instance] saying that women have a right to abortion... [Then there is the] far-right going to the streets screaming “white power” and the government is not taking a definitive stance, flirting with far-right, fascist groups.” (Agnieszka, June 2018)

In Chapter 4, I will discuss how such a diverse group of actors with different understandings of what alter-European activism is about can work together towards a sense of agency beyond borders. Before I can discuss this in more detail, however, I first have to clarify how I have gone about researching such a wide-ranging network of actors that spreads across and beyond EU-Europe.

2.2.3. *Acts*

How do you research a subject that is not *located* in any one place? More specifically, in the context of my own research, where would my field of alter-European activism begin and end? In recent decades, the aspect of “multi-sidedness” has been widely discussed in ethnographic scholarship, highlighting the point that many research projects - even if conducted in a single site – are influenced by the “circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus, 1995, p.96), which raises a number of conceptual and practical issues. Scholars with an interest in transnational phenomena have approached such questions in different ways. One way to research transnational

activism might indeed be by comparing activist groups working in the context of similar struggles in different countries. Kaldor and Selchow's (2015) and Flesher Fominaya and Cox's (2013) edited volumes on European social movements illustrate that collections and comparisons of various European countries can provide insightful knowledges about how movements adapt to and vary in different national contexts. Such accounts remain highly relevant, not least because "in many cases national contexts continue to provide the most immediate and relevant point of reference for movement actors", while also bearing the risk to "constrain mobilization" (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p.194), as I will show for the case of alter-European activism in Chapter 6. In order to complement such accounts, however, it is similarly important to find ways of researching transnational movements that do not start from "the nation as a unit" (Livingstone, 2003, p.480). Avoiding any sense of "methodological nationalism", that is, "the assumption that the nation/ state/ society is the natural social and political form of the modern world" (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002, p.301), is particularly important in my specific research context, as taking the national as the "natural order of things" (Malkki, 1997, p.71) is precisely what alter-European activists seek to challenge. One way to research transnational activism without primarily relying on the unit of the nation-state might thus be by locating oneself in a particular location and investigate global activism from a situated perspective. Juris' (2008a) ethnography of the alter-globalization movement for instance, starts from a group in Barcelona and Catalonia with whom he participated in local actions, while also travelling to global gatherings and key events elsewhere. However, as Swartz, Turner and Tuden (2002) remind us, the point of political anthropology does not necessarily have to be to focus on a specific political group alone. Instead, they suggest that we might place particular importance to the "processual" nature of the political, stating that "a political study follows the development of conflicts for power... into whatever groups the processes lead – rather than examining such groups as lineages, villages, or countries to determine what processes they might contain" (p.108). My own research might thus be considered as a "mobile ethnography" (Marcus, 1995, p.96), in that I "follow" (p.106) the struggle of transnational activists across a number of different geographic locations.

Where, then, "do we 'hang out' when the processes which we are studying produce common social conditions or statuses... but not necessarily coterminous collectives?" (Amit, 2000, p.15) As with other ethnographies and particularly with ethnographies of transnationally mobile subjects, in my project, too, the ethnographer is a "central agent in

the construction of the ‘field’” (p.14). Amit argues that ethnographers “may have to purposefully create the occasions for contacts that might well be as mobile, diffuse and episodic as the processes they are studying” (p.15). Thus, the question where alter-European activism was *located*, had to be negotiated throughout my fieldwork and in particular the first year of this research project. Since I did not want to study the organisation European Alternatives but the wider movement it contributes to, I decided to focus on and follow key actions organised by or in collaboration with European Alternatives (Appendix B). In other words, what I am interested in in my investigation of emerging forms of agency beyond borders, rather than a particular national or local location, or group, is a transnational “community of practice” (Amit, 2000, p.8).

In the first year, I started scoping my field by attending several topical events. I quickly found out that researching alter-European activism required a degree of flexibility as actions, protest and events are often organised with reference to ongoing political developments. Thus, between 2016 and 2017, I attended dozens of Brexit-related protests in London in the months following the UK’s vote to leave the European Union, helped organise a panel discussion on the future of freedom of movement in the context of Brexit as well as an event related to the French election in 2017, in which the far-right Front National was predicted to do well. I also accompanied other European Alternatives activists to Italy’s capital city for the counter-protest taking place in response to the official 60th anniversary celebrations of the Treaty of Rome. Once I had gained a better overview of the field and some of its key actors more generally, I then selected more strategic sites for data collection, focussing on what seemed to be to be key *acts* worth investigating further in the remaining two years of fieldwork (Appendix B).

For what remained of my time in the field, I selected three different types of acts to follow. Firstly, I followed everyday meetings and communication with regard to campaigns I was involved with in my dual role as a hyphenated activist-ethnographer. This meant taking notes during physical meetings or videocalls with activists in different locations as well as reading and responding to hundreds of emails. This active involvement in particular campaigns gave me a sense of the more mundane parts and the everyday life of alter-European activism. Secondly, I continued to attend and contribute to the organisation of events like Transeuropa Festival that were to function as spaces of convergence for a variety of different actors and were open to the broader public. This involvement took me from my first encounter with European Alternatives at Transeuropa Festival in Belgrade

in 2015 (this chapter) to Madrid in 2017 (Chapters 1 and 3) and Palermo (Chapter 8), as well as to a public conference in Berlin in 2018 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Lehman Brothers collapse (Chapter 4).

Finally, so as to branch out and be able to speak to activists from different parts of Europe as well as from different struggles, I decided to follow campaigns and workshops that brought together selected actors towards specific ends. This included two campaigns in particular: “Transeuropa Caravans” (Chapters 6 and 7) and the “School of Transnational Activism” (Chapter 7). Transeuropa Caravans, as I will explain in more detail in later chapters, was a campaign organised by European Alternatives together with different partner organisations that sent five activist caravans travelling across Europe in the run up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. This campaign took me from London to Warsaw, from Munich to Bad Ischl and from Marseille to Paris. The “School of Transnational Activism” refers to European Alternatives’ efforts to organise workshops and trainings to bring selected actors together around a particular purpose. This included a workshop involving actors from municipal movement parties in different parts of Europe (Chapter 7) or a training for actors from different contexts all working on the issue of freedom of movement (Chapter 6). Over the course of three years, my multi-sited ethnography thus took me to a total of eighteen cities in ten different countries (Appendix A). As none of these campaigns had, perhaps somewhat surprisingly at first, naturally taken me to Brussels – an issue I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4 – I also arranged to accompany European Alternatives’ activists to a meeting at the European Parliament as part of the campaign Charta 2020 (Chapter 7). This strategic involvement with different acts thus allowed me to gradually interrogate different aspects of alter-European activism.

2.3. Methods of data collection

2.3.1. *Engaged observation*

This thesis’ primary method of data collection is engaged participant observation conducted with alter-European activists from different parts of Europe over the course of 36 months between two topical political events: the UK’s vote to leave the European Union in June 2016 and the European Parliament elections in May 2019. Like Juris’ (2008a) involvement with the alter-globalization movement, my transition from activist

to activist-ethnographer was rather fluid. As the aforementioned anecdotes from Transeuropa Festival in Belgrade in 2015 and my involvement with Another Europe Is Possible's progressive "Remain" campaign in the UK (Chapter 1) illustrated, before I entered the field as an engaged scholar, I had already participated and contributed to alter-European activist networks as an activist. It was this ongoing active involvement that gradually granted me access to different parts of the movement. However, while I did take photos at public protests and wrote auto-ethnographic fieldnotes and reflections in the first months following Brexit, I did not systematically gather data until my University granted my project ethical approval in November 2016. Throughout my fieldwork and particularly in those first few months of transitioning from activist to activist ethnographer, I always made sure to make my being there as a scholar transparent to activists I was with. The degree and depth of my participation also varied throughout the fieldwork, generally being more engaged throughout the development and execution of key acts and campaigns, and more distant in times of writing and drafting chapters (see Juris and Khasnabish, 2013).

Negotiating different degrees of my engaged participation, I took inspiration of other activist scholars' work, in particular those practising 'militant' forms of research. Such approaches, including "militant anthropology" (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p.409), "militant research" (Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007, p.9) or "militant ethnography" (Juris, 2007, p.164, see also 2008a), seek to not only contribute to academic knowledge, but also to be *politically* relevant and committed to working *with* and *for* rather than *about* social movements. As Shukaitis and Graeber put it: "Militant research starts from the understandings, experiences, and relations generated through organizing, as both a method of political action *and* as a form of knowledge" (2007, p.9, emphasis added). Similarly, Juris, whose approach to what he calls "militant *ethnography*" (2008a, p.20, emphasis added) has largely inspired my own approach to researching alter-European activism, argues that:

"To grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices, one has to become an active participant. With respect to social movements, this means organizing actions and workshops, facilitating meetings, weighing in during strategic and tactical debates, staking out political positions, and putting one's body on the line during direct actions (...); one has to build long term relationships of commitment and trust, become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct-action organizing and transnational networking.

Militant ethnography thus refers to ethnographic research that is not only politically engaged but also collaborative, thus breaking down the divide between researcher and object.” (p.20)

In other words, “militant” approaches suggest that academic rigour and public or political relevance need not necessarily be mutually exclusive (see Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p.370). Working “from within rather than outside grassroots movements”, Juris sees militant ethnography as an “alternative research method” to “traditional academic approaches to the study of social movements” (2007, p.164). Amongst some social movement scholars, this desire for alternative research methods emerged from a critique of modes of scholarship which approaches activists “as ‘objects’ of study in a manner not dissimilar to an engineer studying a closed hydraulic system” (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014, p.46). Faced, in contrast, with self-reflexive and self-critical actors, Juris concluded that “classic objectivist paradigms fail to grasp the concrete logic of activist practise, leading to accounts and models that are not only inadequate, but are of little use to activists themselves” (2007, p.164). In contrast, as Juris and Khasnabish explain, more than verbally aligning themselves with a particular group, “activist researchers *enact* their political engagement by establishing relationships with a politically organised movement”, and commonly express a form of solidarity that is somehow “reciprocal” (2013, pp.24-25, emphasis added). In practice, the notion of “being useful” might take varying shapes or engagement strategies (see Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014, for a detailed discussion). Ways of engaging might include: contributing to key actions like protests, meetings or events (Juris, 2008a); using one’s structural privileges to provide the material and immaterial necessities for struggle, for example by providing access to university facilities (Halvorsen, 2015); or note-taking during meetings (Jeppesen, Hounslow, Khan and Petrick, 2017).

In the case of my own fieldwork, practising engaged participation meant not only being there for key acts, but contributing to them. On any of these occasions where I was able to physically part-take in particular actions, I collected data by writing field notes, taking photographs and sometimes make atmospheric audio-recordings, or audio-record informal conversations where explicit consent was given. Here, I took inspiration of how to record and process data from DeWalt and DeWalt (2002). However, in order to really understand the actions at stake, I needed to be present not only during visible moments of protest or campaigning. In other words, if I wanted to grasp the everyday struggle of alter-European activists and understand how they act across borders, it was necessary to

act myself. Over the course of my fieldwork, I attempted to engage in a broad range of different tasks and ways of participating, alternating between different levels of engagement. Concretely, this meant, for instance, organising two local events in London, contributing my opinion at meetings or helping out with particular campaigns. I also took on mundane everyday tasks like carrying printed material from one place to another, organising rooms, joining calls, proofreading and transcribing texts, or tidying up a room after meetings. In some cases, my engagement was more punctual, limited to the participation or support of a single event or protest (such as the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties marches in Rome discussed in Chapter 4). At other times, I was involved in projects and campaigns such as the School of Transnational Activism or Transeuropa Caravans, which ran for months and, in some cases, years (see Chapters 6 and 7 and Appendix B). Like Juris (2008a), I often found this type of engagement difficult, at times conflicting, as I will reflect in Chapter 8 – but always necessary in my given context.

Importantly, my active engagement in the politics at stake did not only derive from the desire to collect better data, but from the commitment to militant ethnographers' principle of "being useful". Thus, "[h]ow can we make our work relevant to those with whom we study" (Juris, 2007, p.164)? Throughout my own fieldwork, I used numerous ways of contributing to the movement, such as by writing texts and helping to organise campaigns, as mentioned. Moreover, like other militant ethnographers, I also experimented with different modes of collective reflection (Juris, 2007, 2008a; Halvorsen, 2015). This included offering my analysis to activists "for further reflection and debate" (Juris, 2007, p.173), for instance through a blog where I shared emerging ideas from my investigation as it developed and which encouraged further debate, as well as through discussions in individual or collective meetings. Another instance of knowledge exchange and collective reflection was presented through an annual collaboration report, in which I provided a summary of the collaboration, projects and outputs of a given year, and which I discussed annually in a meeting with representatives from my collaborating organisation. Such tools for individual and collective reflection helped me to continuously reflect on my ambiguous position as an activist-ethnographer from an academic perspective. Besides taking a more distanced position during times of writing and in particular while writing up, they ensured that more than merely celebrating the activism at stake, my engaged participation could bring to the fore questions and insights that might be visible neither from too close, nor from the distant position of the disengaged observer. Finally, the data

gathered otherwise through interviews and the analysis of media texts also helped to broaden the view of what I experienced first-hand in the field.

2.3.2. Interviews

Over the three years of research I interviewed thirty activists from across different parts of the movement and from different geographies (Appendix C). These semi-structured, qualitative interviews from which I quote throughout this thesis serve to complement my findings from the participant observation, both to validate emerging themes as well as to see if additional issues were emerging, and to better understand individual activists' motivations for taking part in alter-European activism. While the questions varied depending on the activist's individual location and engagement, interviewees were all similarly prompted with questions regarding the nature and reason for their engagement in the movement at stake, and questions regarding their personal and political motivations and life story. Except for two interviews which were conducted via videocall, all interviews have been conducted in person and recorded with participants' consent, and lasted approximately one hour on average, the shortest being thirty minutes and the longest two and a half hours. In line with my University-approved research ethics form, interviewees were informed about the possibility to withdraw from the interviews at any point during or after the interview took place and have been informed about the basic premise of the research and questions of anonymity. Like Juris (2008a), I have chosen not to anonymise the names of the organisations I worked with, for I have never made a secret – in line with my engaged ethnographic approach – of my organisational affiliations, neither would I want to take credit for ideas which are theirs. I have, however, anonymised the names, and sometimes gender, nationality or other features that might identify them, of individuals I interviewed or describe in anecdotes (see also Appendix C). For the purpose of data analysis, interviews have been transcribed and colour coded so as to more easily identify common and emerging issues.

My list of interviewees evolved in a similar way to the data gathered via participant observation. I started with existing contacts, interviewing European Alternatives members and staff who contributed to organising some of the key actions discussed throughout this thesis, many of whom I would work together with closely throughout the course of the fieldwork. This group makes up about half of the people I interviewed.

Keeping in touch and closely working with some of the activists I interviewed also gave me the opportunity to ask additional questions as my understanding of the field evolved. As I gradually got to know more and more activists in the wider network, I selected additional interview participants in a strategic way with two rationales in mind. Firstly, I strategically approached activists who might be able to provide a perspective I wanted to find out more about. This might have been either because they came from a particular part of the movement, were located in a particular struggle or worked on a particular campaign. For instance, when I began to realise the importance of how alter-European activists are attempting to find new ways of working with existing European or municipal political institutions (see Chapter 7), I strategically approached activists for interview, whom I knew were particularly involved in this part of the wider struggle. Thus, in order to hear from different parts of the movement, I chose to interview activists who take different roles or hold different understandings of what alter-European activism means to them.

Secondly, another reason for strategically approaching activists for interview was my aim to represent the movement as a whole, as I came to understand it. For instance, once I realised that activists from different national backgrounds and various local struggles have rather different motivations for why they get involved in alter-European activism (see Chapter 4), I made sure to include perspectives not only from Western European countries (such as the UK and Germany) but particularly also from countries in Southern (including Italy and Spain), Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans (including participants from Poland, Croatia and Slovakia). I also deliberately included interviewees from non-EU countries, including one participant from Belarus, one from Egypt, one from Brazil and one from the US. Importantly, what many of my interviewees and alter-European activists more generally have in common, is some kind of migratory background, either because they hold dual citizenship or because they reside or have lived in a country other than the one they were born in. While fairly diverse in terms of their national backgrounds, however, the majority of the people I interviewed are white European nationals (with the aforementioned exceptions of two interviewees with North African backgrounds and two originating from the Americas), which is somewhat representative of the movement as a whole.

In terms of other characteristics, many of those I met make their living in creative, academic or political professions, for example as campaigners, artists, theatre

practitioners, facilitators, academics, students, writers, or work in communications, journalism, higher education, the cultural industries, foundations, charities, schools, think tanks, governmental and non-governmental organisations, left political parties, or are self-employed doing one or a combination of those things (in other words, they work with “ideas, images, affects and relationships”, that is in the context of post-Fordist, “biopolitical production” – see Hardt and Negri, 2004, p.xvi). While many have to negotiate precarious employment situations, and some, like myself, grew up in working class households, the vast majority of them have the privilege of being University-educated and speak at least two languages. In terms of gender, I aimed to be representative of the movement as a whole, thus selecting more female (18) than male (11) interviewees and interviewing one person who identifies as non-binary. With regards to their age, my interviewees’ average age between 20 and 40 is representative of typical participants in the wider network. As a result, several of the activists in their twenties whom I interviewed (for instance Theo, Rosa or Agnieszka) have only participated in these networks for a few years, although some of the older activists like Mark, Saskia and Antonio have at least a decade, if not several decades of experience in pan-European organising as in the case of Petra, age 70, the oldest activist I interviewed.

2.3.3. *Media texts*

Another key source of data collection were the movement’s key media texts and (digital) communication. While participant observation was crucial to my research, the transnational nature of my field also calls for particular attention towards media processes, as they play an important part in the makings and re-makings of politics (Juris, 2008a; Horst and Miller, 2012). As several scholars have highlighted with regards to transnational social movements in particular, such as the alter-globalization movement (Juris, 2008a; Flesher Fominaya, 2014) as well as the movements of the squares (Gerbaudo, 2012; Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015), (digital) media and communications processes form an essential part of transnational social movements’ actions. For instance, as Juris points out with regards to the alter-globalization movement, “activists generally use e-mail to stay informed about activities and perform concrete logistical tasks” (2008a, p.13). Alter-European activism is no exception. Thus, in order to keep in touch and understand the everyday practices of alter-European activists, particularly in times between key actions taking place in the form of physical gatherings

(Appendix B), I closely followed the different media outputs of alter-European activism (Appendix D).

My starting point for selecting appropriate media outputs for qualitative analysis was the network and media infrastructure used and produced by European Alternatives. In general terms, like with previous transnational movements, I quickly found out that keeping in touch with other alter-European activists and upcoming actions required my participation in a variety of different digital communications channels such as e-mail, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, European Alternatives' newsletter and website, or videocalls. Moreover, similar to the alter-globalization movements' use of Independent Media Centres or Indymedia, alter-European activists use alternative digital media platforms "to post their own news stories, constituting a self-manged communication network that bypass corporate media" (2008a, p.13).

Throughout the first year of my research, in order to develop an overview of the movements' different communication tools and media outputs, I began by taking screenshots of public social media pages reporting on protests I attended, relevant organisations' websites and gathering printed material and sometimes placards of the events I observed. However, I quickly realised that a comprehensive and systematic analysis of even only European Alternatives' digital and print media output would have been beyond the scope of this thesis. Throughout this thesis, I am thus drawing on data from a strategic selection of the seven media outputs outlined in Appendix D, which re-occurred at different times throughout my fieldwork: the nomadic audio-visual talk show format Talk Real (Chapter 6), the alternative online media platform Political Critique (Chapter 6), European Alternatives' bi-weekly email newsletter (Chapter 4), the blog that was created in the context of the Transeuropa Caravans campaign (Chapters 6 and 7), European Alternatives' public social media channels (Chapter 6), different print media such as flyers, books and brochures that would be available at various events (such as Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017; European Alternatives 2017a, c; Marsili and Milanese, 2018) and the online platform Urban Alternatives which maps local initiatives from across the continent (Chapters 7 and 8).

Once again, as a comprehensive analysis of either of these outputs would have not been feasible within the limitations of this project, my engagement with these different media outputs was strategically selective and led by my time in the field and the particular acts

I attended (Appendix B). Thus, once I had a general overview of different media flows, I decided to focus on media and communications output produced in the context of the particular campaigns I was directly involved with. In these contexts, I would select appropriate data for qualitative analysis based on the observations I had made in the field. Reviewing the selected outputs from immediately before, during and the weeks after particular fieldtrips, I took notes, analysed and archived particular media artefacts that illustrated, supported or offered further insights about observations I had made during the participant observation. In other words, for each act I attended I thus gathered a sample of media texts from my initial selection of outputs (Appendix D) to complement and compare to my findings from the participant observation. Here, rather than an in-depth analysis of the individual *content* of alter-European activism's media output, however, I was particularly interested in understanding how alternative media serve to create and perpetuate the particular *cultural logic* (see Juris, 2008a) of alter-European activism. This will become evident for instance in Chapter 6, where I argue that the alter-European activist media helps to establish the *nomadic* logic of alter-European activism.

Finally, more than gathering and analysing key media texts, in order to live up to the engaged mode of participation of this research, one of the key ways in which I contributed to the movement at stake throughout my time in the field – besides supporting the organisation of particular actions and events described above – was through my active contributing to the production of alter-European activist media. This might have included research related, editing, proof-reading or writing related tasks. For instance, I contributed articles to Political Critique (Scharenberg, 2017c, 2018a, b) or Another Europe Is Possible's blog (2017a) and wrote several pieces for the Transeuropa Caravans blog (2019b, c) as part of my involvement with this campaign.

This very active and direct involvement in the research subject at stake in this thesis arguably came with numerous challenges and limitations. Thus, over the course of the first two years of this research, I developed an epistemological framework, which underpins my engaged ethnographic involvement and which I continued to return to and revise as the thesis progressed. Drawing and continuously reflecting on what it means to do engaged ethnographic ethnography, the following epistemological foundations helped me to navigate through the tensions and challenges that undoubtedly arose in the context of my role as an engaged activist ethnographer.

2.4. Epistemological foundations: the politics of engaged activist ethnography

2.4.1. *Engaged ethnography in context: from committed scholarship to militant research*

“Is not science itself ‘political activity’ and political thought, in as much as it transforms men [sic], and makes them different from what they were before?” (Gramsci cited in Wacquant, 1992, p.47)

I am, of course, not the first scholar whose research aims not only to intervene into a particular academic discourse, but who also hopes for their research to be relevant to wider societal issues. As Gramsci’s words suggest, the question of how academic labour and political activity overlap might be as old as the social sciences themselves. Indeed, as Seidman argues, more than merely accumulating knowledge for the sake of science, the hope to make a positive difference in the social world “has guided sociology and modern social theory for some 200 years” (2013, p.ix). In his seminal call for public sociology, Burawoy (2005) refers, for instance, to the public relevance of nineteenth century thinkers like Karl Marx, W.E.B. Du Bois or Jane Addams. Other scholars go even further back in time, illustrating the long history of engaged scholarship with reference to Machiavelli and Aristotle (Calhoun, 2008, p.xiii), or trace the origins of social theories to ancient Chinese, Egyptian or Greco-Roman civilizations (Seidman, 2013, p.9). Since then, the tradition of political engagement was carried on by numerous intellectuals throughout the twentieth century (Said, 1993). Bourdieu, whose work was “intensely concerned with the moral and political significance of sociology” (Wacquant, 1992, p.49), comes to mind as an illustrative example. His “militant sociology” (Pinto, 2001) was rooted in the observation that social science – in that it is intertwined in complex webs of power structures – “necessarily takes sides in political struggle” (Bourdieu cited in Wacquant, 1992, p.51). Bourdieu’s commitment to being politically relevant articulated itself, for instance, in his support of the Algerian liberation struggle or the 1968 student protests (Wacquant, 1992).

The discussion of how social science might be publicly or politically meaningful continues until today. Most recently, this is visible in the ongoing debates on the contemporary meaning of a “public” or “live sociology” (for instance Calhoun, 2005; Back and Puwar, 2012; Hynes, 2016; Arribas Lozano, 2018), and across the social

sciences more broadly. From anarchist and feminist approaches (for example Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007; Bookchin et al., 2013; Jeppesen et al., 2017), to calls for a “politically engaged” or “public anthropology” (for instance Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Bourgois, 2006; Davis, 2006; Osterweil, 2013), engaged activist scholarship in human geography (for instance Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge, 2007; Halvorsen, 2015; Russell, 2015), and a commitment to social change in media and cultural studies (for example Ang, 2016; Freedman, 2017; Davis, Fenton, Freedman and Khiabany, 2020), academic scholarship that links to contemporary struggles has become more and more commonplace across the academy throughout the beginning of the twenty-first century. Given this ongoing interest in the public relevance of research, some even speak of a wider “methodological turn” and epistemological shifts (Reiter and Oslender, 2015, p.x). Reiter and Oslender refer here, amongst others, to scholars from South America and the African diaspora, who ground new ways of thinking in concepts such as “double consciousness, mestiza consciousness, border thinking, and subaltern epistemologies” (2015, p.x), which challenge common notions of academic authority and objectivity (Mignolo, 2012; Arribas Lozano, 2018).

Despite this rich tradition and contemporary practice of engaged scholarship and public intellectuals, unresolved questions and ambiguities remain. For instance, while generally sympathetic with Burawoy’s (2005) public sociology, a number of scholars have questioned epistemological aspects of his proposal. Calhoun (2005), for one, challenges Burawoy’s standpoint epistemology in favour of civil society, arguing that committed scholarship continues to pose epistemological challenges in regard to questions of objectivity, academic authority and claims to truth. Hynes (2016) raises questions about academic authority by challenging the presentation of public intellectuals as heroic figures, while Arribas Lozano contemplates the possibility for sociologists to “unlearn our academic authority and privilege” and engage in more collaborative research practices (2018, p.15). As Hale points out, there remains a sense of ambiguity towards politically engaged scholarship within the academy:

“we find politics in the academe at every turn as high-level professors shuttle back and forth between the university and government or private sector pursuits. Nevertheless, graduate students and junior faculty members are regularly warned against putting scholarship in the service of struggles for social justice, on the grounds that, however worthy, such a combination deprives the work of

complexity, compromises its methodological rigour, and, for these reasons, puts career advancement at risk.” (2008, p.2)

What Hale’s observation illustrates is not only that “even the most seemingly objective accounts have an implicit politics” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p.25). The quote further reminds us that engaged research, “is not just about reaching a wider audience; it is also about how we conduct our research” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p. 25, see also Arribas Lozano, 2018, p.106).

Of course, critiques of traditional understanding of objectivity are hardly new. Feminists, for instance, have long questioned disembodied notions of objectivity and developed alternative epistemologies such as the concept *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988). Moreover, the critique of anthropology’s colonial entanglement from the 1970s onwards, has given rise to different methodological approaches exploring how social research might be practiced in more collaborative ways, including participatory action research (PAR), feminist and indigenous methodologies (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p.23; Arribas Lozano, 2018, p.99). Nevertheless, according to Arribas Lozano (2018), such methodologies, including “militant” approaches, have been largely ignored by the public sociology literature and deserve further investigation. Thus, in this final part of this chapter, I am developing an epistemological framework for engaged activist ethnography that draws on ‘militant’ scholarship and other radically engaged modes of ethnographic research. However, in line with feminist researchers like Juhasz, I, too, do not think of my own work as militant, for I disagree with the “the militaristic, patriarchal, or even aggressive meanings of the term” (Bookchin et al., 2013, p.20, as also acknowledged by Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Halvorsen, 2015) and thus prefer to speak of my activist ethnography as *critically engaged*.

In what follows, I will propose four aspects in the process of knowledge production that are relevant here, understanding knowledges along four “C’s”, as *contextual*, *corporeal*, *contradictory* and *collective*. These dimensions are neither necessarily new or specific to engaged activist ethnography per se, nor are they separable into neat categories, but intersect and overlap. Nevertheless, as these dimensions stood out in my own and other scholars’ experiences of engaged activist ethnography, they proved to be useful as an epistemological framework that underpinned and guided my engaged ethnographic

research with alter-European activist networks, aiming for the knowledges produced to be at once academically rigorous and publicly relevant.

2.4.2. Contextual knowledges

“Imagine you wake up one morning and find your world has changed. Rights, freedoms, and securities that you once took for granted are gone. Your future has become threateningly uncertain. Worst of all, you did not see it coming and suddenly you find yourself in a situation that you never thought possible.”
(Fieldnotes, October 2016, Berlin)

When my research project with transnational activists in Europe began in late 2016, a year of political mayhem was coming to an end. The UK’s decision to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president were but two illustrative examples of a crisis within Western democracies that cut much deeper. On the European continent, this crisis surfaced increasingly through the rise of various nationalist forces, including far-right parties like the German AfD, the Front Nationale in France, the Austrian FPÖ and Matteo Salvini’s Lega in Italy, which gained considerable strength even in founding EU member states. Meanwhile, “Fortress Europe” had left many of those seeking refuge from war, poverty or prosecution to die in the Mediterranean. Such and other perpetual crises like ongoing austerity or the regressive backlash against women’s and minorities’ rights in different European countries marked the context within which my ethnographic research project was unfolding. The aforementioned quote - taken from a text which was collectively written by a group of young activists from France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro and Scotland in October 2016, of which I was part - attempted to capture the atmosphere of the time: a lingering aftertaste of powerlessness, shock, and despair that the preceding events had left behind. It was a timely moment to start my research and learn more about how transnational activists seek to intervene in these contextual developments⁷.

Besides considering the political context within which activism takes place, it is crucial to consider the institutional context in which knowledge gets produced. In recent decades, many scholars described how a neo-liberal logic creeps into various fields of public life

⁷ The text was later published in other languages, including in German (Herr et al., 2017).

in a “termitelike” fashion (Brown, 2015, p.35). Nash (2019) and Freedman (2017), for instance, discussed how processes of neo-liberalisation play out in a UK context. Feminist activist-researchers like Jeppesen et al. argued that this process of neo-liberalisation “favours a capitalist market logic over strictly academic commitments” (2017, p.1057). Similarly, Freedman (2017) points out that research agendas designed to maximise profit contribute to the very situations that produce inequality. Considering “the scale of inequality, poverty, militarism and discrimination in the world”, Freedman holds, “there is a need for scholarly activity that is committed not only to user engagement and impact but to social change” (2017, p.195). In other words, it is such entanglements in political and institutional contexts that underpin engaged researchers’ argument that scholarship should not only be academically rigorous, but also intervene in a given context.

What, then, does it mean to produce academic knowledge in the contemporary context? As Hale reminds us, “all knowledge claims are produced in a political context; notions of objectivity that ignore or deny these facilitating conditions take on a de facto political positioning of their own” (2008, p.2). Indeed, some “militant” and engaged activist ethnographers problematise how researchers are deeply entangled within institutional and broader societal power structures. Juris and Khasnabish, for instance, argue that “the positivist logic of objectivity has long served as a mask to hide a false universality... in ways that support the interests of those with greater socioeconomic, political, and cultural power” (2013, p.373). Their perspective contests the assumption that researchers can enter a field from an entirely neutral position to start with, arguing that the contemporary context is already skewed and biased in favour of the status quo. Importantly, Juris and Khasnabish also stress that this does not mean that all researchers are entangled in the same way, or that it is possible to be aware of and address these entanglements at all times. As Scheper-Hughes writes with reference to Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the history of European fascism: it is arguably “almost impossible to be continually conscious of the state of emergency in which one lives” (1995, p.416).

Nevertheless, the knowledges produced in this thesis start from the assumption and ongoing critical awareness that both alter-European activism as well as a study of such networks is always deeply entangled in wider political contexts. In other words, the politics of alter-European activism cannot be understood without knowledge of the particular political contexts within which they unfold. Consequently, having already

begun to do so in the previous chapter, I will continue to refer to relevant political events to which alter-European activism responds or relates to throughout this thesis.

2.4.3. *Corporeal knowledges*

By the time we made it to Trafalgar Square, I was exhausted. Physically, because I had taken part in the entire day of action to defend EU citizens' rights in the context of Brexit: helping fellow activists set up a stand with material, talking to others during the mass-lobby at Westminster Parliament, and, finally, collectively chanting at the day's closing rally under Nelson's Column. Emotionally, because I am one of the more than three million EU citizens living in Britain myself, whose future is fatefully dependent on how the negotiations will turn out. Trying to influence their outcome, the group which organised this day usually focusses their efforts on lobbying and PR. This, in fact, was their first rally, as one of the activists told me. "We could have just done a lobby, it would have been fine. Politically we didn't really need to do that." But a rally, he claimed, is a kind of reward, an opportunity to get together and "enjoy the collective atmosphere" in times when "there is so much uncertainty and people are feeling really anxious." Familiar with respective emotions due to my own entanglements in the political situation and related forms of activism, what resonated with me about his comment was that the rally's primary purpose was less about putting pressure on political decisions. It was to have a soothing effect on all those left alone with the unbearable feeling of uncertainty - a means of collective enduring and gathering strength. (Fieldnotes, September 2017, London⁸)

The previous anecdote is one of many possible examples that might illustrate my physical and emotional entanglements in my ethnographic field - the corporeal dimension of the knowledges produced. Respective entanglements are common amongst scholars who take 'militant' and engaged approaches to activist research. "In order to grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices," Juris argues with regards to what it meant to do militant ethnography with the alter-globalization movement, "researchers have to become active practitioners" (2007, p.165). In his case, corporeal engagement included attending hundreds of protests and meetings, part-taking in online discussions, as well as, quite literally, "putting one's *body* on the line during direct actions" (Juris, 2008a, p.20, emphasis added, see also 2007, p.165). Attention to "sensations of tension, anxiety, fear, terror, collective solidarity, expectation, celebration, and joy", he argues, can provide an

⁸ Some of my impressions and data gathered of this event have appeared on Political Critique (Scharenberg, 2017c).

embodied understanding of the cultural logics of the activism at stake (2007, p.166, see also 2008b). Juris holds that:

“it was only by becoming deeply involved in the direct action planning process, which at times meant positioning myself at the center of extremely intense and sometimes personal debates, that I could fully appreciate the complexity and logic of direct action planning and the accompanying fear, passion, and exhilaration.” (2007, p.168)

Taussig’s (2013) account of Occupy Wall Street in New York is another example that shows how scholarly investigations that pay attention to emotional and affective dimension can help illuminate certain aspects of the movement’s specific cultural and political logic. To capture the affective atmospheres in Zuccotti Park, Taussig quite literally occupies the text with images, signs, quotes, media headlines and sounds, illustrating the event’s historical intensity. Highlighting seemingly banal actions – the knitting, the dancing, the shouting, the cleaning, the drumming – Taussig’s text reconstructs the visceral and, indeed, “magical” (p. 30) sense of political significance that these moments held at the time. Thus, Taussig captures a crucial aspect of the movement’s political logic:

“More than anything else it is an attitude, a mood, an atmosphere [...] this is why the politicians and the experts have a problem. They see OWS as primitive and diffuse because it has no precise demands – as if the demand for equality were not a demand, at once moral and economic, redefining personhood and reality itself.” (p.39)

Juris’ (2007) and Taussig’s (2013) accounts are examples of how attention to the corporeal dimension of knowledge production can produce valuable theoretical insights: they reveal certain aspects of the movement that might otherwise be less visible. As Juris and Khasnabish (2013) argue, some more conventional strands of social movement scholarship commonly map activist practice along institutional dynamics. This means that politics is primarily understood in relation to state institutions, party politics and representative democracy, “thereby reducing these phenomena to existing political, epistemological, and ontological frameworks” (2013, p.6; see also Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p.195). In some cases, such a perspective might lead to misunderstanding or misrepresenting the activism at stake. For instance, in the aforementioned anecdote, it was my corporeal entanglements (here: exhausted) that shed light on the protest’s purpose

(here: enduring), which might have been less obvious from an institutionally focussed perspective.

To be clear, I am not arguing that corporeal perspectives should always be prioritised or that institutional dynamics are not important. To be sure, ethnography, too, always comes with certain limitations and carries the risk of getting too close or going too deep (see, for instance, Walsh, 2012). Indeed, it is widely accepted that the researcher's body functions as a key instrument for data gathering (Juris, 2008b; Walsh, 2012), and that reflexivity is therefore essential to critically reflect on different aspects which researchers bring to the field - their personality, ontological viewpoints, physical features, sexual orientation, demographics, gender, class and ethnic background – and their influence on how one selects, perceives, depicts and interprets data (Wacquant, 1992; Day, 2005; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Seidman, 2013; Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). For engaged activist ethnographers, it is often the time of writing which enables a sense of critical distancing (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013). Yet, attaining to the corporeal dimension and paying attention to “the subjective mood, feeling, and tone” of political events can add “descriptive flesh to what might otherwise read as dry, distant, and disengaged analytic accounts” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p.3), thus creating research output with a greater accessibility and the potential to engage wider audiences in important societal questions. Put differently, ‘militant’ and engaged approaches challenge researchers to question how we write, what aspects we write about and what other shapes research outputs might take. Taking this challenge seriously, my aim in this thesis is, using Taussig's words, to “create a text equal to what is being written about” (2013, p.3).

2.4.4. *Contradictory knowledges*

Throughout three years of engaged ethnographic fieldwork with transnational activists, I have grown used to awkward introductions. When I introduce myself in a group of activists, I usually take a bit longer than everyone else, having to explain my different positions as both activist *and* ethnographer. When fellow activists introduce me, they sometimes jokingly add that I would be a kind of ‘spy’ or explain that I am also here to ‘research them’. Usually people respond to these awkward introductions with curiosity, interest, or indifference. On one occasion, however, I was met with a sense of suspicion. The situation occurred at the beginning of my fieldwork in the context of dozens of

activists from across and beyond Europe gathering for a few days of meetings and workshops in East Germany. The activist I was introduced to had recently come back from Greece, where he worked with migrants who had undertaken dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean. When I mentioned my split position as an activist-scholar, the friendly expression on his face dropped. He explained his frustration with academics: sometimes, he felt, there were more researchers than activists, but rather than helping activists in hectic and stressful situations, such as when people had just been rescued at sea, they were standing around taking notes. He told me he hoped I was not that kind of academic.

The sense of suspicion I faced in this situation is known to many activist scholars. Like in my ethnographic anecdote, suspicion might arise from activists' previous experiences with researchers whose commitment was brief, and who have had little to "give back" (Calhoun, 2008, p.xx), or when researchers enter an activist community primarily with the aim to contribute expert advice rather than taking part (Day, 2005; Juris, 2007). This tension is pointedly illustrated in Schepher-Hughes' *Propositions for a Militant Anthropology* (1995), in which she describes her ethnographic engagement during field work in a Brazilian shanty town in 1982. The anthropologist had previously worked there as a community organiser, actively supporting the community's struggle for clean water, basic medical services and other local infrastructures. When she returned to the field as an ethnographer a couple of decades later, some of the local women were struck by her newfound political disengagement. After re-articulating her role as primarily defined by observing, documenting and understanding, Schepher-Hughes recalls that her research participants were not impressed. "That was all good and well, replied the women, but what else was I going to do while I was with them" (1995, p.410)? In their view, she observed, they had been very willing to collaborate with her, while she seemed to refuse to work with them. Hence, they call on her to join the struggle rather than "just sitting idly by taking field notes. "What is this anthropology to us, anyway?" (1995, p.411), they asked.

To most ethnographers, the inhabiting of two *contradictory* positions will be a common experience. As both *academic* practitioner, that is, as the scientist with a tape recorder, and as someone who might become a *friend*, meaning, "a human being like everyone else", ethnographers have to negotiate what Morin calls an "internal duality" (2002, p.158). In engaged activist ethnography, however, this internal split is complicated

further. As the aforementioned anecdotes illustrate, the ethnographer's position is not only split in two, but might be understood as a kind of internal *triangulation*. As *human beings*, ethnographers have a sense of responsibility towards their participants with whom they often have friendly relationships (Morin, 2002). As *scientific beings*, activist ethnographers have to deliver accounts that are not only politically useful, but also "rigorous and robust in academic terms" (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p.370; see also Juris, 2008a). Finally, as *political beings*, activist ethnographers are expected to actively engage politically, rather than idly standing by while others do the practical work (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). While some (for instance Hammersley, 2000) might criticise that scholarship that takes sides with political struggles often fails to resolve its own contradictions, 'militant' and engaged activist scholars argue that the position of engaged scholars is unavoidably "schizophrenic" (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p.24) and *necessarily* contradictory (Halvorsen, 2015). However, rather than throwing the notion of objectivity overboard altogether or developing "overly celebratory accounts of social movements" (Juris and Kashnabish, 2013, p.374), engaged activist researchers argue that the point, as the title of Hale's (2008) edited collection suggests, is *Engaging Contradictions*, rather than ignoring that they exist. Juris and Khasnabish, for instance, propose a mode of reflexivity that moves "back and forth between deeper modes" of physical and emotional engagement, and "more distant moments of interpretation and critical analysis" (2013, p.374), a strategy I have attempted to apply in my own work. In other words, what this thesis tries to offer is "a decentred, diasporic position", a way of "engaging with the world, not just personally but also intellectually and politically," as Ang (2016, pp.33-34) once described the work of Stuart Hall.

2.4.5. *Collective knowledges*

Conducted between the years 2016 and 2019, my ethnographic research is a project that speaks to topical issues which emerged in its contemporary political context. As such, it investigates various questions of public relevance, for instance, what might it mean to act as a citizen beyond borders? For while nationalist, far-right forces managed to shift public discourses on migration to the right, there also seems to be growing general sense in recent years that contemporary challenges arising in the context of migration, climate change and data capitalism need to be addressed beyond national borders. While I was still in the middle of wrapping up my ethnographic fieldwork in 2018, two co-founders

of European Alternatives had already written and published an entire book addressing such questions, based on their decade long experience of trans-European activism (Marsili and Milanese, 2018). The book complemented an active tradition of self-publishing within the movement. Many of their publications, magazines and media, both digitally and in print, brought together academic analysis with the perspective of artists and activists, either in the shape of their own analysis, or by inviting guest contributions and conducting interviews with renowned scholars (for instance Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017). Some of the activists I worked with also contribute articles or give interviews to mainstream media. Rather than foregrounding my own analysis, I thus decided to organise a public event at my University in November 2018, which brought together a group of people who might be described as activists, academics, or who - like myself - incorporate both these perspectives⁹.

What this short anecdote aims to illustrate is that the ethnographer “is not necessarily the most educated person in the village” (Calhoun, 2008, p.xxii). Other engaged activist scholars, too, have stressed that “activists produce and distribute their own analyses and reflections” (Juris, 2007, p.164). This recognition that social movements might themselves be regarded as “knowledge producers” (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell, 2013, p.199; see also Arribas Lozano, 2018) is far from new. In his foreword to Touraine’s *Return of the Actor*, Aronowitz argues that the study of the Polish trade union *Solidarność* revealed that the union did not merely fight for workers’ rights, but might be understood more broadly as “a struggle for a new cultural model of society as such” (1988, p.xv). More recently, Benford and Snow’s (2000) discussion of framing processes in social movements is another example of how movements construct social knowledges. Respective forms of knowledge production in movements do not necessarily require the presence of a researcher or have to take place inside the conceptual or physical boundaries of an academic institution (Halvorsen, 2015; Russell, 2015). Rather, knowledge production might take the shape of “everyday ‘research’” that is characterised by “a constant experimentation and reflexive refinement of political ambitions, organisational norms, forms of democracy, institutional structures and social reproduction” (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014, p.15). Such practices challenge more traditional understandings of the researcher’s role as a specialist with privileged access to truth (see Russell, 2015, p. 227). In Hynes’ words, “public sociology does not require a heroic figure who is capable of

⁹ A transcript of this conversation was later published on Political Critique (Scharenberg, 2018a).

clarifying the demands of the present” but might be capable of “co-inhabiting an emergent time and space” (2016, p.816).

As the ethnographer becomes “one voice or participant in a crowded field of knowledge producers” (Casas-Cortés et al., 2013, p.199), what, then, might the specific contribution of researchers be, and how might they be more than mere advocates? Casas-Cortés et al. suggest that we might think of engaged activist ethnographers as those who “weave” or “translate” the available knowledges in a given field, rather than merely “explain” or “represent” (p.199). In this sense, activist ethnographers become editors of *collective knowledges* rather than the sole producers of scientific theory. Like a literary editor, the ethnographer works from a position, which does not create knowledges from scratch, but collects the perspectives of others and assembles them with reference to the given context. In this view, a sense of objectivity might be achieved, to borrow an expression from Haraway, by assembling “partial views and halting voices” into what she calls a “collective subject position” (1988, p.590). Alternatively, we might think of the editor-ethnographer as Berger’s “clerk of the records” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p.419) who compiles the history of a group of people. Scheper-Hughes understands this position as a kind of witness. This is important, for “witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations” (1995, p.419). Rather than resolving all tensions, the task of the researcher as editor or “clerk of the record” is to take responsibility for how she compiles the collective ‘account’.

A focus on the collective dimension of knowledge production does not only raise questions about the notion of objectivity, but also about how engaged ethnography might function as a mode of owning and distributing knowledge collectively. Besides the possibility of co-publishing, the collective organisation of public events, where research participants can speak for themselves, rather than the researcher speaking for or about them, provides an interesting case. As Juris showed, the practice of attending and organising conferences and workshops *with* rather than *about* activists is common amongst engaged activist scholars (2007, p.171). Other than the event I organised in November 2018, I also spoke at or contributed to other conferences and panels discussions organised by and with activists throughout my research. Once again, this did not necessarily mean uncritically celebrating the movements at stake. Indeed, by moderating the panel discussion on citizenship beyond borders myself, I was able to ask critical questions which also allowed audience members to make up their own minds,

taking both academics' and activists' positions into consideration. Importantly, even though such events focus on creating public relevance, rather than merely "producing the next round of journal articles to benefit the academics' own career" (Calhoun, 2008, p.xx), it is crucial to remain critical of the fact that academics who engage in such efforts ultimately do gain from engaging with activists, if only because their careers are built on knowledge produced by and with activists. As one of the activists in Juris' study put it: "You go back to the university and use collectively produced knowledge to earn your degrees and gain academic prestige. What's in it for the rest of us" (2007, p.171)? Such remarks illustrate that the need for further experimentation with different modes of co-creating and collectively sharing knowledge with research participants and wider publics is a challenge that researchers should take seriously.

2.5. Conclusion

As I have shown throughout this chapter, and in particular in its previous final section, engaged activist ethnography is a highly complex and often difficult undertaking. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will return to the issue of engaged research methodologies and reflect on some of the limitations of engaged activist ethnography as I have come to encounter them throughout the work on this thesis.

For now, the aim of this chapter was to show how I approached engaged activist ethnography methodologically with regard to my particular field of alter-European activism. Starting with my own transition from activist to activist-ethnographer, the chapter introduced my field of study, research participants and research methods in more detail. Moreover, besides introducing my research subject and methodology, I also reflected on some critical questions regarding what it meant to practise 'militant' or engaged activist ethnography in the specific context of my research field. What I have argued in the final part of this chapter, drawing on my own as well as other activist scholars' experiences in the field, is that engaged activist ethnography *can* produce knowledge that is both academically "rigorous *and* useful for activists", as Juris (2008a, p.19, original emphasis) has argued.

Before we can dive deeper into this particular context and the findings that my engaged methodological approach has produced, however, it is equally necessary to situate this

study of alter-European activism not only methodologically, but also theoretically. The following chapter will serve this purpose, reviewing how previous transnational movements have been understood and demonstrating how my engaged study of alter-European activism contributes to the scholarship of transnational social movements.

3. Understanding transnational movements in the age of digital networks

3.1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis, as outlined in the previous two chapters, is to investigate how agency is exercised in alter-European activist networks. Thus, there are two key terms here which require further clarification: the network paradigm and the concept of agency. I will discuss these terms in more detail in two literature review chapters, each of which focusses on one concept. While the second part of this thesis is specifically concerned with conceptualising how agency is enacted in alter-European activist networks, starting with a chapter that reviews how *agency* has been understood across the social and political sciences (Chapter 5), this chapter turns to the idea of the *network*. Reviewing how the metaphor of the network has shaped social movement scholars' understanding of transnational movements, the overall aim of this chapter is to situate my ethnographic study of alter-European activist networks within existing social movement literature on transnational mobilisations and demonstrate how my own study contributes in particular to recent debates on the nature of agency in contemporary movements.

To begin with, it is important to highlight that the selection of literature discussed in this chapter and throughout this thesis was largely led and influenced by my time in the ethnographic field. In the first few months of my research project, I started my review of relevant scholarship by focussing on methodological and epistemological questions regarding the ethics and practice of engaged research. This was not only due to my engaged mode of ethnography, which required me to be able to negotiate my complex position in the field, as discussed in the previous chapter. I also deliberately decided to not immediately dive into existing social movement literature, because rather than entering alter-European activist networks with a predefined set of analytical frames in mind, I wanted to discover which questions or theories might directly emerge from the field. The following three parts that make up this chapter are the result of how my field led me to engage with particular discussions within social movement scholarship and to reflect on how this thesis' theoretical journey evolved throughout my fieldwork.

The chapter starts from the assumption that in order to understand agency in alter-European activist networks, I need to begin by contextualising alter-European activism within the history of recent transnational mobilisations and how their actions have been

understood by social movement scholars. Here, I focus in particular on what the alter-globalization movement, and the wider discussions on globalization within which it emerged, might tell us about alter-European activism.

A second aspect that quickly became evident both throughout my time in the field and in how social movement scholarship had been making sense of previous transnational mobilisations was the role played by different media and networking technologies. The second part of this chapter will thus demonstrate how digital networks have not only changed how social movements organise, but how they have also brought about a predominant paradigm that has since been employed to make sense of transnational social movements' sense of agency, namely the idea of the network. However, while the network paradigm aptly captured the network politics of the alter-globalization movement, I argue that alter-European activists' sense of agency appears to operate according to a slightly different logic.

The final part of this chapter will therefore turn to more recent and emerging discussions within social movement scholarship to which this thesis contributes. In particular, I will draw on discussions around the so-called "movements of the squares" as well as new actors such as "movement parties" (della Porta et al., 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, b) which emerged in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent Eurozone crisis, and which threw up new questions for social movement scholars. In this third part, the chapter ultimately shows that while alter-European activism can certainly be understood as a *networked* form of mobilisation, the network metaphor is less useful to understand alter-European activism's sense of agency.

As some media and social movement scholars have already begun to tackle the concept of agency in the age of digital networks (Kaun, Kyriakidou and Uldam, 2016; Kavada, 2016; Milan, 2018) and in the context of social movements' turn towards democratic institutions (della Porta et al., 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, b), I argue that the question how transnational social movements seek to enact *agency* in the contemporary moment requires closer attention by social movement scholars. Thus, the chapter concludes, it is by foregrounding this question of agency and systematically exploring how it is understood in alter-European activism, that this thesis makes an original contribution to emerging discussions in social movement scholarship.

3.2. Transnational movements in context

3.2.1. *Networking practices in alter-European activism*

A few days after I interviewed Antonio near Madrid's City Hall, I make my way over to Matadero, a former slaughterhouse-come-culture-centre in the city's South, right at the Río Manzanares. Here, approximately one hundred participants have taken a seat on dark green plastic chairs in a dimly lit warehouse for the opening event of Transeuropa Festival (Figure 4). Saskia, a long-term member of European Alternatives and one of the key organisers of the festival, steps on a small stage located in the middle of the room. The stage is surrounded by the circular arrangement of chairs on which the participants took their seats on one side and an exhibition entitled "Rebuild Refuge Europe" on the other, which - in exploring the ongoing challenges relating to migration and the accompanying rise of far-right nationalists in Europe – figuratively and literally builds the backdrop of the festival. As Saskia indicates in her opening speech, the gathering of a broad range of actors in this room and in different locations throughout the city in a series of events, debates, workshops, exhibitions and performances has a particular aim: "Transeuropa Festival", she says, "is an invitation to join forces, to come together, to co-create." Silvia, an Italian activist, who has come to Madrid to help facilitate the festival, later re-iterated this point in an interview. She listed the festival's aims as follows:

"Bringing people together on a European level; exchanging different perspectives of topics; contaminating each other's politics and mixing not only activists, but activists with policy makers, researchers, with general public; creating different perspectives on a space for a progressive Europe... - a Europe of municipalities, of cities of change, a Europe that can be something else than Fortress Europe, a Europe that works on the commons as economic or political principle." (Silvia, October 2017)



Figure 4: Transeuropa Festival opening event, Madrid, October 2017; Photo: European Alternatives

Over the course of the next few days, I begin to get a sense of how these aims come to live through the diversity of different actors, campaigns and ideas present at Transeuropa Festival. The day after the opening event, I make my way over to La Ingobernable (Figure 5), an old school which has been occupied and turned into a social centre, where the majority of the workshops of the festival were to take place. Here, I attend a series of workshops, including one on the “De-patriarchalisation of politics”, which invites participants to explore how feminism might transform political organising and institutions, based on the experiences of radical municipalities in Spain (Chapter 7). Other events included a workshop run by the self-organised migrant workers’ Union of Street Vendors as well as a series of meetings and performances hosted by a local anti-racist organisation which brought together campaigners from different countries. Besides meeting other activists in workshops, I also attended several panel discussions which additionally brought together a variety of perspectives from speakers such as activists, artists and journalists from across Europe, local and foreign city councillors, as well as a Podemos parliamentarian. One panel had municipal councillors from Palermo, Naples, Gdańsk and Madrid discuss how an alternative refugee politics might enable cities to act by forging connections and creating access to European funds across borders – a proposal that would begin to translate the “Europe as Refuge” exhibition and the local

disobedience from city councils like Madrid's (Figure 1) into progressive pan-European policy.



Figure 5: Squatted social centre La Ingobernable, Madrid, October 2017; Image: video still (European Alternatives, 2017d)

What I began to notice in these days in Madrid was that several of the ideas, such as the trans-municipal approach to refugee politics, and some of the people present, such as the city councillors in the previously mentioned discussion, would return throughout my time in the field. For instance, besides getting to know several actors I had not met before, I also encountered familiar faces such as Theo, the activist from Germany whom I had first met in Belgrade two years before, or Mark, one of the fellow activists from Another Europe is Possible whom I campaigned with in the run up to Brexit (Chapter 1). Catching up with Mark, who had come over from London to facilitate a workshop on what Brexit might mean for activists in continental Europe, I learned that the festival's coming together of a broad variety of actors somewhat reminded him of the World Social Forums which he had attended a few years earlier. When I asked him about this remark in an interview a few months later, however, he also made clear that there were some key differences between these earlier articulations of transnational activism and what contemporary alter-European activism was about. Reflecting on his experiences at one of the European Social Forums, he said:

“It was quite nice: you had this wall at the World Social Forum where everyone could go and pin up an idea, a proposal, so it’s very participatory and pluralistic. But on some level, it was too pluralistic, because it didn’t resolve itself to prioritise a particular thing... It lacked being political in that sense.” (Mark, December 2018)

In contrast, Mark described the point of his contemporary engagements in alter-European activist networks in a similar way to how Silvia and Saskia articulated the point of Transeuropa Festival: “You take social movements, civil society, politicians, thinkers from different parties and movements and you build a coalition politics.” Mark’s reminiscence of the World Social Forums at Transeuropa Festival confirmed an observation that had already surfaced in the first months of my fieldwork: alter-European activists were, of course, not the first to try and organise beyond national borders. If I wanted to make sense of alter-European activist networks and what, if anything, was new about these movements and their sense of agency, it became clear that I needed to place these networks in context with preceding transnational mobilisations and how they have been understood by social movement scholars in recent decades.

3.2.2. *How globalization changed (the study of) social movements*

“can we think other ways of being globalized, of becoming planetary, or are we stuck with this neoliberal model?” (Braidotti, 2017, p.17)

Transnational organising, of which events like Transeuropa Festival are but one possible expression, is not a new phenomenon. As Berger and Scalmer’s historical account of *The Transnational Activist* (2017) shows, transnational mobilisations have existed long before the twentieth century. Historical examples of transnational resistance include Marx and Engels’ (2004) famous call for the proletariat to unite across countries and the first workers’ international, the transnational connections made throughout anti-colonial struggles (Gandhi, 2006), or pan-Africanism (Featherstone, 2008). A more recent example, as della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht (2009) have shown, is how international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Transnational Social Movement Organisations (TSMOs) have entered the arena of international politics in the late twentieth century. In these years, the transnationalisation of social movements occurred in the context of different strategies, including movements trying to find international allies to mobilise and put pressure on national issues, social movements addressing national governments

to advance global issues, or social movements directly putting pressure on international actors. This is in addition to protests and mobilisations taking place in different countries at once, such as in the context of the 1968 student protests or the transnational gatherings of the peace movement which brought together activists from the Western and the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain in the 1980s (Kaldor, 2003). Despite this rich history of transnational mobilisations, however, della Porta et al. argue that social movement studies “have been late to address phenomena of transnationalization, and are still in search of adequate theories, concepts and methods to address them” (2009, p.ix). Indeed, social movement scholars’ turn to foreground the issue of transnationalisation and the *global* dimension of resistance in more depth, can only be understood in the context of a wider discourse of globalization that emerged throughout the political and social sciences.

While globalization is not an entirely new phenomenon either¹⁰, it is throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, after the fall of the Iron Curtain and with the rise of digital technologies and the birth of the world wide web in 1989, that many sociologists (such as Giddens, 1999; Beck, 2000; Sassen, 2007) and other scholars across the wider political and social sciences become increasingly occupied with an emerging phenomenon: the idea of globalization. Broadly speaking, globalization refers to the sense of space-time compression that was described by many scholars in the beginning of the 1990s (for instance Massey, 1991), and cuts across various dimensions of social life in complex ways, including technological, economic, financial, ideological, ecological and cultural flows as well as the dimensions of migration and civil society (Appadurai, 1990; Beck, 2000). One aspect I am particularly interested in here, as it is crucial to understanding alter-European activists’ sense of agency, is the question of power, that is, the emergence of new global actors and the changing power dynamics on the global political stage. As Beck argues, globalization challenges one of the basic premises of modern societies, namely the assumption that “the contours of society largely coincide with those of the

¹⁰ As Beck points out, there are different possible answers to the “question of *when* globalization began.” (2000, p. 20, original emphasis) One might refer here to the transnational processes that took place during the rise of industrial capitalism. Marx and Engels have already pointed to the global character of capital in the late 19th century when they wrote: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere.” (2004, p.39) As Marx and Engels acknowledge here, it was the so-called “discovery of America [that] paved the way” for this “world-market” to be established (p.38). Indeed, the emergence of modern globalization might be traced back even further to the beginnings of European empire, colonialism and the trans-Atlantic trade of enslaved people from the 16th century (Gilroy, 1993). Moreover, a historical view also shows that transnational trade and exchange already took place between different Mediterranean cities of what is today referred to as North Africa, Southern Europe and the Middle East throughout medieval times as Braudel (Mucem, 2017) has shown.

national state” (2000, p.21). This “methodological nationalism”, he argues, is shaken as “new relations of power and competition, conflict and intersection, take shape between, on the one hand, national states and actors, and on the other hand, transnational actors, identities, social spaces, situations and processes” (p.21). Sassen (2007) similarly distinguishes between two different dynamics of globalization. On the one hand, there is “the formation of explicitly global institutions and processes, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), global financial markets, the new cosmopolitanism, and the International War Crimes Tribunals” (p.5). On the other hand, there are the “multiple local or “national” processes and actors”, which make a crucial part of globalization. Here, Sassen points not only to how nation-states play their own part in implementing “certain monetary and fiscal policies” that are critical in “the constitution of global financial markets” (p.6), but also to the role of “cross-border networks of activists” (p.6).

Indeed, it was in this context of changing power dynamics that yet another actor emerged on the global political stage, which, argue della Porta et al. (2009; see also della Porta et al., 2006, p.10) many scholars in the late 1990s did not see coming. This movement, which subsequently travelled around the globe in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has since been analysed by numerous theorists from across the social and political sciences (for instance Routledge, 2003; Graeber, 2004; Day, 2005; della Porta et al., 2006; de Sousa Santos, 2006; McDonald, 2006; Featherstone, 2008; Juris, 2008a; Pleyers, 2010; Flesher Fominaya, 2014) and has been called by many names. The press, for instance, misleadingly labelled it the “anti-globalization” or “no global” movement (della Porta et al., 2006, p3). However, as Graeber (2004) explains, many of the activists in the movement were not at all categorically against globalization as such. Juris, for example, argues that activists in these movements did indeed perceive themselves as part of a global force defined by “transnational fields of meaning, where images, discourses, and tactics flow from one continent to another” (2008a, p.58). Juris and others thus prefer the term “anti-corporate globalization movement” or “alter-globalization movement”, or refer to the movement as the “Global Justice Movement” (Flesher Fominaya, 2014), “counter-global networks” (Featherstone, 2008), “grassroots globalization networks” (Routledge, 2003), “new global”, “altermondialiste”, “Globalisierungskritiker” (della Porta et al., 2006, p.8), or simply as a form of “globalization from below” (p.3). Besides these different names, what is widely acknowledged to be the underlying premise of this rather diverse movement is a common critique of *neoliberal globalization*. As Juris summarises, neoliberal globalization “refers to a set of free market policies commonly referred to as

the Washington Consensus, which are imposed through trade agreements and multilateral institutions including the World Bank, IMF, and WTO” (2008a, p.7).¹¹ How, then, did this new global movement seek to act vis-a-vis such powerful actors, and what do its actions tell us about how agency might be understood in alter-European activist networks?

3.2.3. *Actors and actions in alter-globalization networks*

In order to better grasp the alter-globalization movements’ sense of agency and their diverse network of actors, it is important to highlight that part of the movements’ roots are to be found in the jungle of Chiapas. As several scholars remind us (for instance Graeber, 2004; Nash, 2007; Juris, 2008a; Flesher Fominaya, 2014), it was here, as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was set to go into effect in 1994, where the so-called ‘Zapatista Army of National Liberation’ declared their resistance against police, army and government, demanding “economic, social, and political justice and cultural autonomy” (Nash, 2007, p.439). While these demands were originally made in reference to the situation of Mayan Indians, the Zapatistas inherently saw the origins of their problems in free trade agreements and global neoliberalism (Juris, 2008a). Juris argues that the Zapatistas developed “a new political language” that focussed on consultation, diversity and global solidarity, rather than “the age-old imagery of the proletariat” (p.45). Instead of attempting to assemble the working classes, the Zapatistas called for a coming together of people from around the world to stand up *against* neoliberalism and *for* humanity. In this spirit, a global gathering entitled the “First Intergalactic Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism” (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p.64) took place in Chiapas in August 1996 (see also Graeber, 2004). This meeting was attended by individuals from a network called the People’s Global Action (PGA), who later contributed to further “transnationalisation” of the Zapatistas’ call to action (Graeber, 2004; Juris 2008a).

¹¹ Respective policies, Juris points out, deregulate global markets on the one hand while simultaneously privatising or cutting public spending and imposing austerity measures for areas like “healthcare, education, the environment, and even life itself” (2008a, p.8). Originally developed by neoliberal think tanks and intellectuals like Friedrich Hayek and the Mont Pelerin Society in the 1940s, respective policies have subsequently been introduced by politicians such as Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK in the 1980s (see Pleyers, 2010; Flesher Fominaya, 2014), with disastrous results: “growing poverty, inequality, social dislocation, and ecological destruction within and across developing and industrialized worlds” (Juris, 2008a, p.8).

One of the most famous articulations of the alter-globalization movement that subsequently followed has come to be known as the “battle” of Seattle in November 1999 (della Porta et al., 2006, p.3; Juris, 2008a, p.28; Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p.5). Besides the general sense of discontent with market deregulation and neoliberal hegemony, the immediate reason why some fifty thousand people gathered on the date of the third World Trade Organization conference was the WTO’s censoring of countries that had violated free trade agreements (della Porta et al, 2006). Although the spectacle lasted only for several days, the anti-WTO protest was perceived as such a visible protest landmark that some scholars make a temporal distinction of times *before* and *after* Seattle (for example della Porta et al., 2006; Juris, 2008a). The battle of Seattle also serves to vividly illustrate an important aspect of the movement which alter-globalization activism shares with the alter-European activism: each movement assembles a diversity of different actors. Della Porta et al. (2006) state that the call to demonstrate against the WTO in 1999 was signed by no less than 1,387 groups with the streets of Seattle being inhabited by a variety of different groups including anarchists, environmentalists, feminists, farmers, indigenous grassroots organisations, trade unions and NGOs (della Porta et al., 2006; Juris, 2008a).

The actions and tactics employed on the streets of Seattle were equally varied, ranging from a series of direct actions and theatre groups to road blockages and vandalism. To be sure, the contrast between those activists who roamed the streets of Seattle in turtle costumes to both remind of their status as an endangered species, which was further accelerated by some of the WTO’s policies, as well as of the protest’s non-violent orientation, and the Black Bloc protesters who smashed the shop windows of global corporations such as Nike, McDonald’s and Starbucks whom they saw as directly responsible for environmental destruction and workers’ exploitation, could hardly be more stark (della Porta et al., 2006; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Such a diversity of different actors and actions has undoubtedly led to tensions in the alter-globalization movement (see de Sousa Santos, 2006; Juris, 2008a; Flesher Fominaya, 2014) as well as in subsequent transnational mobilisations including alter-European activism (as I will show in Chapters 4 and 7). Nevertheless, it is this diversity that is one of the main characteristics of this first explicitly global movement: far from being single-issue based, the movements’ general orientation was “anti-systemic” (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p.41).

I recall the battle of Seattle here not only because it is an important landmark in the recent history of transnational mobilisations, but because it vividly illustrates a number of aspects that the alter-globalization movement shares with alter-European networks and that help begin to make sense of the movement at stake in this thesis. Firstly, as per Mark's comment, the diversity of actors present at Transeuropa Festival becomes less surprising in the context of how an equally diverse set of actors already came together in similar gatherings such as in the World Social Forums or the WTO protest in Seattle. Secondly, more than two decades after Seattle, many of the problems the alter-globalization movement was criticising are still with us today, marking the contemporary context for alter-European activism. Pleyers argues that “[w]ith the fall of the Berlin Wall, neoliberal ideology became hegemonic” (2010, p.17; see also della Porta et al., 2006) – a condition which continues to define the present moment. In this context, nation-states continue to face a loss of sovereignty as “neoliberal rationality”, as Brown puts it, “recognizes no sovereign apart from entrepreneurial decision makers” (2010, p.22). Besides the endurance of neoliberal hegemony, other contemporary global challenges like climate change or the ongoing Covid-19¹² pandemic have only rendered the need for a progressive politics that is able to exercise agency beyond the borders of nation-states all the more important. In this context, it is less surprising that alter-European activist organisations like European Alternatives continue to define their struggle as searching for alternatives that take us beyond both the national *and* the neoliberal status quo, as I have shown in Chapter 1 (see also Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017).

Finally, then, it is this attempt to build a network with the capacity to act beyond the borders of nation-states that alter-globalization and alter-European movements share. Indeed, similar to the nomadic make-up of Transeuropa Festival, what happened in Seattle did not stay in Seattle. Between 2000 and 2005, similar events followed across the world, with actions taking place in Washington D.C., Prague, Nice, Porto Alegre, Cochabamba, Bangalore, Quebec City, Gothenburg, Genoa and Barcelona (Routledge, 2003; Graeber, 2004; Juris, 2008a; Pleyers, 2010; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). These events included what came to be known under the umbrella name of World Social Forums (WSF), including regional gatherings such as the European Social Forums (see della Porta and Caiani, 2009), as well as other activities such as a series of mobile activist practices

¹² As the global Covid-19 pandemic is still unfolding at the time of writing, in the final months of this project, I am unable to engage with the particularities of this most recent border-crossing crisis in much depth. Nevertheless, I will briefly return to the question what the challenges likely to arise in the aftermath of the pandemic mean for alter-European activism in the thesis' epilogue.

and protests taking place in different parts of the world (Routledge, 2003; Featherstone, 2008) and further protests against gatherings of the WTO, EU, or the G7 (Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Besides transnational gatherings of activists like at the World Social Forums or Transeuropa Festival, alter-European activists also employ tactics like activist caravanning, which have already been used in alter-globalization networks, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 6. It is this transnational spread of the struggle at stake in this thesis, that required me to engage with a second major debate that is relevant to understanding agency in alter-European activism. Besides networking practices like meetings and protests, I came to realise that another important factor at play in alter-globalization as well as alter-European actions, was the role of digital networks.

3.3. From digital networks to network politics

3.3.1. How digital media changed (the study of) transnational social movements

Besides physically assembling different actors in Madrid, the opening event at Transeuropa Festival is also illustrative of how alter-European networks make use of different media practices for a variety of purposes. For instance, as shown in Figure 5, Saskia's welcoming words were followed by a video that showed events, workshops and assemblies related to Transeuropa Festival taking place in twelve different cities all across and beyond EU-Europe, thus visualising the transnational dimension of the festival and the wider network of actors involved. Moreover, all panel discussions were video-recorded and live streamed and are still available on European Alternatives' YouTube channel, archiving and prolonging the discussions in digital spaces. Workshops, discussions and exhibitions were advertised locally via posters and flyers, and through European Alternatives' and local groups' social media channels. Articles and blog posts were written and distributed via alternative media channels like OpenDemocracy and Political Critique to make them available to wider audiences (Appendix D). Finally, different print material was laid out at the different locations, including a print journal that was produced specifically for the festival, which I had helped to pick up from a local Podemos office and distribute across the different venues a few days before the festival started. Different media technologies, I understood at Transeuropa Festival and other events I attended throughout my fieldwork, seemed to constitute an important part of

alter-European activism. However, once again, alter-European activists are of course not the first to engage different media technologies.

Throughout the centuries, media technologies have played an important role both for how social movements have organised as well as for how they have been understood by social movement scholars. For instance, Couldry and Curran (2003) remind us that media practices played an important part in the struggle of eighteenth-century French revolutionaries. Similarly, radical English newspapers inspired underground politics towards the turn of the 1800s and throughout subsequent centuries of working-class struggle (Atton, 2002). Despite this long history, however, Atton points out that it is only from the 1950s onwards that media and communications' scholars developed a sustained interest in social movements' use of media technologies. With the shift from class-based forms of organising focussed on political institutions to the identity-related politics of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, media and communications scholars subsequently turned their attention to issues of representation. One important topic of scholarly interest in this context was the production of alternative media such as independent film, pirate radio and radical print media (Atton, 2002; Atkinson, 2010). As several scholars have pointed out, such alternative media play a crucial part in movement politics due to their potential to challenge the dominant power of established mass media and open the media production process to a broader public (Atton, 2002; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Atkinson, 2010). Besides issues relating to the construction of discourse and representation, however, more recent social movement scholarship has shown that attention to media processes can also illuminate other important aspects of social movement politics. For instance, in the second half of the twentieth century, scholars investigated not only how activists use media technologies to challenge the power of established media, but also how movements construct themselves discursively as collective political subjects (Mattoni, 2012; Kavada, 2015) and shape their collective identity (Melucci, 1996; Atkinson, 2010). Thus, what preceding decades of scholarship have shown is that attention to a movements' alternative media strategies and their repertoires of communication (Mattoni, 2012) can bring to the fore important aspects of social movement politics.

With the invention of the world wide web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 – and later the development of web 2.0 applications in the early 2000s – social movements' relationship with digital and social media has become a key area of interest in social movement

scholarship until today (see, for instance, Postill, 2018). This is not least because the emergence “of new digital technologies has profoundly altered the social movement landscape” and played an important role for the emergence of the alter-globalization movement (Juris, 2008a, p.9; see also Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Indeed, one of the first movements to engage with digital technologies were the Zapatistas, whose “pioneering use of digital technologies” (Juris, 2008a, p.12) informed the alter-globalization movements’ use of digital media. In fact, digital technologies played such an important role in their dissemination of information that the Zapatista have been called the “first informational guerrilla movement” (Castells cited in Atton, 2002, p.133). As Atton elaborates, the Zapatista were the first of many movements to follow who have used ICTs (information and communication technologies), such as online video, web radio, bulletin boards and chat rooms, for the purposes of mobilising or sharing information outside of mainstream media. Inspired by the Zapatista’s use of digital technologies, the People’s Global Action (PGA) and the wider alter-globalization movement subsequently used websites, mailing lists and networks such as Indymedia to organise and coordinate their global actions (Juris, 2008a; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). As Juris explains, the term Indymedia referred to the hundreds of Independent Media Centres that have been established around the world in order to enable activists to post their own content and bypass the corporate mainstream media. Indymedia was launched during the anti-WTO protests to broadcast the events taking place on the streets of Seattle in 1999 (see also Flesher Fominaya, 2014). By 2010, there were “over 160 autonomous Indymedia collectives around the world”, who “write articles, contribute videos and images, and provide commentary and testimony about issues of concern to progressive social movements” (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, pp.137-138).

As Juris argued in the context of the alter-globalization movement, “media activism and digital networking more generally had become critical features” of the movement (2008a, p.3). Indeed, it can even be argued that the “network of networks”, as the internet has been described in this context, has contributed to the rise of a “movement of movements” (for instance, della Porta et al., 2006, p.28). To be sure, respective technologies have further expanded the emancipatory potential of movements’ media politics and mark a significant shift in communication repertoires impacted on activists’ possibilities to speak to power, organise as a movement, and construct their political identities through mediated practices. Flesher Fominaya, for instance, lists a number of opportunities for mobilising that information and communications technologies offer social movements,

including the possibility to communicate with others at a distance via mailing lists, messaging apps, the disseminating their own content via webpages, or the generation of resources through crowdfunding applications (see 2014, p.129). However, at the same time, various scholars (including Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Barassi, 2015) have also highlighted numerous challenges arising in the context of movements' relationship with digital media. Barassi, for instance, highlighted the everyday struggle of *Activism On The Web* (2015) and what it means to organise in the context of capitalist digital infrastructures, including how activists negotiate issues of surveillance, or the data and profit-driven nature of many of those platforms. What I am particularly interested in here, however, is less how the social movement at stake in this thesis engages with digital networks. Rather, what is crucial for my understanding of alter-European activism, is how the *cultural logic* of the network (Juris, 2008a) has become important to understanding not only movements' media practices, but their politics and sense of agency more generally. Indeed, as Juris' and others have shown for the alter-globalization movement, more than being used as mere communication tools, digital networks have also brought about new forms of collective subjectivity.

3.3.2. *The rise of the network paradigm*

Within the wider discussion around globalization and the rise of digital networking technologies throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the "network" metaphor became a predominant tool to explain various social structures, including social movements (Barassi, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). To be sure, the idea that social movements might be understood as "networks" is not new in itself (della Porta and Diani, 1999). Della Porta et al. (2006), for instance, define "*global social movements*" as "supranational networks of actors that define their causes as global and organize protest campaigns that involve more than one state" (2006, p.18, original emphasis). Indeed, network-based mobilisations can be traced back to the politics of environmentalists, feminists and other mobilisations that were part of the so-called "new social movements" in the second half of the twentieth century (see, for instance, della Porta et al., 2006; Buechler, 2011; Juris, 2012). Nevertheless, several scholars have found the metaphor of the network particularly useful to describe the politics of the alter-globalization movement as well as more recent mobilisations taking place in what Castells calls *The Information Age* (1996, 1997, 1998). The work of Castells is particularly noteworthy in this context. His premise is that we

must take technological change, which he sees as nothing short of a “information technology revolution” (1996, p.5), as the starting point for analysing global society at the turn of the century. Castells argues that networks play an important role in this context, as they would “constitute the new social morphology of our societies” (1996, p.500).

As Barassi (2016) shows, Castells was but one of various scholars who applied the network paradigm as an analytical frame to make sense of transnational social movements like the alter-globalization networks. Respective strands of scholarly literature (such as Hardt and Negri, 2004), Barassi argues, were based on the assumption that Internet technologies enabled more flexible forms of political belonging that were “fundamentally different from earlier social movements and deconstructed older, identity based forms of political engagement” (2016, p.425). Hardt and Negri’s idea of the *Multitude* (2004) or “network struggle” (p.79) is a prominent example of this approach. They think of the “multitude” as a multi-layered actor “composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity – different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires” (2004, p.xiv). Hardt and Negri see the internet as a possible model for the network resistance of the multitude, “because, first, the various nodes remain different but are all connected in the Web, and, second, the external boundaries of the network are open such that new nodes and relationships can always be added” (2004, p.xv). As Barassi shows, in the early 2000s, Hardt and Negri were not the only scholars who advanced “the belief that the ‘network’ had become a new model of political organization and was offering new political possibilities for progressive social change” (2016, p.425).

One of the scholars who has perhaps most comprehensively conceptualised the idea of the network in the context of the alter-globalization movement is Juris (2008a, 2012). His idea of “the cultural logic of networking” (2008a, p.11) refers to the movements’ practice of “using the networking tools and logics of contemporary global capitalism to challenge global capitalism itself” (p.2). Approaching the production of alter-globalization networks from an ethnographic point of view, Juris argues that activists have internalised the guiding principles of information capitalism and apply them to their own networking practices. Juris makes a helpful distinction here, categorising the movement’s network practices into different aspects, namely, their use of digital media (technology), their

organisational structure (norm) and political model (form) (see pp.10-11). “Beyond providing a technological medium”, Juris argues, “the Internet’s reticulate structure reinforces network-based organizational forms” (p.13) as well as a ““new way of doing politics”” (p.14). What is meant by this, Juris goes on to explain, is “a mode of organizing involving horizontal coordination among autonomous groups, grassroots participation, consensus decision making, and the free and open exchange of information” (p.14). Juris contrasts this political logic that involves “[c]lassic anarchist principles such as autonomy, self-management, federation, direct action, and direct democracy” (p.15) against the workings of party politics:

“While the command-oriented logic of traditional parties and unions involves recruiting new members, developing unified strategies, pursuing political hegemony, and organizing through representative structures, network politics revolve around the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse collectives, organizations, and networks converge around a few common principles while preserving their autonomy and identity-based specificity. The objective becomes enhanced “connectivity” and horizontal expansion by articulating diverse movements within flexible, decentralized information structures that facilitate transnational coordination and communication.” (p.14)

Juris is not the only one who highlights the network logic’s proximity to anarchist principles. Analysed through the lens of its actions and political imaginaries, some scholars have interpreted the alter-globalization movements as inherently motivated by anarchist thought (for example Holloway, 2002; Graeber, 2004; Day, 2005). For Graeber, “anarchism is at the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of most of what’s new and hopeful about it” (2004, p.203). Graeber supports this claim with reference to the movements’ tactics, which focus on building spaces for autonomy and are “less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule” (p.210). He refers here to non-violent tactics that perhaps constitute “a new language of civil disobedience” including humorous nonsensical chants free of demands, street festival, re-imaginings of the Black Bloc as a “Pink Bloc” or “Revolutionary Anarchist Clown Bloc”, or the rubber-duck and foam-armed “mock army” of the Ya Basta! collective (p.208; see also Juris, 2008a).

To what extent, then, does the network logic and the use of digital networks in the alter-globalization movement apply to the context of alter-European activism? As I got more and more familiar with my field while engaging with the aforementioned literature on the

network politics of alter-globalization networks, I started to notice not only similarities, but important differences with regard to how alter-European activists were engaging with digital networks and what this meant for how they aimed to act politically.

3.3.3. *Beyond the network paradigm? The role of (digital) networks in alter-European activism*

Thus far, in this chapter, I have shown how some aspects of alter-European activism can be traced back to earlier debates on globalization and the alter-globalization movement, such as a diversity of actors coming together across national borders or their common critique of neoliberal governance. Moreover, I demonstrated how digital networks became essential for transnational movements' capacity to act and how the network paradigm became the predominant metaphor to describe not only movements' alternative media practices, but also their networked sense of agency. The more I learned about the alter-globalization movements' actions and tactics and the more time I spent in the field, however, I gradually came to realise that while much could be learned from existing scholarship of previous transnational mobilisations, alter-European activists' networking practices seemed to be based on a somewhat different understanding of how agency might be exercised in the context of contemporary challenges.

Firstly, alter-European activists' reliance on digital networks seemed to be of a different quality compared to how the alter-globalization movement had embraced early internet technologies. To be sure, as my description of the different media technologies present at Transeuropa Festival illustrated, media play an important role for alter-European activism in a variety of ways. Étienne, who has been working with European Alternatives for several years when I interviewed him, and who spends a lot of his time forging connections between different actors in the movement, explained to me how media technologies played an important role in his daily routine. Reflecting on the organisation's different uses of media, he differentiates between "internal communications" and "external communications":

Étienne: "There are... communications for the sake of *coordination* [my emphasis], so making sure that everybody is on the same page, that everybody is updated, that everybody has the right information, erm, so that's one part of it."

Antje: “How do you do that?”

“...Well, through emails, but also through sharing documents, and so we work a lot with Google Docs... sometimes through calls, of course, lots of calls, lots and lots of calls, because all of us are working remotely, but also through Telegram, also through messaging apps, increasingly, even more... The external communication is a bit different... managing the website, managing the social media, managing the relations with the press... Now there is also managing Political Critique, our transnational magazine.” (Étienne, November 2017)

What becomes obvious in Étienne’s response is that media are somewhat omnipresent in alter-European organising as they are employed towards different ends: to *coordinate actions* (particularly through email and messaging apps like Telegram), to *spread information* of events and protests (particularly through social media and email newsletters), to *influence discourse* (particularly through working with more established print and online media, see Chapter 6), and to *create counter-narratives* (particularly through alternative media such as the online magazine Political Critique or the digital talk show format Talk Real, see Appendix D). This omnipresence of digital media was also mentioned by other activists, such as Silvia, who had contributed to organising Transeuropa Festival in Madrid. When I asked her how much time she spends in front of the computer on a daily basis compared to the time she spent in physical meetings with other activists, she said “95% [of the time is spent] online”. Applying Juris’ distinction of the network paradigm into three different aspects (namely technology, norm and form, see 2008a, p.10), it might thus be argued that alter-European activism can certainly be understood as a *networked* practice in the sense of both their use of technology – given their daily engagement with digital networks – and their networked forms of organising, for instance in the shape of gathering a diversity of actors at Transeuropa Festival. Indeed, in one of the flyers they distributed at the festival, European Alternatives describe themselves “a broad network of individuals and organisations working together to address our common challenges” (Fieldnotes, Madrid, October 2017).

Despite the omnipresence of digital networks and various networking practices, however, the network metaphor also faces a series of limitations when it comes to making sense of alter-European activism’s sense of agency. For instance, despite their rather extensive use of digital media, both Silvia and Étienne, as well as other activists I spoke to, articulated strong reservations about certain aspects of organising online:

“[We use] online [media] for coordination, getting information, getting trainings, but it’s not enough to really create connections. Online is limited in time, you cannot have a full day of online meeting, human beings cannot be in front of computer for a full day. It’s also a question for me of building trust. It’s much better when you actually meet people, when you actually know them. Lots of the connections are created by moving around.” (Étienne, November 2017)

“When you engage in transnational [organising], the online [sphere] becomes a very big part of what you do... [With this kind of] work that is transnational and remote you don’t have enough time to sit together and discuss meanings... That is the thing I’m struggling the most with right now, if you organise online with people you never met and they are a name online that also means you cannot be accountable, you can just disappear and not do what you said you would. The sense of belonging is more difficult to generate... Meeting people, exchanging experiences, you need the physicality. The digital is a tool, not an end in itself... Digital as an end in itself is completely empty.” (Silvia, December 2018)

The latter response, in particular, summarised well how I have seen alter-European activists engage with digital media during my time in the field: as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. In other words, while digital networks were everywhere, they did not explain everything about this movement’s approach to social change.

Silvia’s remark also begins to point towards a second crucial difference between alter-European activism and alter-globalization networking practices: while the networking logic of the alter-globalization movement was largely driven by autonomous principles, alter-European activists seemed more inclined to involve particular institutional actors towards specific objectives. As European Alternatives put it in the aforementioned flyer: “Our action is both at the grassroots and in the institutions” (Fieldnotes, Madrid, October 2017). This transversal approach to organising became visible, for instance, in different aspects of how Transeuropa Festival was set up. For example, while working with local social centres like the occupied La Ingobernable, the festival also involved the more established culture centre Matadero or actors from Madrid’s municipal government. Similarly, while several workshops were open to the broader public and a variety of different perspectives could be heard, there were also the panels with more selected speakers from radical municipalities and national political parties like Podemos. Finally, the festival operated both on the cultural as well as on the political level. One of the topics in which this became most obvious was the theme of an alternative refugee politics which ran through different parts of the festival: being addressed from a cultural perspective through the exhibition “Re-build Refuge Europe”, which surrounded the stage at the

opening event, as well as through debating actual policy solutions for an alternative trans-municipal politics, involving some of the very actors that could begin to put these politics into practice in several cities across the continent while pushing for a radical shift in the European institutions. This approach seemed particularly topical within the contemporary political context, given the ongoing urgent need for alternatives to Fortress Europe (see Chapter 1).

Observations such as these, as well as Mark's comparison between Transeuropa Festival and the World Social Forums, pointing to their different understandings of what "being political" meant to these movements, suggested that alter-European activism's sense of agency operated on a somewhat different understanding of agency compared to the networking logic of alter-globalization activism. To be sure, as several scholars have shown, the alter-globalization movement was itself not an exclusively autonomous actor, given the presence of more established organisations such as trade unions and NGOs, and, indeed, political parties such as the Brazilian Workers Party, the presence of which has caused ongoing tensions at the World Social Forums and other events (see, for instance, de Sousa Santos, 2006; Pleyers, 2010; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Yet, compared to the strong autonomous and "anarchist currents" (Day, 2005) in the alter-globalization movements, alter-European activists seem much less sceptical about the possibilities of engaging radical institutional actors. It is with regards to questions of norms and forms (Juris, 2008a), then, that the networking logic did not seem to provide enough insights to fully grasp the particular understanding of agency that underpins alter-European activism.

To conclude, as I have shown in this section, digital networks and other media technologies undoubtedly played an important role for the activism at stake in this thesis. Thus, in Chapter 6, I will return to the question of how (digital) activist media contribute to the particular logic according to which alter-European activist networks act across national borders. Yet, while the networking logic might still be useful to describe *how* alter-European activists organise, it seems less useful to explain, for instance, *why* they deliberately involve specific (for instance institutional) actors. In order to begin to grasp their particular logic of action, I will finally turn to more recent scholarly literature on transnational mobilisations and some of the latest discussions within social movement scholarship, which this thesis seeks to contribute to. In order to contextualise these debates, I need first of all introduce another collective actor that followed the alter-

globalization movement and emerged in the aftermath of the global financial crisis: the movements of the squares.

3.4. After the network, the question of agency

3.4.1. Emerging themes in the scholarship of recent transnational movements

The year 2008, in which the Lehman Brothers Bank declared bankruptcy, marked the beginning of a global financial crisis that was unprecedented in scale. As Fenton writes, “global capitalism cracked. A financial crash exposed the abuses of the banks and financial agencies, which had worked economic systems to their advantage until those systems fractured under the weight of debt they had created” (2016a, p.1; see also Flesher Fominaya, 2014). However, Fenton also points to the more hopeful, progressive response that emerged in the aftermath of the crisis: “the last decade has also been marked by public manifestations of dissent” (2016a, p.1).

Indeed, the year after the Lehman Brothers’ bankruptcy saw people take to the streets in Iceland, where three major national banks collapsed, in what is called the Saucepan Revolution (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, p.148). In the following year, a period that is now known as the “Arab Spring” or the “Arab Uprising” began with protests in Tunisia in 2010 and Egypt in 2011, where Tahrir Square was famously occupied to protest president Mubarak, and later spread to other countries including Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Bahrain (Castells, 2012). Next, on May 15th 2011, a group of protesters named “Indignados” or “15-M” occupied central squares in Madrid, Barcelona and more than 50 other squares across the country to protest austerity and demand “real democracy” (Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2014, 2020a, b). Greece followed after Spain only a month later, with protesters calling themselves “*aganaktismenoi*” (outraged) and occupying Athens’ Syntagma Square from June 2011 (Douzinas, 2013, 2017). Later in the same year, Occupy Wall Street’s call to take to the streets against global finance capital was echoed by protesters in London and other places across the globe (Halvorsen, 2012, 2015; Taussig, 2013; Matthews, 2018, 2019). One year later, it was a group of ecologists defending Istanbul’s green space against urban development plans which later expanded into a wider resistance movement against president Erdoğan’s autocratic government that drew millions to Taksim square throughout the summer of 2013

(Douzinas, 2014). In 2016, a precarious labour law had French *Nuit Debout* protesters occupy squares until late at night (Gerbaudo, 2017; Felicetti and della Porta 2018).

Despite their local and national differences, the aforementioned movements have been grouped together under one name: the “movements of the squares”, which Gerbaudo defines as “an array of protest movements that have emerged in different countries the world over, protesting against neoliberalism, extreme economic inequality, austerity policies, and lack of democracy” (2017, p.2). Throughout the 2010s, a great amount of scholars in the social and political sciences have written about how these movements might be characterised and understood (for instance Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Frenzel, Feigenbaum and McCurdy, 2014), including a variety of studies which had a particular focus on the Occupy movement (for instance Juris, 2012; Halvorsen, 2012, 2015; Taussig, 2013; Kavada, 2015; Dean, 2016; Matthews, 2018, 2019), bringing about new paradigms and metaphors by which their politics might be understood. Two of these emerging debates are particularly relevant to my own investigation of agency in alter-European activism: the foregrounding of the role of territory, and the foregrounding of questions of agency.

The first relevant theoretical move that occurred in the context of the movements of the squares I want to discuss, was the shift in attention from digital networks to the role played by physical gatherings, occupations and protests in public squares, such as Zuccotti Park in New York or the steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral in the case of Occupy London (Halvorsen, 2012; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Matthews, 2018). Recent scholarship demonstrated the importance of protest camps (Frenzel, Feigenbaum and McCurdy, 2014), the performative potential of bodies in public assemblies (Juris, 2008b; Butler, 2015) and the centrality of the occupied territory, for instance in the case of the Occupy movement (Halvorsen, 2012; Matthews, 2018). Scholars of respective phenomena consequently introduced new metaphors and concepts in order to make sense of the movements of the squares, including the notion of “aggregation” (Juris, 2012), “orchestration” (Gerbaudo, 2012) and “assembly” (Hardt and Negri, 2017). Drawing on the example of Occupy Boston, Juris argues that while the network paradigm served to understand the “new patterns of protest” in the alter-globalization movement, Occupy’s politics might better be understood via a “logic of aggregation”, which “involves the assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces” (2012, p.260). Juris argues that “rather than mobilizing “networks of networks” the use

of Twitter and Facebook within social movements tends to generate “crowds of individuals”” (p.267).

Similarly, pointing to the importance of occupations, Halvorsen holds that “the logic of the network may be insufficient to understanding the diverse spatial strategies of contemporary social movements” (2012, p.427). Drawing on ethnographic data conducted with Occupy London, Halvorsen finds that more central to Occupy’s sense of agency than the creation of global transactions, was the local occupation and the use of public space itself. While acknowledging that digital technologies have played a role in mobilising and gathering people in the squares, he holds that “Occupy has also highlighted the limits of the ‘facebook revolution’, and shown the need to be grounded in place” (p.431). Matthews makes a similar point around Occupy’s territorial politics, arguing that the camps often literally functioned as the “‘common ground’ of an often disparate movement” (2018, p.127). While Halvorsen concludes that this does not necessarily mean that the network has become entirely irrelevant as a spatial metaphor, he does hold that a respective critique “raises questions over the centrality of networked thinking to contemporary understandings of global movements” (2012, p.427). Hence, Halvorsen asks whether it might be necessary to find “another metaphor to provide the movement with newfound agency” (p.432). Such questions of place and scale continue to play an important role in how recent mobilisations, including alter-European activism, might be understood, albeit in a slightly different way. I will thus return to the question of territory and how alter-European activism operates across different spatial registers according to a nomadic logic in Chapter 6.

Besides discussing the importance of physical gatherings, scholarship of the movements of the squares has also continued to investigate the role of digital media in the context of these protests. To be sure, despite the growing interest in the role of public gathering, digital networks and new media technologies still played an important role in mobilising people to take to the squares. While mailing lists and Indymedia shaped the actions of the alter-globalization movement, emerging in the years after 2009, this next generation of protesters relied much more on social media and web 2.0 applications which had developed in the early 2000s (Juris, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2017). Indeed, the mobilisations of the Arab Spring have been dubbed by journalists as Facebook or Twitter Revolutions (as Gerbaudo, 2012, p.6 reminds us) and it might certainly be argued that “[s]ocial media have dramatically changed the way individuals and groups mobilize and organize for

collective action” (Milan, 2018, p.507). However, while some of the earlier debates on how movements were engaging with digital networks have been defined by a degree of techno-determinism and perhaps overemphasised the role of digital networks for social movements, as Barassi (2016) has shown, recent media scholarship has highlighted various issues that social movements have to negotiate in the age of social media (for instance Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Fenton 2011). As Fenton and Barassi write, “[i]n the social sciences, there is much disagreement on the political possibilities offered by social media” (2011, p.180).

One theme emerging in the context of such recent debates on social movement’s use of digital media that is particularly relevant to understanding agency in alter-European activist networks is the question how “the digital age challenges conventional understandings of political agency” (Kavada, 2016, p.8; see also Kaun, Kyriakidou and Uldam, 2016; Milan, 2018). Demonstrating how activists might be able to “appropriate social media data” for their own purposes, Milan suggests that “datafication may support users’ agency” (2018, p.519). Other scholars have instead highlighted the limitations of social media’s individualising tendencies. Fenton and Barassi, for instance, argue that “the logic of self-centered participation promoted by social media can represent a threat for political groups rather than an opportunity” (2011, p.183), thereby limiting their capacity as a collective actor. Fenton and Barassi conclude that social media “practices may be liberating for the user but not necessarily democratizing for society” (p.193). What such ongoing discussions illustrate then is that understanding the role played by digital media in social movement politics is crucial to understanding how progressive agency might be enacted in the digital age (see, for instance Isin and Ruppert, 2015; Kavada, 2016; Rustin, 2019).

There was something about this question how movements might exercise agency in the digital age that highly resonated with what I had observed in my own field of study. After a couple of years in the field, as I began to analyse and interpret some of the observations made in more depth, I began to see that the question of agency and how it might be exercised in the context of today’s border-crossing challenges was at the heart of alter-European activism. However, thinking back to the remarks made by alter-European activists such as Silvia and Antonio whom I interviewed at Transeuropa Festival, it also became clear that digital media were only one terrain of action. As Antonio pointed out, the role that can be played by political institutions and radical institutional actors must

equally be taken into consideration. Thus, there is one final dimension in recent mobilisations and social movement scholarship I want to introduce, namely, how agency might be exercised not only within but also *beyond* digital networks. Indeed, recent mobilisations have not only taken from the internet to the streets but from the streets to the institutions.

3.4.2. *From networks to institutions: the “democratic turn” and the question of agency*

Social movement scholarship commonly defines social movements along a line of distinction between institutional and non-institutional actors. Goodwin and Jasper broadly define a social movement as “a collective, organized, sustained, and noninstitutional challenge to authorities, power holders, or cultural beliefs and practices” (2015, p.4). As such, a social movement is different from instance of social protest, which Goodwin and Jasper argue “refers to the act of challenging, resisting, or making demands upon authorities, powerholders, and/or cultural beliefs and practices by some individual or group” (p.3). Della Porta and Diani (1999) similarly stress the aspect of frequent and sustained action. They understand social movements according to four central aspects “as (1) informal networks, based (2) on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about (3) conflictual issues, through (4) the frequent use of various forms of protest” (p.16). Both of these definitions, however, also clearly distinguish social movements from political parties. According to della Porta and Diani, the two approaches could be regarded as “two different systems of action” (p.19). For instance, della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter argue that “[w]hile parties or pressure groups have somewhat well-defined organizational boundaries, enrollment in a specific organization normally being ratified by a membership card, social movements are instead composed of loose, weakly linked networks of groups and individuals who feel part of a collective effort” (2006, p.20). Despite this commonly made distinction, however, the lines between movements and parties have often been rather blurry in practice. Della Porta and Diani give the examples of social democratic parties’ relationship with the long-standing labour movement and of the Green parties, which emerged out of the environmental movement (1999, p.18). Similarly, Escobar and Alvarez have shown that social movement politics in Latin America tend to be much less divided in terms of rigid distinctions between the cultural, the political and the everyday and thus “challenge our most entrenched ways of

understanding political practice and its relation to culture, economy, society, and nature” (1992, p.7; see also Van Cott, 2005). More recently, as already argued in the previous sections, mobilisations like alter-globalization movement were similarly made up of both autonomous actors and institutional actors such as trade union, labour organisation and party political actors such as the Brazilian Workers Party and respective tensions between autonomous and Institutional Left have been an ongoing struggle within the movement (Flesher Fominaya 2007, 2014; Pleyers, 2010).

While many more examples of the blurring line between movements and parties might be traced along the history of social movements, the emergence of new hybrid actors in the aftermath of the movements of the squares clearly presents social movement scholars with a series of new questions and an emerging field of research regarding the changing relationship between movements and parties. Indeed, the movements of the squares made space for new political actors to emerge from the streets. According to Gerbaudo, these included a variety of actors such as “the genesis of new political parties such as Podemos, the renewal of existing left-wing parties as with Syriza, and the propulsion of maverick politicians like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn into the limelight” (2017, p.23). Much can be learned from these mobilisations which have taken crucial aspects of the protests from the streets into the national institutions. In Spain, for instance, Podemos, which only took office in 2015 and soon found itself in a coalition government with the Spanish social democrats by 2019, arguably played an important role in channelling “protest movements in a direction that seeks to engage with existing institutions in order to transform them” (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016, p.70; see also Flesher Fominaya 2020a). In Greece, Syriza, the alliance of the radical left, which was founded in 2004, was able to take some of the demands into parliament when succeeding in national elections in 2015, as already discussed in Chapter 1 (see Douzinas, 2013 and 2017 for an in-depth discussion). On the local level, another actor that has emerged from the movements of the squares, which has received significantly less attention, namely the phenomenon of municipal movement parties. In Europe, one of its most prominent examples has been the city of Barcelona where radical housing activist-come-major Ada Colau first took office in 2015 as part of the formation *Barcelona En Comú*, as Gerbaudo (2017, 2019) only mentions briefly. Spain has been at the forefront of this movement of radical cities, including also Madrid and A Coruña, but similar examples can be found in Italy, France, Poland and all across and beyond Europe, as I will show later in this thesis (Chapter 7; see also *Barcelona En Comú*, 2019).

With the emergence of such new actors, recent social movement scholarship has turned to questions including how social movements were seeking to intervene into some of the most pressing political challenges in Europe, not only by making demands towards established institutions, but by radically challenging and claiming these institutions for themselves. As some of the actors involved here – such as the emerging network of municipal movement parties – seemed to play an important role in alter-European activism, it was this recent strand of social movement scholarship that only emerged throughout my ethnographic research project, in the years between 2016 and 2020, that seemed to speak most directly to some of the challenges and questions raised in the context of alter-European activism. I will review and engage with some of this emerging scholarship, most notably the idea of “movement parties” (della Porta et al., 2017) or “hybrid parties” (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, b), in more detail in the coming chapters. Flesher Fominaya speaks, in this context, of a “democratic turn” (2014, 2017, 2020a), that is, “the centrality of democratic regeneration and the reclaiming of political institutions for citizens” (2020a, p.25), a transition which she has outlined in detail for the case of the Spanish 15-M. While previous transnational mobilisations such as the alter-globalization movements and the movements of the squares have emerged alongside what Flesher Fominaya and Cox have described as “the “New Left” problematic – the experience of a mainly extra-institutional left movement culture in political contexts marked by the institutionalisation of a more moderate left” (2013, p.2; see also della Porta et al., 2017) – the “democratic turn” sees movements engaging with political institutions in ways that deserve further investigation. It is this emerging field of scholarship regarding where and how contemporary social movements in Europe seek to exercise agency that this thesis’ investigation of alter-European activism contributes to – albeit not from the perspective of a particular local or national case, but from a trans-European perspective. What, then, can alter-European activism tell us about how agency might be enacted in the contemporary moment?

3.4.3. Original contribution: understanding agency through alter-European activist networks

As mentioned above, the more time I spent in the field, the clearer it became to me that the question of how agency might be exercised in a world of border-crossing challenges

lay at the heart of the activism at stake in this thesis. Thus, if I wanted to understand alter-European activism, I needed to centre the question of how agency is enacted by the actors in this field. In other words, how exactly were alter-European activists seeking to contribute towards social change? The need to problematise precisely how social movements contribute to social change has already been highlighted by other scholars. For Fenton, for instance, it is clear that “we cannot avoid the fact that politics is about power” (2016b, p.353). In her analysis, media and communications scholarship of social movements and radical politics has too often merely “glossed over” the given social and political contexts in which radical politics operate and thus “forgotten about the politics itself” (p.347). Fenton (2011) sees this question of power as one of the central challenges for transnational social movements today. On the one hand, she argues, the focus on multiplicity and autonomy in the networked politics of some contemporary social movements might indeed hold the potential for a radically plural democracy made of a multiplicity of different subject positions. On the other hand, both multiplicity and autonomy hold the risk of actually preventing substantive change if they do not consider the political architectures which predate the digital networks, in which much of contemporary activism plays out. Taking the importance of context and existing political architectures into consideration, how, then, are social movements seeking to exercise agency in the contemporary moment?

As I have begun to show in this chapter, an investigation of alter-European activism has much to contribute to this question how agency might be understood in the 21st century. Although I will discuss the role of alternative media practices in Chapter 6 in more detail, this thesis contributes to the scholarship of transnational movement networks not by prioritising their use of digital media practices or networking technologies, but by centring the question of agency, as it is enacted in alter-European activism. While several social movement and media and communications scholars have already begun to demonstrate the limitations of the network paradigm (for instance Halvorsen, 2012; Barassi, 2016) and pointed to the need to foreground the idea of agency (for instance Kaun, Kyriakidou and Uldam, 2016; Kavada, 2016; Milan, 2018), the concept of agency remains somewhat under-theorised, or “glossed over” as Fenton’s (2016b, p.347) previous quote suggested, not least with regards to how contemporary social movements including alter-European activists engage with democratic institutions. This “democratic turn” (Flesher Fominaya, 2014, 2017, 2020a) demands that social movement scholars pay particular attention to precisely how recent social movements understand social change

to take place and calls for a more in-dept conceptualisation of different forms of agency. The thesis thus contributes to emerging strands of social movement scholarship with a particular interest in how movements and parties overlap by investigating how alter-European activists seek to enact agency in the contemporary moment.

Importantly, while recent scholarship has focussed on how movement parties in particular national contexts might be understood (for instance della Porta et al., 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, b), my own study contributes to this emerging strand of scholarship by focussing not on how agency might be exercised at the level of the nation-state, but investigates agency “below and beyond the nation-state”, as European Alternatives frequently put it. My central question of how agency is enacted in alter-European activism thus secondly speaks to an ongoing question that has occupied social movement scholars from the times of the alter-globalization movement until today, that is, how agency might be exercised across national borders? In Pleyer’s words:

“How to become an actor in this global age? How to have an impact on the world’s affairs when even elected politicians are bypassed by decisions taken by transnational companies or by experts at international institutions?” (2010, p.12)

It is precisely because this “lack of citizenship” remains until today in the context of “the onslaught of financial markets, the weakening of the nation-state in a globalised era, and the crisis of mass membership organisations” (Gerbaudo, 2017, p.8; see also Flesher Fominaya, 2014), that the question how alternative actors might seek ways of enacting agency beyond borders remains relevant and requires further investigation. For Gerbaudo, it is “the inability of established Left parties and civil society organisations – trade unions, co-operatives, associations – to give voice and weight to popular demands” in times of neoliberal globalization that has, amongst other factors, “created the space for new counter-hegemonic actors to arise on the back of broad social alliances that were previously inconceivable” (2017, p.16).

While alter-European activists are not the first to organise transnationally, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, investigating movements on a *trans-European level* can contribute valuable insights to this question, not least, because an institutional infrastructure – however much alter-European activists might disagree with its current make up and politics – already exists in the form of EU institutions. Returning to a statement made in the print publication distributed at Transeuropa Festival in 2017, which

I quoted in Chapter 1, alter-European activists see “[p]recisely the crisis of the EU and of global governance”, as an opportunity “to deeply restructure our capacity to do politics beyond borders” (European Alternatives, 2017c, p. 29). As I have already indicated in the first three chapters of this thesis, however, rather than primarily taking place in or with reference to EU institutions, alter-European activism’s relationship with institutional political actors takes us to the role played by radical municipal actors, which have received less scholarly attention compared to nation-wide movement parties such as Podemos and Syriza. I will return to the particular question of alter-European activists’ relationship with political institutions in Chapter 7 in more detail.

To conclude, the thesis contributes to two emerging strands of social movement scholarship. Firstly, by centring the question of agency and demonstrating how it is enacted and understood in the context of alter-European activism, this thesis contributes to the ongoing debate regarding how contemporary transnational movements seek to exercise a sense of agency. Secondly, the thesis contributes to an emerging discussion on the changing relationship between movements and parties. Investigating the level of trans-European activism does not, however, straightforwardly imply a centrality of EU institutions, but, as I will show, also leads to the importance of municipal movement parties for re-imagining agency beyond the borders of nation-states. Before I can further discuss how alter-European activist networks employ different media practices to move across geographical boundaries (Chapter 6) and organise across the lines commonly drawn between grassroots and institutional activism (Chapter 7), that is how a sense of *agency beyond borders* is exercised in alter-European activism, it is this question of how alter-European actors relate to “Europe” that I have to address first and will turn to in the next chapter.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how this thesis builds on and contributes to recent scholarship of transnational social movements. Rather than offering a comprehensive overview of transnational movement scholarship, however, I focussed on issues that are particularly relevant to making sense of my specific context of alter-European activism, namely the role played by globalization, digital media and social movements’ networking practices,

as well as emerging discussions on the nature of agency in the digital age and the changing relationship between movements and parties in recent years.

The chapter ultimately argued that such recent scholarship and different mobilisations taking place throughout the 2010s, including alter-European activism, call for a shift in focus from the network paradigm to the question of agency in times of border-crossing challenges. As I demonstrated in this chapter, such a shift in focus requires my study of alter-European activism to pay particular attention not only to activists' media practices (Chapter 6), but also to how social movements engage with democratic institutions (Chapter 7). The thesis thus ultimately contributes in particular to emerging discussions on how movements negotiate the relationship between the grassroots and the institutions and how they seek to build agency by bringing together different actors across geographical as well as institutional borders.

I will further conceptualise how agency is enacted and understood by alter-European activists in the second part of this thesis. First, however, I want to introduce in more detail some of the key *actors* in alter-European activist networks. Who are the people who make up this movement that works towards another Europe from below? What drives them to participate in this kind of activism in particular? Finally, what role does the idea of "Europe" play in constituting this movement as a collective actor? These are some of the questions I will tackle in the following chapter.

4. “Europe for the many”: alter-European actors and the question of collective (European) identity

4.1. Introduction: Europe beyond the Brexit binary

When I started working on this research project in 2016, the tentative title for this thesis was “Pro-European activism in times of crisis”. In the months leading up to UK’s EU referendum, this title seemed appropriate and topical. At the time – as mentioned in Chapter 1 – I volunteered with a UK-based progressive “Remain” campaign group, whose message, in essence, was “remain and reform”. Activists in this group were often closely related to the progressive wing of the Labour party, Momentum, the Green Party or trade unions, as well as other social movements and organisations like Global Justice Now. While acknowledging that the EU was far from perfect, these activists started from the position that both Britain *and* the EU needed to change. Moreover, they saw a number of fundamental rights and benefits including workers’ rights, freedom of movement, environmental standards and science and research funding – currently granted by EU membership – at risk under a Tory government in power. The point to be made was that *more* agency for migrants, minorities and the broader population in Britain and Europe was needed, not less. Gradually, I began to realise that in a similar way to how the term “*anti*-globalization” movement did not do justice to the politics of the *alter*-globalization movement (as discussed in the previous chapter), the term “pro-European” in my tentative thesis title did not quite serve to neatly accommodate – and, in fact, somewhat misrepresented – the transnational movement at stake here. Who, then, are the actors in this movement and how might their relationship to Europe be understood?

Having already outlined the political context which alter-European activism struggle against (Chapter 1), my engaged methodological approach to researching this particular movement (Chapter 2) and the relevant scholarly discussions within social movement literature to which this thesis ultimately contributes (Chapter 3), the aim of this chapter is to finally introduce some of the actors that make up alter-European activist networks in more depth. The chapter thus investigates how alter-European activist networks constitute themselves as a collective actor with a sense of agency, and how “Europe” features in this process of collective identity formation. My argument will evolve in three steps. First, I will situate alter-European activism within a wider history of how social movements have related to “Europe” in recent decades. Here, I will argue that the Brexit

binary of being “for” or “against”, “in” or “out” of Europe does not hold, and that EU-Europe, in fact, appears to be rather absent from the movement’s actions and motivations. In the second step, I will introduce six different types of actors from the network, the perspectives they offer in relation to Europe as well as their motivations for participating in alter-European activism. These include the perspectives of (1) migrant citizens, (2) feminists, (3) greens and socialists, (4) Afro-Europeans and de-colonial activists, (5) Central and Eastern Europeans, and (6) Mediterranean activists. Finally, I will discuss precisely how this diverse set of activists constitutes itself as a collective actor.

Through the negotiation of numerous tensions and the development of shared campaigns, the chapter argues that what begins to emerge here is a sense of transversal agency, which arises from the connections made between different struggles, rather than a shared essence or predefined understanding of “Europe”. I will begin to illustrate this argument with a short anecdote during which this existence of “multiple Europes” was particularly visible: at the Rome Treaties’ 60th anniversary protests in March 2017.

4.2. Social movements and Europe: a complicated relationship

4.2.1. *Multiple Europes*

The two streams of protesters approach the Colosseum from opposite directions. As they begin to merge in the spare shadow of Mediterranean pine trees standing nearby, it becomes obvious why they have not been marching together all along (Figure 6). There are several groups of protesters out today, I am told by one of the local members of European Alternatives who has contributed to organising this gathering on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. In opposition to nationalist far-right anti-European groups, who also take to the street on that day, we will take part in one of the two rather “pro-European” streams. These two streams are planned to merge in the end, although – literally and figuratively – starting from different directions, taking different marching routes. Strikingly, this difference between the two streams visibly manifests itself in a clash of colours.



Figure 6: Protesters gathering near the Colosseum, Rome, March 2017; author's photo

On one side, there is our “progressive” bloc – a procession of red, white, rainbow and green colours (Figure 7) – which is made up of a number of different groups and organisations: left-wing parties, local non-profit organisations, members of the European Green Party, members of the “Democracy in Europe Movement” DIEM25, protesters carrying Syriza flags, Italian anti-fascist movements, Kurdish solidarity groups and a group of dressed-up drummers, besides European Alternatives members and staff who have arrived from Rome, Paris, Berlin, London, Warsaw, Bologna, Gothenburg and elsewhere. These protesters followed a call organised by a number of local organisations under the title *La Nostra Europa: Unita, Democratica, Solidale* (“Our Europe: United, Democratic, Solidarity”), coming together:

“to mark the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome in the full knowledge that we must change Europe, to stop it from falling apart, to avoid a social and environmental catastrophe and to keep authoritarianism at bay... Today we stand at a crossroads and must choose: between saving human lives and saving banking and finance; between fully guaranteeing and gradually eroding human rights; between peaceful coexistence and war; between democracy and dictatorship. Mistrust, fear and social insecurity are increasing, while racism, reactionary nationalism, walls, borders, and barbed wire are on the rise.” (European Alternatives, 2017b, online)



Figure 7: “Progressive” protesters at 60th Anniversary marches, Rome, March 2017; author’s photo

On the other side, there is the blue and yellow bloc of protesters, excessively decorated with stars and European flags. While we march for a “Europe for *all*”, they simply “March for *Europe*”, as the banners at the front of each procession summarise their respective core claims. This stream of protesters, which includes more established actors such as different MEPs and organisations like the Young European Federalists, expresses an explicitly pro-EU sentiment not only through their colours and flags, but also on the signs they carry (Figure 8): “All EU needs is love”, “I heart EU” and “European Federation is European Revolution”.



Figure 8: “Established” protesters at 60th anniversary marches, Rome, March 2017; author’s photo

This abundant celebration of the terms “Europe” and “EU” in their appearance is striking, compared to the “Europe for all” marchers’ more critical expressions. Here was a mode of “flagging” (Billig, 1995, p.5), in which the symbolic representation of Europe through EU flags and other “totem-like symbols” became “a kind of fetish” meant to have a community-creating function (Sassatelli, 2002, p.446). Importantly, however, yellow and blue – it appeared in this context – represented the colours of those who wanted to “protect Europe”, rather than change it. That is, yellow and blue were the colours of the status quo. Despite both marches merging towards the end and some individual people mingling and moving across and between the two, what was striking to me was the near absence of yellow and blue, that is, the colours of EU flags and banners in our part of the protest. (Fieldnotes, Rome, March 2017)

4.2.2. Ambiguous Europe

In order to better understand the conflicting views of EU-Europe amongst the protesters in Rome, which the previous vignette visually illustrated, it is important to embed

contemporary alter-European activism into a wider history of social movements' relationship with the EU and the idea of Europe. As Flesher Fominaya and Cox show in their edited collection *Understanding European Movements* (2013), social movements played a central role in the development of European societies, social theory and, more generally, in "the making and remaking of Europe" (p.9). Yet, despite this rich movement history in Europe, many social movements through the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century have arguably had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the idea of Europe and its institutional equivalent. For example, Lahusen argues that in its early decades, European integration was advanced "largely without the participation of social movements" and was instead "spearheaded by political and economic elites" (2004, p.55). Indeed, the question of European integration in the aftermath of World War II received a low amount of public objection more generally, giving it a sense of what has come to be known as "permissive consensus" (Lahusen, 2004; della Porta and Caiani, 2009). Besides the recent experience of fascism, another reason why this consensus was hardly challenged - or at least not publicly, as della Porta and Caiani (2009) argue - is the fact that European integration has long been treated as a matter of diplomatic and international relations. Due to its high levels of political and economic technicality, its details received little public attention, which "contributed to depoliticising the theme of Europeanization" (p.20). The overt presence of established political actors in these debates is also visible in the scholarship of European politics, which has often focussed on the institutional processes of European integration rather than the role of civil society or grassroots organisations in European politics throughout much of the twentieth century (della Porta and Caiani, 2009).

Indeed, as Lahusen (2004) argues, amongst the first interest groups in Brussels at the time of the Rome and Paris Treaties were primarily formations such as consumer organisations or trade unions. This only began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when social movement organisations (amongst them in particular human rights, environmental and social justice groups) joined as part of a second wave "rush towards Brussels" (p.56) and established themselves as regular EU-lobbyists since. The 1980s and 1990s also saw various transnational mobilisations in Europe, including, for instance, alliances made between "French ATTAC and Brazilian movement organizations, or between Italian and Spanish radicals and the Zapatistas", which Flesher Fominaya and Cox see as "central to the construction of the "alter-globalization movement"" (2013, p.1). Other examples of transnational collaborations across Europe can be found in the peace movement's efforts

to transgress the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall in bringing together activists from Eastern and Western European countries in the 1980s (Kaldor, 2003), in the emergence of pan-European marches, linking up protesters from different European countries to address unemployment on a European level in the 1990s (della Porta and Caiani, 2009), or the transnational mobilisations of precarious workers in the early 2000s (Mattoni, 2012).

Another important development for understanding the relationship between social movements and the idea of Europe in the 1990s is the Treaty of Maastricht taking effect in 1993. As Sassatelli (2002) points out, with the Maastricht Treaty, the adjective “economic” fell away and thus left the institutions to be “just” European. Both Shore and Sassatelli consider the EU’s investment in cultural programmes following the Treaty as an attempt to inject a sense of European consciousness into the public perception of Europe. Both scholars also crucially point out that culture here is seen to play an important role not just in establishing a shared feeling of European identity, but also in overcoming the institutions democratic shortcomings and in retrospectively legitimising the European project politically as well. This was important as, although the Treaty marks more than “forty years of institutionalised attempts to ‘build Europe’”, Shore suggests that political integration seemed to “have had little impact at the level of popular consciousness” (2000, p.224). While Shore admits that Europe is much more “felt” in people’s everyday lives today, be it through cultural exchange programmes like Erasmus, the abolishment of internal border controls through the Schengen Agreement taking effect in 1995, or the introduction of a common currency in many countries at the turn of the century, he remains sceptical of the power of the EU’s “repertoire of ‘post-national’ symbols”, which he regards as “pale imitations of nationalistic iconography”, to establish a real ‘European public’ (2000, p.222). Indeed, the turn of the century arguably marks the end of the “permissive consensus” towards European integration, which was replaced instead by a rising sense of Euro-scepticism, illustrated not least in the rejection of a European Constitution in French and Dutch referenda in 2005 (see della Porta and Caiani, 2009, p.4) as well as in movements’ continuously sceptical relationship towards “Europe”.

One period of mobilisations during which this ambiguous relationship with Europe became particularly evident occurred in the early 2000s during the European Social Forums. Despite the rich history of transnational mobilisations in Europe, della Porta and Caiani argue that it is only after the turn of the century that “the involvement of civil

society and social movement organizations in the debates on European integration” properly develops as a “new trend” (2009, p.4). This development took place in the context of the counter-summits and forums emerging in Europe in the wider context of the alter-globalization movement (Chapter 3), which worked towards “alternative proposals for a European level of governance” (p.5). While precursors to these movements had already existed for some time (Flesher Fominaya and Cox, 2013), della Porta and Caiani attest to a somewhat unprecedented sense of “Europeanization from below” (p.5) to these mobilisations. One of the striking findings of their study, however, is that these movements cannot be said to categorically be “pro-European”. Rather, discussing the degree of Euro-scepticism and Euro-criticism in the movement, della Porta and Caiani conclude that “[s]ocial movement attention to the EU does not automatically translate into either approval or disapproval, as support for Europe emerges as a polymorphous term that refers not only to different processes, but also to different ‘Europes’” (pp.167-168). Following the alter-globalisation movement’s World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001 and the movement’s broader critique of neoliberalism and globalization, della Porta and Caiani argue that a key role of the European Social Forums during their meetings in Florence, Paris, London and Athens between 2002 and 2006 was to discuss precisely the *limits* of Europeanisation and call for “social justice and ‘democracy from below’” (p.134).

4.2.3. *Absent Europe*

More than an ambiguous or sceptical relationship with the idea of Europe, some scholars suggest that Europe has even become somewhat absent in more recent mobilisations. Kaldor and Selchow’s study of *Subterranean Politics In Europe* (2015) highlights this issue with regards to the pan-European anti-austerity mobilisations as well as some of the movements of the squares (see Chapter 3) in the beginning of the 2010s. Here, Pianta and Gerbaudo argue, many of the anti-austerity protesters saw “Europe” as the “culprit” (2015, p.31) rather than as a possible space to create viable alternatives to austerity and neoliberalism, and thus abstained from addressing institutions on that level, mobilising instead primarily in a national context. Pianta and Gerbaudo further found that “the lack of interest for Europe as a political space” derives from activists’ “scepticism towards the possibility of turning the European project towards progressive and equitable ends” (p.32). In those movements, the notion of “Europe” typically featured as part of the

problem rather than the solution (Kaldor and Selchow, 2015). As Deel and Murray-Leach observed as part of the same study in their investigation of London-based mobilisations including Occupy, UK Uncut and the 2010 student protests, activists typically often took “Europe” to mean “EU”, while this “Europe-as-EU” was subsequently quickly criticised as “an agent of neo-liberalism.” (2015, p.191) Kaldor and Selchow, whose aim was to map “pro-European initiatives” amongst those movements, even had to change their research question after struggling to find pro-European initiatives that were organised primarily from the bottom-up, rather than by more established actors such as politicians, think tanks and NGOs. Indeed, Europe, here, is found to be either “absent”, “irrelevant” (Deel and Murray-Leach, 2015, p.196), or “invisible” (Kaldor and Selchow, 2015, p.2) in social movements’ politics.

Situating my aforementioned anecdote of the 60th anniversary protests in Rome into this wider context of how recent mobilisations have related to the idea of Europe, the absence of EU symbolism the aforementioned “progressive” protest stream begins to appear less surprising. Nevertheless, I remained struck by the fact that EU symbolism and even the idea of Europe itself continued to remain somewhat absent at various events. Another example was the “left bloc” at one of the People’s March protests in London in October 2018, which brought together different groups of the UK left, including members of the Greens and the Labour Party, trade unions and migrants’ rights groups, taking up space within a broader sea of first-time protesters and more established groups wearing self-knitted yellow starred blue berets and carrying EU flags marching to Whitehall. Here, within this left enclave, red placards, flags and smoke bombs produced colourful media coverage without the slightest hint of yellow and blue (see Figure 9). As I found out during one of the organising meetings in London, this effect was far from accidental. At that meeting, one of the activists explicitly reminded people, half-jokingly, to abstain from explicit modes of EU flagging: “Don’t bring too many EU flags”. Rather than Beethoven’s 9th symphony, by the end of the march, some of these protesters were singing *The Internationale*.



Figure 9: “Left bloc” protesters at People’s Vote March, London, October 2018; author’s photo

Finally, I also found Europe to be rather absent in many of the interviews I conducted. It was only when I transcribed one of my first interviews that I realised that the term “Europe” had not come up in forty-five minutes of conversation at all, although I explicitly asked interviewees about their political beliefs and their motivations for participating in respective activist networks. Instead, when I asked interviewees what had politicised them, they tended to talk about a number of issues: about how they demonstrated against the war in Iraq, about the 2010 student protests in the UK, about the Spanish Indignados or the World Social Forums, about climate change, about Trump, Brexit and the threat of a rising far-right, racism and xenophobia, or about their lived experiences in relation to feminist and LGBTQ+ issues. Unprompted, many of my interviewees did not mention “Europe” at all. I later added a note along the lines of “What does Europe mean to you?” to my list of questions and made sure to ask it at the end of future interviews, where the topic did not come up naturally. Where Europe did come up as a topic of conversation, some interviewees hesitantly related it to their personal experiences of having lived in different countries or talked about it in rather abstract terms, while others immediately encountered it with a straightforwardly critical stance. Étienne’s reaction was a typical example of the latter:

“You can easily label yourself as pro-European, but what does that fucking mean?... It makes no sense, because it doesn’t say what it works against or what it works for.” (Étienne, November 2017)

Given that all organisations and groups I collaborated with carried Europe in their name – albeit often paired with qualifying additions such as “transform”, “restart”, “another” or “alternatives” – Étienne’s remark suggested a more complex relationship that seemed worth investigating further.

Following on from my previous chapter on the importance of focussing on agency, I will subsequently apply Pleyers’ “agency centred perspective” (2015, p.200) to understanding alter-European activism, which Pleyers takes from the work of Touraine (for instance 1988), starting not from an assumed idea about European identity, but from the actors themselves. “An analytical outlook focussed on agency”, Pleyers suggests, “underlines that social movements and individual subjects are the actors of the transformation of society, notably through the way they contest and transform central cultural orientations” (2015, p.201). Indeed, as I will show, “progressive activists have a far less consensual opinion” than the mainstream media’s focus on “Europe as the primary space of action” or “the importance of the EU as a key actor” (p.201) might imply. Thus, in the next section, I will introduce six alter-European actors in more detail, discussing what motivates them to engage in alter-European activism and how – if at all – they relate to the idea of Europe.

4.3. Introducing alter-European actors

4.3.1. *Migrant citizens’ perspectives*¹³

Walking through the crowd of protesters, I spotted a woman who is wrapped in an EU flag, which barely protects her from the London drizzle. When I asked her why she has come out on this day of action, which began with a mass lobby in parliament and ended with a rally on Trafalgar Square to demonstrate for EU citizens’ rights in the context of

¹³ As part of my collaboration, a text in which I draw on fieldnotes and data from the event I describe in this section has been published on Political Critique (Scharenberg, 2017c).

Britain's ongoing divorce negotiations with the EU, Giulia, a UK resident from Italy, told me:

“...since I moved to the UK I feel more European... I guess the Brexit vote created new categories of people... [However, while] I do feel I'm European, I still think that the EU is a neoliberal institution, which needs to be challenged... Now, since the Brexit vote, I feel that voicing these opinions has become harder, because the EU is the institution that protects our rights... I am active in migrants' rights, so I know much needs to change within the EU. However, as a European and as someone living in the UK, I have become part of a group that has the EU flag in its logo. I join them and wear yellow and blue clothes and this is not something I would usually do.” (Giulia, Fieldnotes, London, 13th September 2017)

Giulia's ambiguous feelings about her own outfit summarises well how many in the movement who participate in alter-European activism due to an interest in or lived experiences of issues related to migration feel about Europe. On the one hand, Fortress Europe or the idea of European citizenship is seen as the problem in the sense that it primarily grants freedom of movement rights to EU nationals, thereby excluding non-EU citizens and “irregular migrants” (McNevin, 2011). Others highlight how EU citizenship rights can be used to protect minorities, while holding at least the potential to be more inclusive than citizenship that is tied to the nation-state, due to its supranational constitution (for instance, Braidotti, 2015).

Moreover, within this already ambiguous relationship, different migrants' experiences vary drastically, even between those who hold European citizenship. Two other protesters I meet on that day explain why:

“Feeling European depends on the part of Europe you are from. I'm not sure everyone [here] identifies as such. As a Romanian my experience was different to my German or French colleagues. I definitely felt like a migrant.” (Romanian protester, Fieldnotes, London, 13th September 2017)

“This is just the start of an erosion of rights, EU migrants are the target today, other migrants have been before and will be again in the future... Some of the groups that you don't see represented when you talk about Brexit and the impact on them are the Roma, disabled, people who won't be able to proof they've exercised treaty rights... Sexworkers, who are also working, but not in a legal industry... EU Nationals from a black and minority ethnic backgrounds, who have left EU countries because of the racism and discrimination they faced... These are

people that are all still missing from these discussions.” (British migrants’ rights activist, Fieldnotes, London, 13th September 2017)

While it is important to highlight such differences that become visible in this context, Brexit also created an opportunity for campaigns that build alliances across different sets of actors. One campaign that arose in this context, called “Let Us Vote”, provides a good example of how activists were not only fighting for rights to be *defended*, but how a sense of agency might be *expanded* to all mobile subjects in this context. Supported by a coalition of alter-European and migrants’ rights groups in the UK and on the European continent, including Another Europe Is Possible which is a member organisation of European Alternatives, the campaign demanded the right for all UK residents, regardless of which country they are from, to vote in future elections and referenda. This demand arose in the aftermath of the UK’s EU referendum, in which millions of mobile EU and UK citizens, who are some of the people most affected by this decision, did not have the right to vote. In other words, they lacked agency to decide over their future lives in the UK and on the European continent. More than merely addressing this issue, however, the campaign raised broader issues regarding the question what happens to voting rights in the case of migration. Thus, importantly, the campaign does not perpetuate or set up hierarchies between migrants and British citizens abroad, or between different groups of migrants within the UK, but demands the right to vote for *all* residents in the UK, regardless of their nationality, thus granting rights and political agency based on residency rather than nationality.

Although the “mass lobby” and the “Let Us Vote” campaign are specific to the particular context in the UK, these actions illustrate how issues related to migration often play a crucial role in alter-European activism. This is not only because the paths of many alter-European activists I met throughout my time in the field have been shaped by some kind of migratory experience, either because they have family from or in different countries, or because they have resided in different countries themselves. George – a long-standing European Alternatives spokesperson from the UK whom I met again at the mass lobby in London where he was invited to speak – has experienced both, having family who migrated from Italy and now living abroad himself. Besides sharing his own migration story, however, when he took the stage to give a speech at the mass lobby, he highlighted why issues related to migration matter more widely in the context of alter-European activists:

“What is happening today is not just about three million [EU citizens residing in the UK]... If we allow the government to take away these rights, we are undermining everybody’s rights to citizenship.” (George, Fieldnotes, London, 13th September 2017)

What George pointed to in his speech is that, in the context of Brexit, it is not only EU citizens residing in the UK who are at risk of losing citizenship rights. Brexit also puts all British citizens, whether they migrate or not, at risk of losing rights tied to EU citizenship. For activists like George, such contemporary issues related to migration thus raise broader questions around the nature of citizenship today. I will return to such questions regarding the potential of citizenship as a route to agency beyond borders in the next chapter.

4.3.2. Feminist perspectives

Maria, a Spanish activist in her mid-twenties, was one of the first people I interviewed. We met in her birth town of Madrid during the preparations of Transeuropa Festival in October 2017. After I asked her why she got involved with European Alternatives, Maria explained to me that it is in feminism where her politics are rooted. Having grown sensitive to respective issues while growing up with a single mother in an all-female household has influenced her activism from a young age:

“I’ve always been doing activism or voluntary service... like helping homeless people. I was [also] helping the kids of a mother who was suffering domestic violence with homework.” (Maria, October 2017)

Other activists who explicitly identified as feminists talked about similar experiences of early politicisation through volunteering experiences or family members.

“I think I always had a sensitivity, because of my family upbringing. My family are quite political, my mum is a feminist... then there was a feminist collective in my Uni that became my current group of comrades and friends and sisters – for more than ten years now. (Silvia, December 2017)

“My first memory of feeling political was as a girls scout as a kid..., [when] deciding our school should have recycling programme... [My parents] did a lot of volunteer work but I don’t think they would have framed it as activism or even as

being political. To me, as an adult, it *is* a political act.” (Alexandria, November 2018)

Despite these references to rather personal experiences, feminist activists in the movement whom I interviewed also repeatedly linked their own activism to other struggles, pointing to how different issues intersect:

“[I like] this idea that what’s happening in feminist activism and migration activism feeds each other, it’s the same fights. What I’ve done on women’s rights is not separate from the migration side of my activism, it’s all linked.” (Alexandria, November 2018)

“There are so many issues that I care passionately about. In my spare time I work on housing and domestic violence. I don’t think one issue really grabbed me it was more about thinking what was happening around me. I actually think that all these things are interlinking.” (Audrey, December 2018)

“My main interest kept being feminist organising, with the years with a queer lens... My politics – maybe not that successfully – is to try and see the way in which differences of oppressions intersect, that is what intersectional organising is about.” (Silvia, December 2017)

“if we take down all our problems on this planet, it’s really related to patriarchy. What about patriarchy in the form of the priest, in the form of the imam, in the form of your father, in the form of no rights, in the form of social injustice, in the form of the military dictator, in the form of Thatcher? It’s patriarchy.” (Habibah, August 2019)

Maria’s story embodies many of these different angles. At Transeuropa Festival in Madrid, she explained that she always “wanted to work beyond borders” and told me about how this interest had taken her from Madrid, where she grew up and witnessed the uprising of the Indignados taking to the streets and occupying Plaza del Sol in 2011, as well as to Chicago and Istanbul, where she went as part of an Erasmus programme because she wanted to find out more about the intersections between Islam and feminism in the context of her interest in gender studies. Thus, when I asked her exactly why she got engaged in a transnational organisation like European Alternatives, she drew different aspects together, explaining that, for her, a sense of agency can only be achieved across struggles and across borders:

“It was great to find an organisation like European Alternatives that was working on many different issues that I care about... It’s impossible to tackle the challenges that we have now from the national level... capitalism is doing that and it’s doing great, so we just need to find the same way of collaborating for the right cause beyond borders... If I have kids one day, I want them to know what is going on in the US, in South Africa, Ukraine, because there is no way back to that. We are so connected now, how can we be active citizens without surpassing the nation-state? It’s impossible.” (Maria, October 2017)

The sense of agency proclaimed by Maria and other feminist activists thus ranges from lived experiences to a wider critique of capitalism that is at once personal, intersectional and transnational. In other words, hers and others’ sense of agency here is not dissimilar from the idea of a “Feminism for the 99%” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019), which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter.

4.3.3. Green and socialist perspectives

Mark and I agreed to meet in a café near London’s Regents Street for the interview in December 2018 as this was where we wanted to join a Brexit related anti-Tory march afterwards. In these last few year since the referendum, Mark has been working tirelessly with others, making the left case for “Remain”, that is, to argue why it was necessary, in this view, to “remain and reform” the EU to address a series of social and environmental issues from the perspective of the radical left. Indeed, Mark has been campaigning for some of these issues for years, as he tells me with reference to his experience of the anti-Iraq war protests in 2003 and the alter-globalization mobilisations:

“That was a period where you had a lot of initiatives, movements that were challenging neoliberalism in the Global South, injustices in international trade treaties and all of that kind of stuff... We did various different mobilisations there around a continuation of the anti-capitalism movement, so the European Social Forum was very important, that took place in London in 2004... The interesting comparison with today is that it was all extra parliamentary social movement stuff and the social movements were very big... but they didn’t have any impact on parliamentary politics... That was its limitation... you go to this great conference and you hear a lot of interesting ideas, but what is the outcome?” (Mark, December 2018)

Antonio, who participated in the European Social Forum in Genoa and who made the remark that “you can be in power without having the power to actually change things”, when I interviewed him at Transeuropa Festival in Madrid, raised a similar point with regard to the political limitations of the alter-globalization movement and “*The question of efficaciousness*” (de Sousa Santos, 2006, p.184, original emphasis):

“it’s not enough to have a talking shop. The only way that talk can not only influence policy by reaching the levels of power but also become a much wider conversation...is by competing for political power. In order to foster a space for debate you need to give that space a space of potentiality.” (Antonio, October 2017)

While Mark’s de facto campaigning efforts are directed more towards British MPs and the national political sphere, other activists like Antonio see leverage building alliances across borders or influencing European institutions. Fabio, who is part of a pan-European mobilisation that campaigned and ran in the 2019 European elections around a “Green New Deal for Europe” (Klein, 2019; GNDE, 2019), which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, focusses his efforts on building alliances between political actors from different countries:

“I interpreted my role in trying to connect the struggle of the Italian left and the struggle of the British left, trying to coordinate actions... We were in touch with the Labour assembly against austerity, we had a number of meetings with Labour people and people from Syriza, Podemos, the Italian left, the French socialist party and a few others.” (Fabio, December 2018)

Despite these slightly different approaches, both Mark and Fabio agree – with references to how their politics are different from those of the alter-globalization movement – that Europe can be a space for leveraging agency when it comes to addressing the contemporary issues they are fighting for:

“[We need] a left that can interpret the time that we live in, to find the right solutions for the problems that we face with the crisis of global capitalism. Those problems apply to the whole of Europe... Because, at the end of the day, British capitalism is very well connected to capital at the international level... You cannot do that just with the British government, you need the European Commission...Both in terms of economic inequality or environmental issues... we need to try and find ways to coordinate the actions at the European level... It’s a very different season for movements compared to the one we had 30 years ago,

compared with the no global movement... [Of course] we need to fight for another world [but] I don't think we can fight for another world if we don't fight for another Europe." (Fabio, December 2018)

"Another world is possible is a great slogan from the World Social Forum... I am interested in problematising the notion of Europe... [because there is] a danger of being Euro-centric... On the other hand, Europe exists, and we should fight for another world in the institutions of Europe too... So yeah, "think global act regional", to change the old slogan." (Mark, December 2018)

In other words, in contrast to their experiences at the alter-globalization movement, while highly critical of European institutions, both Fabio and Mark see the possibility of intervening in Europe's established party political frameworks as an important register of exercising agency beyond borders – a discussion to which I will return in Chapters 6 and 7.

4.3.4. Afropean and de-colonial perspectives

Both James and I had come to Ukraine for the first time when we met at a funding event for European activists in Kiev in the spring of 2018. The two of us immediately bonded over a fascination with this city on the periphery of EU-Europe. Kiev's complicated position between Russia and Europe ran through its architecture, ranging from pompous orthodox churches to brutalist buildings, but was also made visible by the soldiers and tanks we passed on the streets, reminding of the conflict around Russia's annexation of Crimea. Whenever we could sneak away from the workshop, we spent our afternoons exploring this city on long walks, getting to know each other and other activists from different parts of Europe. On these walks, we talked about photography, Labour party politics, our local South London neighbourhood – where we both happened to live – and what it was like growing up in a tower block in a working class household – him in the North of England, I in the East of Germany. James and I decided that the particular connection we felt with this city were our own experiences of growing up in-between worlds. In my case, having been born in a country that does not exist anymore, it was the experience of growing up between East and West that I describe in the prologue of this thesis. James' sense of in-betweenness on the other hand resulted from being born to a white British mother and an African American father. James was happy to share his experiences and analysis of racism in Europe. In fact, his activism revolved precisely

around this – to connect and spread the perspectives of Afro-Europeans. On one walk near Maidan Nezalezhnosti, where a public exhibition reminded of the major pro-European and anti-corruption protests that had taken place here in 2014, James suddenly sprinted off. After briefly explaining something and handing a card to a passer-by, he came back over with a smile. Perhaps she wants to share her story, he explained to me. The young woman was the only other person of colour we met on that day walking the streets of Kiev, and throughout the three-day activist workshop.

For James, collecting, connecting and telling the stories of Afro-Europeans and Europeans of colour was a matter of claiming back agency, ownership and belonging, on a continent which historically constructed itself against non-white and non-Christian Others (Hall, 1991, 1992, 2002) and which holds “nonwhiteness as non-Europeanness” (El-Tayeb, 2011, p.xxiv). As Pitts writes in *Afropean*: “My skin colour had disguised my Europeanness; ‘European’ was still being used a synonym for ‘white’” (2019, p.3). Thus, the sharing of such stories can be understood as an expression of agency against the “colourblindness” that El-Tayeb attests Europe, a discourse which “claims not to “see” racialized difference” (2011, p.xxiv) and thereby externalises issues of racialisation, making it harder to confront Europe’s own brands of racism. Some activists I interviewed make a point of actively confronting this sense of “colourblindness” by calling out respective inequalities, or making connections to histories of colonial oppression:

“When you don’t see colour, your default option is white, when you don’t see gender, your default is cis gender male, so there has to be a conscious effort to work on that” (Silvia, December 2017)

“Have you seen that banner where someone wrote “CO²lonialism”, colonialism but using CO² in there? So it was really making the links of which places are going to be impacted by climate change and are going to struggle most because of the lasting impacts of things like colonialism and inequality.” (Audrey, December 2018)

Moreover, activists taking an explicitly anti-racist, anti-imperial or de-colonial stance, highlight the importance of not only drawing these conceptual links, but also organising respective actors across thematic and geographical borders. In a video interview recorded at Transeuropa Festival in Madrid in 2017, which collaborated with the local anti-racist collective “SOS Racismo”, a Danish Black Lives Matter activist speaks about how the festival has enabled her to set up a collaboration with other activists based in the UK:

“We wish... to make a connection... so that we can strengthen each other throughout Europe.” (European Alternatives, 2017d, online)

Habibah, an activist who organises workshops with different migrants and refugees, pursues a similar strategy:

“we have done one in Gothenburg where we brought... refugees and newcomers together with locals. And we also did one in Jordan, with Egyptians and Jordanians and Swedes... What is it like to be born and raised in Sweden by migrant parents, where you don’t look blond? What does it do to you? What does it create?” (Habibah, August 2019)

In the interview, she highlighted the sense of empowerment that she and others felt throughout these workshops – a sense of agency that arose from the connection of different actors across borders.

4.3.5. Postcommunist perspectives

Agnieszka and I met at a workshop that brought together activists from Central and Eastern Europe to tackle hate speech and far-right nationalism, which took place in the sunny hills of Florence in the summer of 2018. Our beautiful view on the Tuscan landscape was at odds with the darkening horizon in Italian politics. Italy’s new coalition government of the Cinque Stelle Movement and Matteo Salvini’s far-right Lega Nord had taken office only a few months before. One of Salvini’s first actions as Deputy Prime Minister was to close Italian harbours to the MS Aquarius, a boat with more than 600 refugees and migrants on board. Moreover, given Austria entering into a coalition government with the far-right FPÖ and increasingly hostile rhetoric against migrants creeping across the European continent, toxic nationalism was no longer merely an issue in PiS-governed Poland or Orban’s Hungary.

Despite these similarly grim conditions in different countries, however, one issue that several Central and Eastern European activists raised in interviews was a sense of ongoing belittlement by the West:

“activism here [in Western Europe] is definitely something much more different than what I experienced in the Balkans... [There is] this very unfortunate feeling, as an Eastern European, [of] having less value... It’s always this division between East and West, like the East is [full of] savages [laughs].” (Šejla, March 2018)

This comment reflects what Hall wrote about Eastern Europe as one of the West’s “internal others” (1992, p.188): the Eastern European region is “a boundary which has always given western Europe trouble... It stretches out to the Urals and beyond, into the dark unknown from which the barbarians descended” (1991, p.18). This culturally constructed opposition between the supposedly “irrational and barbarous East” and the supposedly “‘rational’ and civilised West” (p.18) has not only existed throughout European history, but troubles activists until today. It drives Eastern activists to claim a sense of emancipation and agency vis-à-vis the dominant Western forces within the political European project. Rather than merely copying the Western European model of democratic capitalism in the context of a postcommunist transition, many activists highlighted the need to recognise the particularities and challenges that arise in their specific contexts:

“the European Union is also often seen as a kind of dominator, manipulator, they tell us what to do. After the Soviets telling us what to do, people say “we don’t want that, we have enough of people from the outside”... What’s problematic is that Western countries don’t often see that or recognise that the EU is not an ultimate value for Central and Eastern Europe... referring to EU is not appealing to people.” (Agnieszka, June 2018)

“I was born in 1984... What we had there was a state capitalism, it had nothing to do with communism. But here communism or socialism is simply a word that you don’t use, it’s really a swearword here... The society has been de-politicised so much after the transition to capitalism... The younger generation has a little bit more of a critical analysis of what happened before 1989, but now the elites, the political elites, they call us Neo-Marxists... it’s anti-leftist.” (Ana, November 2018)

Thus, for Agnieszka and others, agency can be reclaimed through trans-European connections, including with Western countries, but in particular by making links across the region, allowing activists:

“to strategise and think what can we do in our region, which is so diverse in itself. And also maybe embrace Western narratives, but also be critical towards them...

For me, empowering and actually mobilising across the region has to be the starting point... So this is a challenge... European institutions are an important actor... but [they are also] perceived as “they will tell us what to do”. So, who will save us? We have to save ourselves!” (Agnieszka, June 2018)

The workshop in Florence where we met focussed in particular on connecting activists across Central and Eastern Europe was a good example of how this might work. At the same time, other activists highlighted how transnational connections can be made at a very local level. Karolina, another Polish activist, for instance, passionately talked to me about her hometown Łódź:

“My city is a post-industrial city... I call myself a local patriot because even though I am travelling quite a lot, working for this NGO, doing international work... I always end up in this city in Łódź... It was well known for textile industry, but it was the inter-cultural place where four cultures were mixing, Polish, Jewish, Russian and German... Somehow you feel this vibe, intercultural.” (Karolina, May 2019)

Recovering the intercultural history of her hometown in the streets of Łódź, Karolina’s story might be read as a way of taking back agency and ownership over the progressive potential that exists everywhere across Central and Eastern Europe, but that is not always visible through a Western European lens.

4.3.6. Mediterranean perspectives

After having met at several other activist gatherings before, Laura and I saw each other again in Palermo, where she works at a migrants’ rights organisation, at Transeuropa Festival in November 2019. Before coming to Palermo, Laura – who is fluent in Arabic, French, Italian and English – has lived in different places along the Mediterranean coastline, including in Tunis and Montpellier. When I asked her about her relationship with Europe, she hesitates.

“I live in Europe, but it’s hard for me to say I’m European, because I feel more Mediterranean... People in the Mediterranean have really something in common... When you say you’re from the Mediterranean, like, as an Italian, when I was in Tunisia, people would say that “ok, we are brothers, we are brother and sister, because you’re Italian”.” (Laura, May 2019)

Laura is not the only activist I spoke to who connected strongly with this idea of a Mediterranean rather than a European identity. This is not least due to the links Mediterranean activists draw between Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

“I often felt that I was Mediterranean rather than European, more in touch with Southern Europe and North Africa.” (Giulia, Fieldnotes, London, 13th September 2017)

“If you ask me what is my identity, I will tell you I’m an Arab, and then I’m a Mediterranean, Muslim... but Mediterranean is very important, a really really important part of my identity... I was in Greece this summer for a wedding, and when people ask me “where are you from?”, I say I’m from Alexandria. And they’re like “oh Alexandria!”. Because when you say you’re from Alexandria, you’re kind of saying “look! we have a lot in common!”” (Habibah, August 2019)

The concept of a Mediterranean identity is not only something perceived by activists but has also been discussed by various scholars and historians (for instance Chambers, 2008; Braudel cited in Mucem, 2017). Solera (2017) even understands the movements of the squares as a Mediterranean revolution, drawing parallels and connections between the so-called “Arab Spring” and the mobilisations in Greece, Spain and Turkey. There is something about the Mediterranean view that disrupts Western-centric and Islamophobic understandings of Europe that draw Europe’s Southern border along the lines of religion or culture, constructing the notion of “internal” or “external others” along the Mediterranean’s shorelines (Hall, 1992, p.188), as some activists point out. A Greek-British migrants’ rights activist who volunteered at the shores of Lesbos in 2015 observes that

“Greece was the basket case, the European screw up country. Media stories portrayed Greece as in chaos again. We never talked about Italy, Malta, Ceuta, Melilla, the Spanish enclaved in Africa.” (Sophia, November 2018)

Of course, the Mediterranean is also colonial space (see Chambers, 2008) as well as a space of ongoing cultural overlapping and exchange, even if, as one activist points out, contemporary xenophobic nationalists would like to forget about this:

“There was a language that was used in the ports in the Mediterranean. It’s called Sabir and it’s a mixture, a melange between Venetian dialect and Arabic, and dialect from Genova... there was such an exchange of food, of people, of thoughts for a very, very long time and I don’t think you can erase it... Now there is this huge Islamophobia that includes Arabs who are also not Muslim.” (Laura, May 2019)

Yet, it is not despite, but because of these complex contradictions and connections that a Mediterranean perspective might point to a different way of how a translocal sense of agency might be understood, as it is already practiced by activists in this network. This is not least due to the connections made between radical cities and progressive municipal governments across and beyond the Mediterranean, where a new kind of agency across borders might emerge, as I will discuss in Chapter 7.

4.4. From collective identity to alter-European agency

4.4.1. Collective identity as product and process

What do the stories of Giulia, Maria, Mark, James, Agnieszka, Laura and others tell us about the sense of collective identity at work in alter-European activist networks? How do these six different actors and their different tales of Europe relate to each other, and what is their common ground for action? First of all, it is important to highlight that these six perspectives are neither exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive. My aim here, rather than painting a comprehensive picture of all possible ways of relating to Europe, was to provide a sense of who some of the actors in this network are in terms of their identities and modes of collective belonging. Indeed, the different types of actors I introduced here do not just demonstrate a wide range of issues, approaches and interests. Many of them in fact embody several of these modes of belonging and analysis at once.

The concept of collective identity is useful here, in order to begin to understand how such diverse sets of movement actors constitute themselves as a collective actor (see, for instance, Polletta and Jasper, 2001) and how they might exercise a sense of agency. In the European tradition of social movement studies, the work of Melucci (1989, 1996) has been particularly influential in this regard. As Kavada argues, “Melucci employs the concept to study how a group constitutes itself as an actor that is distinct from its

environment and that has a certain agency” (2015, p.875). Melucci defines collective identity as “an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups at a more complex level) concerting the *orientations* of their action and the *field* of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place” (1996, p.70, original emphasis). According to Melucci, this interactive definition evolves from a collective process of constructing and negotiating a common language, a set of shared rituals, practices and symbols, a network of actors and relationships, and “a certain degree of *emotional investment*” (p.71, original emphasis).

Another central element to Melucci’s understanding of collective identity is the distinction between collective identity as a *product* and as a *process* (see Kavada, 2015, p.875; Flesher Fominaya, 2010, p.378). The ethnographic anecdote of the two colour-clashing protest streams in Rome, with which I began this chapter, is illustrative of how collective identity might be understood as a *product*. Here, the movement’s visible collective identity “product” was clearly distinguishable. Through their colour coding, use of symbols and the different walking routes, the “progressive” (Figure 7) strand of protesters distanced itself and created a boundary both towards right wingers and nationalists, as well as towards the more “established” protesters and their excessive amount of EU flags (Figure 8). At the same time, this anecdote is also illustrative of the limits of viewing a movement’s collective identity merely as a static, fixed product. This is not least because the two protest streams *did* eventually meet at the same destination and some individual activists did move between or maintained loose connections with individuals from the other stream. For instance, while they arguably would rather belong to the established end of politics, Green MEPs walked with the progressive stream of protesters, while most other MEPs walked with the “March for Europe” protesters. At the same time, activists from European Alternatives pointed out individuals in the other crowd to me, whom they knew personally from previous events in their respective cities. Similarly, Giulia, the migrants’ rights activist wrapped in an EU flag whom I interviewed at the Brexit protest in London, embodied and thus had to negotiate an equally uncomfortable blurring of boundaries.

As is illustrated in these anecdotes, the “product” metaphor reaches its limits particularly in movements made up of a diverse set of actors, as argued by Flesher Fominaya (2010) with regards to the alter-globalization mobilisations in Madrid, or by Kavada in relation to the Occupy movement (2015). With a similar reference to the diverse set of actors in

the alter-globalization movement, McDonald (2002) even argues that the notion of collective identity has to be overcome in order to better understand the different meanings of action in the movement. In his view, the concept of collective identity does not accurately capture their more fluid and diverse ways of acting in the context of networked capitalism, which he argues are better understood through concepts such as “fluidarity” and “public experience of self” (p.109). Indeed, Melucci himself points to the potential limitation of the general concept of identity in that it “remains semantically inseparable from the idea of permanence” and might therefore “be ill suited for the processual analysis for which I am arguing” (1996, p.72). Nevertheless, I agree with Flesher Fominaya (2010) and Kavada (2015) who maintain that Melucci’s approach to collective identity remains useful to understanding collective action in movements made up of a diverse set of actors precisely because of its processual outlook. Here, collective identity is conceptualised “as an open-ended, multi-layered and dynamic process through which a group negotiates internally the means and ends of its action” (Kavada, 2015, p.883).

Thus, following Melucci’s processual view, collective identity and agency might not necessarily arise from a shared vision or essence that is clear from the outset. Rather, a collective actor and a sense of agency forms precisely in the process of negotiating tensions between “a multiplicity of identities, ideologies, issues, frames, collective action repertoires and organizational forms” (Flesher Fominaya, 2010, p.377). It is for this reasons that this view is particularly useful in better understanding how the diverse set of activists that I introduced in the previous section constitute themselves as a collective alter-European actor.

4.4.2. Negotiating collective identity in alter-European activist networks

In her analysis of collective identity in Madrid-based autonomous collectives that are linked to the alter-globalization movement, Flesher Fominaya (2010) highlights the role of the assembly as an important site of developing a shared set of narratives, relationships and experiences. While Madrid’s autonomous network is characterised by activists participating in “multiple political spaces and flow from one to another acting as conduits of information, influences and connections” (2010, p.381), she holds that “the assembly is the core around which new projects are generated with important ramifications for the latent and visible moments of collective action and therefore the process of collective

identity formation” (p.397). At the same time, these processes taking place in the assembly also “reveal the tensions, contradictions, and negotiations in the latent moments that generate the seeming “unity” of [the] movement in its visible moments of protest” (p.398). In the case of alter-European activism, a similar function is fulfilled by the different occasions in which a diverse set of actors gather, including, for instance, at the 60th anniversary protest in Rome – where protesters’ conflicting views on EU-Europe materialised in a clash of colours between the different streams of protesters – but also throughout other moments of aggregation where activists from different places and struggles come together. This included the several instances during which I met the different actors I introduced in this chapter, such as at the activist training in Florence, where I interviewed Agnieszka and other activists from Central and Eastern Europe, or the funding event in Kiev where I first met James. Another obvious example of a space that brought together a diverse set of actors is Transeuropa Festival in Madrid in 2017, which I introduced in Chapter 3, and where I encountered all the six actors I introduced in this chapter and more in a series of workshops, exhibitions, assemblies and debates.

A good example of the tensions and negotiations arising in these spaces, took place during an event which brought different actors together in Berlin in 2018, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the collapse of Lehman Brothers, which marked the beginning of the financial crisis. Here, a heated discussion unfolded between two panellists. One speaker highlighted the citizenship perspective, arguing that European citizenship, as a “multi-ethnic or multicultural entity bound together in a common legal framework”, might aid a sense of “institutional solidarity”, for instance in the shape of an equal Europe-wide unemployment scheme, which would address economic inequality and could benefit all European residents from Germany to Greece. For another speaker, who started from a decolonial perspective, such proposals do not go far enough if they do not explicitly challenge Eurocentrism:

“Getting rid of the nation-state or having some big European republic, I don’t understand how this solves some of these problems around who belongs and who doesn’t. What we need to talk about and unpick here is this very idea of there being a European identity, Western civilization, which is entirely fabricated from empire... Why do we want to continue to reify Europe? I’m not interested in continuing a European project, because if we look at how the world is structured right now... what you see is that the developed world is giving aid to the developing world, based on the Euro-centric idea that the West has helped the rest

of the world to progress, when all this progress came on the back of colonies.” (Fieldnotes, Berlin, September 2018)

This discussion regarding the question whether Europe might even be the right starting point for collective action, is a typical example of ongoing disputes between activists’ different priorities. What starts to become visible here are different – at times competing – meanings of agency, as some activists find it in more institutionalised avenues such as the legal framework of citizenship, like some of the migrant citizens I discussed earlier in this chapter, while others claim agency by pointing to the urgent need to critically reflect and act on colonial oppression (like the speaker at the Berlin event), or local histories (like some of the Eastern European activists I quoted earlier in this chapter). I will return to another predominant tension, namely that between feminist and more institutionally focussed organisers in more detail in Chapter 7.

Yet, while some activists might be alienated by such differences, other activists I interviewed pointed out that they think the movement works at its best precisely where it makes space for such moments of contradictions, which they believe serve to inform future collective actions. Reflecting on a transnational training programme that brought together a diverse range of actors with different approaches to alter-European activism, two activists highlight the value of tensions and contradictions as follows:

“I learned from everyone, especially because we were so different... We wouldn’t normally have met, I don’t think, that group of people. Maybe if we all lived in the same city let’s say, we might have all been on the same protest, but I think we would have been doing different things on that protest, so I think it was really, really cool to get that group of people together in a room... to hear different opinions and to disagree, but respectfully have these conversations and understand that everyone had something to contribute.” (Audrey, December 2018)

“You don’t all have to be in agreement, but you’re all engaging in contestation. You’re participating in constructing something. The danger is more when you stop engaging, then you’re not part of it anymore but as long as you’re engaging, even if it is in opposition to other activism in the same sphere, something is being made, something is transforming.” (Alexandria, November 2018)

In other words, rather than a fixed sense of a shared identity, alter-European activist networks seem to be made up of a multiplicity of different collective *identities*. As these networks thus operate on different registers of action, agency is expressed in different

forms, ranging from the personal to parliamentary sites, and from a focus on claiming stories to claiming rights – an approach I will conceptualise further in the second part of this thesis. It is in the coming together of a diverse set of actions and actors from across different struggles, that alter-European activists’ *transversal sense of agency* already starts to become visible.

4.4.3. *Transversal actors*

How, then does collective action and a sense of agency arise in these spaces, which bring different actors together across various lines of struggle? A good example of a collective action arising precisely from the tension between different struggles is the Let Us Vote campaign, which I discussed in the context of migrant citizens’ perspectives. Here, while being against Fortress Europe and how the EU has been treating migrants in recent years, a coalition of different activist groups nevertheless used the opportunity of the UK’s exit from EU membership as an opportunity to move beyond the hierarchical distinction between more privileged mobile EU citizens and other migrants. In this context, rather than merely seeking to protect the rights of EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU, the campaign called for all UK residents, including non-EU migrants, to be able to vote in referenda and national elections. Another example would be Fabio’s involvement in the European Green New Deal campaign, which brings together a diversity of actors around the call for social, environmental and economic renewal. Despite different priorities and identities, the common theme of connecting actors across thematic and geographic borders also became visible in Maria’s and others’ remarks on intersectional feminism, in James’ efforts to connect Afro-Europeans, in Agnieszka’s comments about the workshop bridging Eastern and Western narratives, or in the Mediterranean connections highlighted by Laura. A placard that visible illustrates and summarises this attempt to create links between different struggles well was held up in the left bloc at one of the Brexit protests I went to in London in October 2018: “Build Unions Not Borders” (Figure 9).

Having noticed similar tendencies in the context of the alter-globalization movement, della Porta speaks here of a sense of “*tolerant identities*”, which derive “through a process of “contamination in action”” (2005, p.178, original emphasis). Della Porta further highlights tolerant identities’ “emphasis upon diversity and cross-fertilization, with

limited identification” and observes that activists “develop especially around common campaigns on objects perceived as “concrete” and nurtured by an “evangelical” search for dialogue” (2005, p.186). Some of the activists I interviewed similarly speak of “contamination” or “convergence” when it comes to their activism with regards to how different struggles intersect and the importance of building coalitions:

“That’s the value... building a space for convergence... In France, they have a nice word for it I haven’t found in English – *convergences des lutes*... I think we’re missing that, as activist if we’re not drawing on those linkages.” (Alexandria, November 2018)

“...this partnership building has always been, I would say, a particularly strong point [of European Alternatives]... to be able to go and put together coalitions of different actors... to build a polycentric organisation.” (George, November 2017)

As these quotes illustrate, for these activists, agency arises not based on a predefined sense of collective European identity, but through collective trans-European actions that draw links between different sets of actors and thematic struggles.

Returning to my question of how the idea of Europe features in this form of activism, it might be argued that rather than an end in itself, Europe, here, is a means to different ends. As illustrated in the example of the Let Us Vote campaign, or in the green socialist activist who wants to promote the Green New Deal, “Europe” – as a geographical, cultural or political frame of reference – might serve as a vehicle to bringing together actors from different struggles to address some of the crucial challenges of the contemporary moment, defined by thematically intersecting crises that traverse national borders, as I have argued in Chapter 1. Indeed, rather than promoting Europe in itself, it is in the absence of any other real established sense of agency that works across thematic and geographic borders, that activists turn to Europe. As Antonio put it:

“[We need to move] beyond any essentialist conception of a European people, a European border, a European essence... Of course it would be very nice to do this [re-invention of politics] at a global level, at a pan-continental level, but there are no global institutions that could at the moment realistically imagine to transform in order to have a democratic transnational government, whereas in Europe this is a possibility.” (Antonio, October 2017)

Here, rather than a shared essence, it is a *lack*, namely, the lack of agency and the capacity to influence contemporary developments either on a national or European level, that gets people involved. In other words, the movement's relationship with Europe arises through the "relation with its external environment", offering both "a field of opportunities and constraints" (Melucci, 1996, p.73).

What begins to become visible in this process of creating trans-European spaces of convergences, then, is a sense of transversal agency that arises as different actors collaborate across different lines of struggles. In this context, activists do not categorically affirm the idea of Europe, nor do they reject it altogether. What their actions aim at is to change, subvert, or, as one activist put it, to "hack" the European political framework towards different ends *en route* to a progressive, transnational society that is yet to be created. This shared end might be summarised as the convergence of the struggles introduced here: another Europe that is pro migration, pro feminist, green, socialist, anti-austerity, anti-racist, decolonised, and bringing together people across geographical and cultural boundaries from East to West and from the Baltic to the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. In other words, what activists in this network work towards might be called a Europe that works for the 99%, or, as some activists have begun to call it, a "*Europe for the many*". It is for this reason, that this activist network might more accurately be referred to not as pro- but *alter*-European.

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have begun to illustrate how a sense of transversal agency that operates beyond the borders of individual struggles emerges in alter-European activist networks. My argument has been twofold. Firstly, my aim was to show that far from sharing a straightforward essence, a sense of collective identity and the capacity for agency comes into being as various different actors come together in moments of convergence across struggles. As I have shown, these moments of convergence are not free from tension. Rather, I have argued that in order to understand how agency comes about in these networks, we need to pay attention to the processes of how these tensions are negotiated between different actors and struggles, and how they are translated into moments of collective action. Secondly, regarding the role of the idea of Europe in this process, I have shown that Europe might be used as a means towards different ends rather than an end in

itself. Here, Europe might be employed as a strategic site of struggle in the absence of a real sense of agency that already works on a trans-thematic and trans-border level. More important than a shared vision of Europe, therefore, are the connections, links and translations made between different struggles.

While this chapter has shown how different activists come to alter-European networks and how they constitute themselves as a collective actor, one of the questions I have not yet sufficiently addressed is exactly how a convergence of different actors might in fact lead to social change. In other words, how might these multifaceted actors actually be able to change things? What kind of agency do collective actors like alter-European activist networks hold and how might they be able to put a challenge to existing power structures? How one might answer these questions depends on how the concept of agency is understood. Hence, to conceptualise exactly what is meant by “agency” in this context is precisely the aim of the next part of this thesis. Before returning in more detail to how alter-European activist networks enact agency not only across struggles (as discussed in this chapter), but also across different geographical scales (Chapter 6) and political sites (Chapter 7), I will begin this second half of the thesis with an overview of how agency has been understood across the social and political sciences (Chapter 5). The following chapter will thus lay the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for my own conceptualisation of agency, based on how it is enacted in the context of alter-European activism, which I will now turn to develop in what remains of this thesis.

Part II: Conceptualising Agency Across Borders

5. Re-thinking agency across borders

5.1. Introduction: routes to agency in alter-European activism

In my ethnographic descriptions throughout the first part of this thesis I have already made reference to different routes to agency that are employed in alter-European activist networks. For instance, the “Let Us Vote” campaign, in which UK-based activists demanded the right to vote in referenda and national elections for all UK residents regardless of their nationality, assumes that *voting* and the demand of *citizenship rights* can be an essential way of exercising agency in one’s place of residence. Following a different route, for activists like James and Habibah, storytelling and the sharing of personal experiences was regarded as an essential way of exercising agency in the context of having to negotiate racism on a daily basis. Finally, activists like Mark and Antonio insisted that in order to have “the power to actually change things” you also needed to intervene in institutional political spaces.

What, then, is the underlying sense of agency that holds these different approaches together in the same network of actors? In other words, how do alter-European activists understand social change to take place? In order to approach these questions, the aim of this chapter is to lay out a theoretical framework for my own conceptualisation of agency beyond borders, based on how it is enacted in alter-European activist networks. To this end, the chapter will outline different approaches to how agency has been understood across the social and political sciences. I will draw not only on social movement scholarship, but also on other disciplines that will help me make sense of the aforementioned routes to agency present in alter-European activism, including, in particular, migration and citizenship studies and feminist scholarship.

The chapter begins by outlining the problem at hand in the shape of three questions: (1) What is agency? (providing general overview of different approaches to understanding agency from across the wider social and political sciences); (2) Why rethink agency today? (using an ethnographic vignette that begins to illustrate how alter-European activists operates across different registers of action and how this relates to wider questions regarding the state of democracy today); and (3) How to rethink agency beyond borders (drawing on scholarship that has attempted to conceptualise key political terms

across the borders of nation-states). I conclude this first part of the chapter by demonstrating the need to rethink agency across different boundaries.

The second part of the chapter moves on to explore how agency might be understood as moving across geographical boundaries more specifically. Here, I will review literature from migration and citizenship studies, drawing in particular on Isin's theoretical framework for understanding acts of citizenship (2008, 2009, 2012), which will serve as a conceptual frame for my own understanding of agency across borders in this thesis as a whole, as well as Georgiou's (2006, 2013; also Zaborowski and Georgiou, 2019) and Sassen's (2000, 2001, 2004) work on the role of migration and the city for questions of agency. In this section, I will begin to show how the local level might serve as a useful starting point for rethinking forms of agency that are not bound by the territorial boundaries of nation-states, which will become particularly relevant for my further discussions of agency in alter-European activism in Chapter 7.

Finally, the third part of the chapter returns to social movement scholarship. In this final part I will discuss how social movement scholars have understood agency and the role that institutional actors have played in this context. The chapter subsequently concludes with an indicative sketch of the idea of *transversal agency*, which I propose in this thesis. Before I can begin to make this argument of how agency is exercised in the specific context of alter-European activist networks, however, I want to start with a brief overview of how scholars in the wider social and political sciences have understood the concept of agency in more general terms.

5.2. The global crisis of democracy: re-thinking agency for the 21st century

5.2.1. *What is agency?*

The age-old question of agency can be traced throughout the history of Western civilization and remains an urgent question in numerous disciplines today, including philosophy and political theory (for instance Arendt, 1998), anthropology and sociology (for instance Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), citizenship studies (for instance Isin, 2008, 2009; Isin and Ruppert, 2015), political geography (for instance Kuus, 2019), feminist studies (for instance Yuval-Davis, 1999), social movement and media studies (for

instance Milan, 2018). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) offer a useful overview of how different traditions of understanding agency have evolved throughout the centuries. While agency, free will and the issue of intentionality are classic philosophical problems, they argue that the question of agency is commonly traced back to the Enlightenment. It is in that period where Emirbayer and Mische locate “the invention of the individual as a “free agent”” (p.964) and “a new conception as agency emerged that affirmed the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live” (p.965). While subsequent philosophies of agency have been developed in relation to other intersecting concepts like rationality, morality and necessity, such as in the work of Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emirbayer and Mische argue that this rather individualist conception of agency is sustained by various social thinkers including Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, and “still underlies many Western accounts of freedom and progress” (p.965) until today¹⁴.

A scholar who has famously conceptualised the question of action and agency in political terms in the aftermath of the second world war is Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition* (1998), Arendt distinguishes between three categories of human activity: labour, work, and action. As Isin summarises, “Arendt starts from the position that action – as distinguished from not only contemplation but also work and labour – enables human beings to perform their agency, which involved bringing something new into the world whose outcomes are unpredictable” (2012, p.112). While the human condition of labour refers to “life itself” and the “condition of work is worldliness”, what is key to Arendt’s understanding is that action always “corresponds to the human condition of plurality” (1998, p.7), that is, it takes places “in relation to others” (Isin, 2012, p.113). As Isin puts it, “[f]or Arendt, all action is political since it is through action that we disclose ourselves

¹⁴ More recent understandings of agency have, however, begun to challenge such arguably human-centric notions, towards “non-human” or “more-than-human conceptualization of agency” (Kuus, 2019, p.166, see also Featherstone, 2008; Youatt, 2020). Developing a definition of agency for her own field of political geography, Kuus argues that this view has been put forward for instance by contemporary scholarship in philosophy, ecology and science and technology studies which often draws on the work of Michelle Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour in order to develop rhizomatic conceptions of agency made up of networks of human and non-human actors. Another starting point for a conceptualisation of more-than-human agency might be indigenous knowledges and practices of resistance. Writing about indigenous mobilisations against the planned mining of a sacred mountain site in the South American Andes, anthropologist de la Cadena (2010) notes that such practices raise questions about the political agency of natural environments such as landscapes, waterways and mountains and the challenges and limits of how these might be represented within an institutionalised political system. While such critical considerations are at the forefront of contemporary thinking about the meaning of politics today (for instance Youatt’s conceptualisation of *Interspecies Politics*, 2020), not least in times of the looming climate apocalypse, I am unfortunately unable to consider them in more depth in this thesis as the question of more-than-human agency did not prominently feature in own ethnographic field of alter-European activism.

to the world. The political arises from acting together since we always disclose ourselves in the presence of others” (p.116). Furthermore, as Arendt argues elsewhere, power originates not just in human action, but where people “act in concert” (1970, p.44). Arendt’s conception of agency also places importance on the notion of the public sphere and takes inspiration from the Greek polis to which I will return in Chapter 7.

In sociology and the wider social sciences, agency is commonly understood in relation to structure. Such debates often draw on the work of Anthony Giddens or Pierre Bourdieu and highlight “the role of habitus and routinized practice” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p.963). According to this debate, it is crucial to understand “that agents act within a fluid context of structure, marked by group expectations, norms of acceptable practice, sanctions and relations of power” (King, 2005, p.222). One of the key points here is that individual agents contribute to the everyday production of structure, while their acts simultaneously fall “under various constraints which we call ‘institutions’, ‘forces’, ‘trends’, ‘power’ or ‘powers’, and so on” (p.230). According to King, one of the main limitations of the structure-agency debate is that it “either runs the risk of emasculating individual agency in order to explain structural reproduction, or it runs a risk of overemphasizing individual freedom and thereby leaving structural reproduction mysterious” (p.230). Consequently, some scholars have argued for the need to move beyond this debate and conceptualise “agency as an analytical category in its own right” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p.963; see also Kuus, 2019). According to Emirbayer and Mische, such a conceptual focus on agency is particularly urgent in order to be able to respond to contemporary democratic challenges in “a rapidly changing world composed of increasingly complex and overlapping matrices of social, political and economic relations” (p.1013). In other words, what is required more than a general conceptualisation of human agency is a better idea of our capacity to act towards political and social change in the 21st century.

Finally, different feminist scholars have pointed out that agency must not only be understood with regard to social *structures*, but also to social *relations* (Lister, 1997, p.37). Indeed, while agency, in its most general sense, might be understood as “the capacity to act in a given context”, Kuus argues that much scholarship commonly start “with the ‘big picture’ of the state system, then continues with the institutions that manage that system, and finally comes to human beings in these structures” (2019, p.163). In this view, “persons and groups who are less likely to participate in formal politics” (p.164)

can easily be overlooked. To begin instead with the more mundane, everyday understandings of human agency, she holds, turns this view on its head and highlights the important contributions that feminist and related strands of scholarship, such as respective studies from the Global South, have made in terms of challenging our understanding of agency. Black feminists and Afrofeminist scholars have highlighted the importance of how Black women exercise agency when negotiating everyday situations such as racist cultural practices, oppressive academic environments and even most intimate relationships, besides more publicly visible practices of community organising and coalition building (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019). Indeed, as Osei (2019) has shown, in the everyday struggle against the dehumanising violence of structural racism and white supremacy, personal practices related to fashion or gardening can be seen as crucial acts of resistance. “Once different agents are brought into view,” Kuus argues, “new ways of thinking about action become possible” (p.164). In her study on youth activism in Canada, Kennelly, for instance, proposes the idea of “relational agency” (2011, p.112), which highlights the importance of personal relationships between activists for their capacity to act in the context of a neoliberal state.

Thus, what this brief overview shows, is that one of the crucial aspects when it comes to conceptualisations of agency in the contemporary moment relates to the question of the sites and scales of agency. Indeed, links might be drawn between the different approaches to understanding agency which I briefly introduced here. For instance, Kennelly’s idea of “relational agency” (2011, p.112) draws on both feminist scholarship as well as Bourdieu’s idea of habitus. Nevertheless, rather than discussing more general theories of agency, what I am interested in in this thesis is to understand particular forms of *progressive agency*. As Rustin writes, “[a]t every stage of progressive political development, the question of agency – what and where are the forces and agents that might bring about change? – has been a central one” (2019, p.48). Beginning by tracing the idea of progressive agency back to the *citizens* of the French and American Revolutions, as well as those in ancient Greek and Roman *cities*, Rustin subsequently distinguishes between two distinct conceptions of agency: the liberal enlightenment view, which holds that “the extension of rationality and education throughout society would make possible the extension of democratic entitlements to all people” and the Marxist view, which saw “the collective agency of the working class as the only force capable of challenging the structures of inequality that they saw as integral to capitalism” (p.49). Rustin holds that the last three decades, defined by the ongoing rise of digital networks,

neoliberal globalization and other transnational challenges (as discussed in the previous chapters), raise new questions that call for “new concepts of agency” (p.58; see also Kavada, 2016). Similarly, Isin and Ruppert (2015) argued that the opportunities and limitations that come with the possibility of acting in digital spaces require us to revisit our understanding of citizenship and political agency in the contemporary moment.

It is this final point that I want to explore further in this chapter: Given the various scholarly approaches to understanding agency from across the wider social and political sciences, why exactly then is it necessary to re-think agency in the contemporary moment? Moreover, how might the different scholarly takes on agency help to make sense of how agency is articulated in alter-European activism? In order to explore these questions in more depth, I want to return to my ethnographic field.

5.2.2. *Why re-think agency today?*

On the morning of Friday, 10th May, less than two weeks before the European Parliament elections, a group of several dozen pupils gathered at the local train station in Friedrichshafen, a mid-sized town in the South of Germany which counts about 60,000 inhabitants. At this hour in midmorning, they should be in school. However, the whole point of their gathering is to protest exactly that – another average day going past while the planet is on fire. Their school strike is part of the global Fridays for Future movement, which has been taking place in numerous cities across the world since the now-famous Swedish student Greta Thunberg decided to camp in front of the national parliament building in April 2018 next to a sign that simply read “School Strike For The Climate” (see Klein, 2019). Thus, while the students in Friedrichshafen do not encounter many passers-by on this rather quiet Friday morning as they march from the station to the waterfront of Lake Constance, their chants and placards are echoed across the globe: “Our Goal, End Coal”, “FRACK OFF”, “Systems Change not Climate Change”.

I have come to the Fridays for Future protest in Friedrichshafen together with a handful of other alter-European activists in the context of the Transeuropa Caravans campaign. The campaign (which I will return to in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7), sent five activist caravans travelling across the European continent in the run-up to the European Parliament elections with the aim of highlighting that grassroots alternatives to the

European status quo already exist – albeit largely outside of Brussels’ institutions, as I will argue in Chapter 6. Besides this stopover at the climate protest in Friedrichshafen on our caravan’s route from Berlin to Budapest, the caravans also visited migrants’ rights organisations, feminist collectives or radical municipalities in different parts of Europe. For now, however, we mix with the local protesters in Friedrichshafen who have begun to gather around a shell-shaped stage at the lake (Figure 10).



Figure 10: European Alternatives’ activists at a Fridays for Future gathering, Friedrichshafen, May 2019; author’s photo

After some more chanting, a handful of local politicians, including a candidate from the social democrats and members from two local green parties, have agreed to meet the protesters and answer their questions. The discussion takes place in front of the beautiful backdrop of the lake, on the other side of which one can see Switzerland, Austria and Lichtenstein on a less cloudy day, as the lake is bordered by four nations. Yet, despite this international panorama, the local politicians’ answers largely remain exactly there, namely at the local and, indeed, the individual level: start with yourself, become vegan, use less plastic. As the most “radical” part of the discussion revolves around more affordable public transport and the question what should happen with the local airport, it becomes clear that the politicians’ suggestions clash with the students’ expectations:

“Green New Deal”, “smash capitalism”, “divest coal”, “#womansequality” and “no border, no nation, no coal power station” they write on a black board when our activist caravan members asked them to summarise some of their motivations for participating in the climate movement as part of their direct action (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Placard from Transeuropa Caravans action at Fridays for Future protest, Friedrichshafen, May 2019; author's photo

After the local politicians, it is our turn. Jan, one of the Transeuropa Caravan members, dressed in a red high-visibility vest and holding a brass megaphone, enters the stage to address the protesters. Jan descends from a family of dockworkers and trade unionists, and is now engaged in various activist networks himself, including European Alternatives and DIEM25. “I was listening to what the politicians were saying to you, that resistance against climate change starts with you and your own consumption behaviours”, he addresses the students. “If the people in the parliaments and municipal governments are not listening to you, then make sure you are speaking up in those spaces yourselves in the next few years. Run for elections, take it from the streets to the parliaments” (Fieldnotes, Friedrichshafen, May 2019). When I later asked Jan in an interview why he got engaged with alter-European activism, he similarly pointed to the need to move from discussion to action that contributes to tangible social change:

“when I started [organising] with a few friends – activists, artists, lawyers, designers, even one doctor, who is also a theatre practitioner... – it became really clear that we wanted to create spaces – events, projects, actions – that combined discourse with action. Often you would go to an event and think it’s nice, but what is the next step? But this, of course, never happens. Most of the time there is a moment of talking or creating awareness, which is generally a problem of the Left: to do awareness raising, but at the same time not offering a form or call to action of what actually needs to be done.” (Jan, May 2019)

Putting his own analysis of the need for action into practice and similar to other activists I met whose actions similarly span across different groups, Jan, organises not only locally with a collective in Germany, where he lives, and with European Alternatives in the context of Transeuropa Caravans, but also works with the pan-European formation DIEM25. The “Democracy in Europe Movement 2025”, which was co-founded by Yanis Varoufakis and others in 2015 based on the claim that Europe needs to be democratised or it will disintegrate, has since developed into a pan-European organisation with local groups in several European countries and an electoral wing that ran for office in the European parliament elections in 2019. For Jan, as well as for other activists I have spoken to in the wider network of alter-European activism, the proposal of a European Green New Deal – a policy blueprint for “for Europe’s just transition” that was initiated by DIEM25 and assembles a coalition of partners behind it including organisations and networks like European Alternatives, Global Women’s Strike, The New Economics Foundation or the Tax Justice Network (GNDE, 2019) – might be one way of translating the students protesters’ demands into concrete forms of radical social change and an example of how this type of change needs to take place on different societal levels at once. Jan thus supports DIEM25’s attempt to run in the upcoming European Parliament elections with an electoral wing, claiming that theirs is “the most progressive programme that is up for election” (May 2019). Drawing on his overlapping involvement in different alter-European organisations, Jan invited a local DIEM25 candidate who ran for the European Parliament elections in 2019, to come and join one of Transeuropa Caravans’ direct actions in Munich (Chapter 6) a couple of days before our arrival at the Fridays for Future protest in Friedrichshafen. At the same time, he stresses the further need to connect such attempts at taking parliamentary power with grassroots organising, arguing – with reference to the Sunrise Movement in the US and newly elected congresswomen who came to power after Bernie Sanders ran in the 2016 presidential primaries, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib (see Klein, 2019, p.26) – that “the

interlinking of different dimensions is important to give such a proposal weight” (Jan, May 2019).

Indeed, alter-European activists like Jan are not the first to call for radical change to take place on different levels in the context of overlapping contemporary crisis. Scholars like Naomi Klein, for instance, have shown that climate change is deeply entangled with issues such as migration and colonialism, as it is a crisis that is overwhelmingly created by majority-white Western countries, but felt most dramatically by, for instance, “more than 140 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America”, who will be displaced as a result of climate stress by 2050 according to a 2018 World Bank estimate (2019, p.45). Klein also argues that in the Anglosphere, the rise of sea levels is furthermore accompanied by a rise of fascism (p.50). In order to tackle climate change, she holds, “pretty much every aspect of our economy would have to change” (p.14), and indeed, “all aspects of society”, as it was put in the UN’s IPCC report of 2018 (p.24). As Klein summarises, “[i]t’s going to take a lot more than a carbon tax or cap-and-trade. It’s going to take an all-out war on pollution and poverty and racism and colonialism and despair all at the same time” (p.51). Consequently, Klein also actively supports a European Green New Deal, not least by serving on DIEM25’s advisory panel (see 2019, p.31), besides other scholars like Saskia Sassen, as well as progressive local, national and European politicians such as Barbara Spinelli MEP, Caroline Lukas MP and Gerardo Pisarello, First Deputy Mayor of Barcelona.

In a similar vein to Klein (2019), other scholars, too, have called for a re-thinking of how to address what Venn describes as “the converging crises concerning the global economy” (2018, p.1). Venn argues that what is required is nothing short of a “drastic transformation in the practices, ways of life and expectations which underlie the problems” (p.1). While Venn points to different developments, he also stresses “that capitalism as a specific form of a market economy is at the root of the merging of crises” (p.6). Instead, he proposes “a new kind of politics”, namely “a politics of the commons allied to a cosmopolitan project” (p.2). Similarly, though starting from a feminist point of view, Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) have argued that “[w]hat we are living through is *a crisis of society as a whole*” which might simultaneously be understood as “a crisis of economy, ecology, politics, and “care”” and is “at bottom a crisis of *capitalism*” in its contemporary global, financial and neoliberal form (2019, p.16, original emphasis). As “governments are increasingly seen by their subjects as handmaidens of capital”, argue Arruzza,

Bhattacharya and Fraser, “[i]t is no wonder that masses of people throughout the world have given up on mainstream parties and politicians that have promoted neoliberalism” (2019, p.50). Thus, for Fraser, what the contemporary moment of intersecting crises amounts to, then, is nothing less than “a global political crisis”, in which, borrowing Gramsci’s famous lines on the interregnum, “the old is dying but the new cannot be born” (2019, p.8).

Besides such critical scholarly accounts, it is not only young people and environmental movements taking to the streets who feel that politicians have failed to act on their promises (Klein, 2019) and that people themselves fail to act as the tools for an “effective democratic response” are lacking (Norgaard, 2011, p.226) when it comes to tackling contemporary challenges such as climate change. As I have argued in Chapter 1, the lack of agency with regards to border-crossing challenges has become one of the most urgent political challenges in the 21st century. A European Alternatives spokesperson argues in her contribution to a book edited by Germany’s branch of Extinction Rebellion, climate change reminds us that the ecological issue is simultaneously a social issue, thus making the contemporary feeling of a lack of agency and control a “deeply democratic question” (Büllesbach, 2019, p.97) that needs to be addressed both from above and below the nation-state framework where political agency is currently largely rooted.

What, then, does the aforementioned anecdote tell us about how alter-European activists seek to enact agency in the context of a global democratic crisis, and how might recent scholarship help understand how this sense of agency plays out across a variety of borders? Indeed, in order to understand agency in alter-European activism, it requires approaches to agency that move both across and beyond geographical and conceptual borders.

5.2.3. How to understand agency beyond borders?

In recent decades, a variety of scholars have begun to review classic concepts in political theory to make them fit with the aforementioned intersecting nature of the contemporary crises and the changing power dynamics in the context of (neoliberal) globalization (Chapter 3). These included: the question an emerging global or transnational public sphere (Fraser, 2009), the meaning of territory in global times (Sassen, 2006), the

question of global or cosmopolitan democracy (Archibugi and Held, 1995), challenges regarding the boundedness of citizenship (McNevin, 2011; Isin, 2012), the possibility of a global civil society (Kaldor, 2003), European citizenship (Delanty, 2000; Shore, 2000; Balibar, 2004) or a cosmopolitan citizenship (Delanty, 2000). Indeed, the descriptor “cosmopolitan” has been employed by numerous scholars in search of new paradigms throughout the 2000s as a conceptual tool to rethink different aspects of what it might mean to act politically in the 21st century. The idea of a global or cosmopolitan community is, of course, nothing new but can be dated back to the idea of a “citizen of the world” in ancient Greece and the Enlightenment (Marsili and Milanese, 2018, p.160-161), or Kant’s text on perpetual peace, in which he writes already in 1798:

“The peoples of the earth have thus entered in varying degrees into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere. The idea of a cosmopolitan right is therefore not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international right, transforming it into a universal right of humanity.” (Kant cited in Delanty, 2000, p.v)

More recent scholarship, however, has also pointed to the limitations of global or cosmopolitan understandings of citizenship and agency. Isin (2009, 2012), for instance, argues that there is still a lack of vocabulary to imagine how people might act politically across borders. The problem with grand narratives employing the notion of “global” or “cosmopolitan” citizenship, he holds, would not only be that they do not do justice to the “multiple, complex and heterogeneous” realities of today’s world, but that they risk “bounding citizenship again” (2012, p.8). Moreover, another common point of critique of certain conceptualisations of cosmopolitanism, is that they might struggle to take into consideration the lived experiences and local particularities of how contemporary crises play out. Braidotti, Hanafin and Blaagaard, for instance, point to how Neo-Kantian approaches might be critiqued for rationalist, universalistic or Eurocentric assumptions and propose “an affective cosmopolitics of immanent embodied subjectivities” (2013, p.3) instead. Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge and Chakrabarty start from a similar critique of the “abstract” and “universal” tendencies of cosmopolitanism, which, they argue, imply a sense of “mastery, distance from experience” and “indifference to specifics” that risks being “disembodied, free-floating, or generalizing” (2000, p.583). In turn, they propose what they call a “feminist cosmopolitanism” or “*cosmofeminism*” (p.584, original emphasis), which highlights notions of plurality and situatedness.

Amongst those scholars who have tried to conceptualise notions of a cosmopolitan or global sense of agency, feminist accounts on these issues are particularly interesting for my own study. This is not least because feminism plays an important role in the alter-European activism at stake in this thesis (Chapters 4 and 7). Additionally, much feminist scholarship has a history of building alliances not only across geographical borders, but also across other kinds of differences. Analysing what contemporary processes of globalization mean to different aspects and articulations of feminist struggle, Flew, Bagilhole, Carabine, Fenton, Kitzinger, Lister and Wilkinson (1999) argue that any sense of global sisterhood must not start from a false sense of a supposedly universal female condition – as certain brands of whitewashed or Western-centric feminism would have it – but crucially take into consideration the different experiences of women in different local contexts, while also exploring the intersections and global commonalities of their conditions. In fact, the question how to organise across differences has been central to the writings of many queer and black feminists, Afrofeminists and feminists of colour for a long time (for instance Crenshaw, 1989; Ahmed, 1999; Mohanty, 2003; Lorde, 2018; Emejulu and Sobande, 2019), and remains a crucial topic until today.

In a more recent account, Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) show how it might be possible to conceptualise a *Feminism for the 99%* for the contemporary moment, which is, amongst other things, at once eco-socialist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and brings feminism together with other progressive and anti-capitalist social movements. Similar to Flew et al. (1999), Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) argue that such an alliance must start from a critique of capitalism, including issues such as housing, labour, environmental protection and colonialism, besides more traditional feminist issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence or gender roles. Far from dividing the movement against neoliberal capitalism by raising the issue that the contemporary working class must not be understood as an “undifferentiated, homogenous” or universal actor, they hold that alliance will in fact “become utterly impossible if we fail to take our differences seriously” (pp.83-84). After all, they write, “2018 is not 1848” (p.60) and there are a variety of important issues today that Marx and Engels did not take into consideration, including questions relating to sexuality, disability, ecology and gender. “Faced as we are with a more fractured and heterogeneous political landscape,” write Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, “it is not so easy for us to imagine a globally unified revolutionary force” (p.60). Yuval-Davis has a word for this aspect of feminist practice:

transversal politics, she argues, is a way of creating a “dialogue between people of different positionings” (1999, p.95) which might work “as an alternative to the assimilationist ‘universalistic’ politics of the Left on the one hand, and to identity politics on the other hand” (p.94).

It is this tendency of building bridges across a variety of differences that particularly qualifies respective feminist accounts to help make sense of how agency operates in alter-European activism. In the next two chapters (6 and 7), I will return to the Transeuropa Caravans activists to analyse the context and meaning of the campaign in more depth. What I intended to outline in the above anecdote from the activists’ stopover in Friedrichshafen, however, is how *agency in alter-European activism operates across three different registers of action according to a transversal logic*. Firstly, revolving around different themes, ranging from climate change to feminism and migration amongst others, the campaign is another example of the convergence of different *struggles* in alter-European activism that I have already discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Secondly, moving from location to location, the Transeuropa Caravans campaign reiterates Antonio’s point that it is not enough to claim agency in any one city or nation-state. In order to have the “power to actually change things”, as Antonio put it with regards to the case of Syriza in the beginning of this thesis, alter-European activism starts from the observation that agency has to be enacted across different geographical *scales*. Thirdly, as Jan suggested at the Fridays for Futures protest in Friedrichshafen, in order to advance radical change in society, agency must be claimed not only individually at the personal level (for instance becoming vegan), or through collective action on the streets (for instance through protests or strikes). His call to “take from the streets to the parliaments” suggests that alter-European activism starts from the assumption that radical social change needs to take place in different political *sites* at once.

It is through my engagement with feminist scholarship, then, that I discovered that the concept of agency lies at the heart of alter-European activism. As I will show, while it might have been possible to explore alter-European activism through the lens of other concepts, I found the conceptual flexibility of the term agency most useful to grasp the underlying logic according to which alter-European activism operates. In other words, I have decided to focus on agency rather than notions of “democracy”, “citizenship” or “public sphere” – although all of these concepts are equally challenged today by the aforementioned set of crises – because I believe it to be the most flexible term that

encompasses the different aspects of political action I want to discuss here. For one, this is because agency is a term that is often implied, yet there is much room left to properly conceptualise it. Furthermore, I believe that it is for this reason that agency lends itself better to widen our vocabulary and imagination of what might be politically possible in the contemporary moment than, for instance, “democracy” or “citizenship”, as those terms already come with fairly set analytical frameworks, such as the question of political structures or the concept of rights, while I wanted to allow my own exploration to be more guided by my field of study.

Besides feminist scholarship, there are two other fields that have been helpful to conceptualise alter-European activists’ sense of agency, which I will now turn to review in the remaining parts of this chapter: migration and citizenship studies, and social movement studies. Once again, it was my fieldwork that led me towards these particular sets of literature. Besides the role of feminism in alter-European activism, I have turned to migration and citizenship scholarship not least due to the common migratory background of many alter-European activists and the believe of some, like George, that (European) citizenship might be one possible route towards a sense of agency beyond borders today (Chapter 4). Finally, I will ultimately return to social movement studies’ understandings of agency as this is the scholarly literature to which my research ultimately contributes.

5.3. Migrants, citizens, cities: re-thinking agency below and beyond then nation

5.3.1. Nation, migration and the question of agency

“I lived in four countries without moving once”, says Hannah with a provocative smile when someone asks her where she is from. Born in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Hannah went to primary school in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, attended high school in Serbia and Montenegro and eventually studied in an independent Montenegro, she recalls. When I first met her at an alter-European activist meeting in Berlin in the summer of 2015, Hannah had already been studying, living and working in Germany for a few years. Hannah and I immediately bonded over a passion for debating, the experience of borders shifting around us after the fall of the Iron Curtain, which we both felt had shaped our lives significantly, and have since worked together on a number

of events with alter-European activists which received funding from the German social democratic Friedrich Ebert Foundation. At the time we met, Hannah also spent her evenings and weekends at a local refugee shelter as so many other volunteers in Germany and Europe who compensated the national governments' lack of even the most basic humanitarian provision during the first months of what misleadingly came to be known as the so-called "refugee crisis." For Hannah, who had experienced how people were helping each other when Montenegro received an influx of migrants during the collapse of Yugoslavia, volunteering her time to assist newcomers upon their arrival in Germany was common sense. At the same time, while supporting others, Hannah's own status as a non-EU citizen meant that she still had to undergo humiliating bureaucratic procedures to renew her residence permit every year. How come, the two of us kept wondering, that after all she has done for this society – volunteering, paying taxes, obeying all the rules of what it means to be a "good citizen" – that she was not even allowed to vote, let alone stand for elections, in the place she lived and contributed to every day?

Hannah's story is illustrative not only of the multinational or migratory backgrounds of many activists I met throughout my fieldwork (Chapter 4). It also shows how the borders of the nation-state are central to defining and perpetuating the idea of a territory bound political community today and thus, ultimately, to granting or withholding people a sense of agency. This, of course, has not always been the case. As McNevin (2011) reminds us, political belonging might also be granted according to a different logic, as is the case, for instance, in tribal societies. Nevertheless, with the fairly recent birth of the modern nation-state in the shape of the Treaty of Westphalia, "political community, identity, and practice have been linked conceptually to a relatively fixed relationship between state, citizen, and territory" (2011, p.16; see also Lister, 1997, p.51). Since then, the idea that nations and political belonging are rooted in territory is maintained through various social, cultural and legal processes of naturalisation of the national order as the taken for granted "*natural order of things*" (Malkki, 1997, p.71, my emphasis). As this seemingly "natural", national order is disrupted with the advent of globalization, however, McNevin observes how nation-states seemingly feel an "increasing pressure to close their borders to certain types of migrants and to maintain a strong sense of bounded national identity" (p.2). "Border policing", she holds, "creates for domestic consumption an image of a state in control" (p.7) In the words of Isin, "[i]t is in this act of entry that gives the most potent sense of the sovereignty of a nation-state in control of 'its' territory" (2012, p.28). McNevin contrasts the bordering practices of nation-states towards migrants with their willingness

to “open their borders to global market forces” (p.2). Indeed, as Brown (2010) shows, it is in the context of the nation-state’s waning sovereignty vis-à-vis global neoliberal actors that walls and fences are on the rise. While people are stopped at borders”, writes Mignolo in the preface to his thesis on border thinking in a globalized world, “money and commodities have a free ride” (2012, p.xv).

Besides such bordering practices, one of the central concepts through which scholars have explored migrants’ sense of agency is the notion of citizenship and the citizen/ non-citizen nexus (Lister, 1997; Isin, 2002; Khosravi, 2010). Zaborowski and Georgiou’s (2019) analysis of how news media’s visual representation of Europe’s so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 perpetuate a supposedly inherent difference between European citizens and the migrant Other illustrates this dynamic at work. Using two tropes from gaming theory, Zaborowski and Georgiou illustrate how news media coverage across different European countries works to “exaggerate newcomer’s strangeness and incompatible difference from the national subject” (p.92). In this portrayal of a supposedly inherent difference, refugees are rendered as “zombies” (non-citizens) while European nationals appear as the hero game players (citizens). Importantly, in this unequal scenario, it is the European citizen “who unilaterally controls the game and takes *action* when confronted with zombies” (p.92, my emphasis), while the “zombie” status of the refugee or migrant grants them “neither the political agency nor the human rights necessary to protect its existence from being annihilated” (p.105). As Zaborowski and Georgiou show, the citizen/ non-citizen binary – whether constructed and perpetuated legal or via the media – always bears crucial implications regarding the question of agency (see also Georgiou, 2018, on the links between media and migrants’ agency).

Against problematic binary notions of citizenship and political agency in both the media’s as well as scholarly portrayals of migrants (as criticised by Zaborowski and Georgiou, 2019), various migration and citizenship scholars have developed accounts of how migrants’ and refugees’ agency might be conceptualised and understood within and beyond the borders of territorially bound notions of citizenship (for instance Isin, 2002; Khosravi, 2010; McNevin, 2011). What such accounts demonstrate is that migrants’ sense of agency, exercised both through and beyond more common notions of citizenship, has a lot to teach us about how social change might take place. As McNevin argues, “[m]igration in all its forms creates social change that challenges prevailing ideas about who we are as citizens” (2011, p.2). It is for this reason that I will explore, in the

following, how scholars have employed the notion of citizenship towards progressive and border-crossing understandings of agency for my own conceptualisation of agency beyond borders, drawing in particular on Isin who conceptualised *acts of citizenship* across a number of works (2008, 2009, 2012). Before I can explore the notion of citizenship as a potential route to (or limitation of) agency and how this might help understand agency in the context of alter-European activists' actions like those of Hannah or Jan, however, it might be useful to clarify in bit more detail how the meaning of the term citizenship itself has developed over time.

5.3.2. *Citizenship as a route to agency*

In order to better understand how notions of citizenship and political belonging are changing in times of neoliberal globalization and what some have called the “age of migration” (Lister, 1997, p.44), I want to briefly outline how citizenship has been understood more generally. In its broadest sense, citizenship might be defined as the “membership of a political community” which involves four central components: “rights, duties, participation and identity” (Delanty, 2000, p.9). Delanty further distinguishes between two central approaches to citizenship: the liberal one and the communitarian one. Broadly speaking, while the former is centred either around the market or the state and describes a particular formal, legal status, such as a person's nationality, the latter might be understood as “a more active kind of citizenship” (p.9) that is centred around participation in a given civic community. Liberal citizenship is commonly traced back to the Greek *polis* or the Roman *res publica*, although Isin (2002) has shown that the perpetual return to ancient Greece and Rome conceals processes of contestation and paints a distorted Euro-centric picture of the origins of citizenship. Moreover, it is important to highlight that in the Greek and Roman expressions of citizenship, equality and access were restricted to male property-owning warriors (Delanty, 2000; Isin, 2009). Later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, citizenship was tied to the market or the state, such as in the context of the American and the French revolutions, but ultimately remained to be understood primarily as a set of individual rights and duties, that is, “citizenship was ultimately reducible to the pre-political private domain” (Delanty, 2000, p.22). In the communitarian tradition, the understanding of citizenship shifts from an individual to a collective focus, as notions of participation and identity are stressed. Here, Delanty explains, it is in community, rather than in the individual, where civil society is

located. Delanty sees communitarian critiques of liberal notions of citizenship as part of a process of “politicizing citizenship” (p.35).

While the distinction between liberal and communitarian approaches remains until today, several scholars have argued for understandings of citizenship that exceed such binary categorisations. Delanty (2000), for instance, has shown how new social movements, radical democracy and feminism have put different challenges to the concept of citizenship. The work of the feminist scholar Ruth Lister (1997) is particularly useful for my purposes of exploring the concept of agency as well as to illustrate how a binary understanding of citizenship as either liberal or communitarian might be synthesised. Indeed, agency lies at the heart of Lister’s feminist conceptualisation of citizenship, as “the content of citizenship rights is not fixed but remains the object of political struggles” (p.36). With regards to the distinction between rights and participation, Lister argues that “[c]itizenship as participation represents an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents” (p.36). According to Lister, a sense of agency, both precedes and is constituted by acts of citizenship. While she maintains a distinction between *being* a citizen and *acting* as a citizen (p.41), Lister suggests that a focus on agency does not only help to conceptually synthesise this distinction, but also opens up the question of who counts as an actor or a citizen, thereby contributing, for instance, “to the recasting of women as political actors” (p.38). The focus on agency can similarly help to include mobile subjects and non-citizen residents in a possible conceptualisation of citizenship. Understanding “irregular migrants as political actors”, McNevin (2011, p.4) shows how those without formal citizenship rights, and indeed sometimes without the aim of legalising their status (as this would only re-create the binary distinction between citizens and non-citizens) contest the political geography of citizenship and open up “new frontiers of the political” (p.5).

One of the most comprehensive theorisations of respective “acts of citizenship”, which McNevin and others draw on, has been developed by Isin (2008, 2009, 2012). Here, the question of agency initially features insofar as it is absent. Discussing contemporary mobile figures such as migrants, refugees and nomads, Isin suggests that their mode of resistance might derive not necessarily from a sense of “agency as such but because it unsettles the very attempt to fix it” (2009, p.367). Thus, the task, he argues, would be to start from the notion of the act itself and ask how it might challenge and expand our understanding of citizenship “as an institution in flux” (p.370), rather than trying to

contain and retrospectively make it fit within existing theories of citizenship. “We need”, claims Isin, “a new vocabulary of citizenship” (p.368). More than mere membership, Isin argues, citizenship might be understood as “a relation that governs the conduct of (subject) positions that constitute it” (p.371). Isin defines four elements that are essential in understanding citizenship in this sense as “activist citizenship”: *actors*, *sites*, *scales* and *acts*. *Actors* might be “individuals, states, NGOs and other legal or quasi-legal entities that come into being through enactment” (p.371). *Sites* refer to the “fields of contestation around which certain issues, interests, stakes as well as themes, concepts and objects assemble” (p.370), such as “bodies, courts, borders, networks, media” (p.371), while *scales* describe their “scopes of applicability” (p.370), including cities, nations or federations. *Acts* finally shift our “focus from what people *say*... to what people *do*” (p.371, original emphasis). Such “acts of citizenship” (p.371) might include “voting, volunteering, blogging, protesting, resisting and organizing” (p.372). Building on Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Philosophy of the Act* (1993) amongst other works (such as Arendt, 1998 in Isin, 2012), Isin further distinguishes between “acts” and “actions”: “To maintain a distinction between acts and action and acts and habitus requires recognizing *acts* as those that ‘create a scene’, which means both performance and disturbance” (2009, p.379). Isin provides the illustrative example of *actions* like merely habitual voting or paying tax. As opposed to such “routinized social actions that are already instituted”, he contrasts, “acts make a difference” (p.379).

Finally, with regard to mobile subjects, Isin further develops the idea of acts of citizenship in *Citizenship Without Frontiers* (2012) so as to do justice to the “multiple, complex and heterogeneous” realities of today’s world (p.8). Here, Isin formulates his idea with reference to notions of transnational, multinational or global forms of citizenship that have emerged from migration studies, which commonly take a moving subject as a starting point. In contrast, Isin suggests “shifting the focus from the moving subject to the acting subject” (p.11). Further developing his earlier idea of *activist citizenship* (2009), Isin speaks here of *traversing citizenship*, highlighting the fact that “‘citizens without frontiers’ traverse not only actual frontiers (borders, boundaries, zones) but also virtual (or symbolic) frontiers by acting in place of or against how they are supposed to act” (2012, p.14). As a result, Isin holds, “citizens without frontiers destabilize the established narratives of politics” (p.14). It is through this focus of the transgression of different boundaries, that the notion of citizenship and in particular Isin’s idea of *traversal acts of citizenship* becomes useful for my own conceptualisation of agency in alter-European

activism. Throughout the thesis, I will return to the different aspects that Isin defines as relevant to understanding acts, addressing each of them in a respective chapter on *actors* (discussing the role of different identities and the convergence of struggles – see Chapter 4), *scales* (discussing activists’ nomadic media practices and trans-local networks – see Chapter 6) and *sites* (discussing the role of institutions and the possibilities of trans-municipal actors – see Chapter 7).

While borrowing from Isin, however, I am less interested, in this thesis, in that which Isin claims to be “the substance of citizenship”, namely *rights* (2009, p.376), but, more broadly, in people’s capacity to act towards social change. Indeed, this capacity to act might include claims towards rights, but describes a broader understanding of agency that also includes other social, cultural and political aspects. While I follow Isin’s interest in *acts* and agree with the need for a new vocabulary of describing and understanding their relevance in the contemporary moment, I am ultimately less interested in doing so for the purpose of advancing theories of citizenship, but better understanding *agency as collective action for social change*. It is for this reason that the third part of this chapter will turn towards scholarship of collective action and social movements, to which my thesis ultimately contributes. Before I can do so, however, I want to elaborate further on the notion of scales and how citizenship scholars have conceptualised agency in global times, as this will become central to the transversal understanding of agency which I will develop further in this thesis and particularly in Chapter 7.

5.3.3. *Scales of agency: from global civil society to global cities*

As Isin puts it, it is the “boundedness of citizenship to the nation-state that has become problematic in the age of migration and globalization” (2012, p.6). Thus, in the last three decades, various scholars have explored what an understanding of citizenship that is no longer “confined within the boundaries set by nation-states” (Lister, 1997, p.55) might look like. These include concepts such as cosmopolitan citizenship (Delanty, 2000), citizenship without frontiers (Isin, 2012), global civil society (Kaldor, 2003), flexible or nomadic citizenship (Ong, 1999; Braidotti, 2015), European citizenship (Delanty, 2000; Shore, 2000; Balibar, 2004), and the global city (Sassen, 2000, 2001, 2004). In the current absence of “an infrastructure of global citizenship incorporating institutions with the power to enforce such rights and duties” (Lister, 1997, p.60; see also Delanty, 2000),

central to some of the concepts of global, transnational or cosmopolitan citizenship is “the idea of a multi-layered citizenship, operating on several frontiers from the local to the global, in which people can express multiple and overlapping loyalties and identities” (Lister, 1997, p.57). Ong’s flexible citizenship, for instance, highlights the notion of the transnational as a transversal space:

“*Trans* denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive* aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism.” (1999, p.4)

Braidotti’s (2015) idea of nomadic flexible citizenship in Europe is another example of the transgressive dynamic of multi-scalar citizenship. While the idea of European citizenship, its legal, cultural and political aspects, has been extensively discussed by numerous scholars (for instance Delanty, 2000; Shore, 2000; Balibar, 2004), Braidotti’s account is particularly interesting in this regard in that it focusses on the potentially nomadic and transcultural aspects of citizenship that seek to escape notions of boundedness. Drawing on the work of other feminist scholars including Seyla Benhabib, Braidotti argues that legal European citizenship can be made available to “all kinds of hybrid citizens” including stateless people, “migrants and temporary non-European residents” (p.106).

Finally, important to understanding how agency is enacted in alter-European activist networks, as I will show in Chapter 7, are discussions regarding the role that the local level plays for how transnational forms of citizenship are expressed. Indeed, before citizenship was as closely wedded to the modern nation-state as it is today, it originated in cities. For even if we do not start with the Greek *polis* or the Roman *res publica*, cities were the places in which original forms of citizenship have traditionally been negotiated over time in different parts of the world, including in Mesopotamia or South America, as Isin (2002) has shown. In fact, as Delanty (2000) reminds us, the very term citizenship originally meant just that – resident of a particular town. “There was, then,” he argues, “historically a very clear relationship between the condition of citizenship and membership of a city” (p.12). Today, “global city regions are the primary nodes” in the networks of contemporary globalisation and global flows (Isin, 2000, p.3). Interacting

simultaneously with a diversity of global actors such as international institutions, multinational companies and various transnational organisations, “[e]vents that take place in these nodes resonate beyond their immediate sphere precisely because they are nodes within highly complex and overlapping networks rather than self-contained and isolated territories” (p.3). Questions regarding the agency of cities and city dwellers have thus become one of the central issues in discussions about contemporary processes of notions of citizenship and agency in global times (for instance Smith, 2001; Georgiou, 2013, 2016).

The term “global city” itself has been coined by Sassen (2000, 2001, 2004), who has written extensively about related issues. Sassen understands the global city simultaneously as a central node in processes of global finance capitalism, as well as a potential site for localised global resistance. As such, the city can be read as one of the key sights of struggle for agency in times of globalization. According to Sassen, the global city provides a space for “the formation of conceptual and operational openings for actors other than the national state in cross-border political dynamics” (2000, p.48), that is for “a new type of transnational politics that localizes in these cities” (p.49). Two types of (transnational) actors that can be identified in this context are the “global corporate actors” on the one hand, and those who have not previously fit under the umbrella of modern nationhood, including “minorities, immigrants, first-nation people and many women” (p.48). Besides this focus on specific actors, understanding processes of globalization via the city also makes visible the very material aspects which otherwise often go unnoticed in more abstract analyses of the issue. As Sassen puts it, a focus on the city helps to “recover place in analyses of the global economy” (p.49). One crucial aspect of Sassen’s argument is to understand economic globalisation “in its multiple localizations, rather than purely in terms of the broad, overarching macro-level processes that dominate the mainstream account” (p.53). Sassen stresses that this includes not only the city level itself, but also the levels of “the community and the household as an important economic space in global cities.” (p.53; see also Georgiou, 2006) Sassen allocates a sense of agency to actors in these spaces, which she describes with the notion of *presence*, that is, “a condition of being an actor even though lacking power”, which refers to “a broader political process that escapes the boundaries of the formal polity” and “signals the possibility of a politics” (p.58). This feminist viewpoint is a crucial addition for a multi-scalar view of agency, besides other levels such sub-, trans- and supra-national

spheres, including for how agency is understood in alter-European activism, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 7.

As Sassen's work as well as other studies on cities and their possibilities for agency (for instance Smith, 2001; Georgiou, 2013, 2016) have shown, one of the main advantages of a view that starts from the local, is that it casts subjects such as migrants, women and ethnic minorities as central actors in global politics. Georgiou, for instance, uses the term "street agency" (2013, p.150) to describe how city dwellers seek to challenge hegemonic power structures and exercise forms of agency that might not neatly fit within certain fixed categories of representational democracies. Moreover, the role that cities and city dwellers might and have played in the fight against climate change (Norgaard, 2011; Klein, 2019) is an illustrative example of how re-thinking transnational agency from the local level might work in practice. I will return to these discussions and the importance of local actors for alter-European activism in more detail throughout this thesis and particularly in Chapter 7. For now, what I wanted to show in this section is that once we de-couple citizenship and political belonging from the hegemonic ordering principle of the territorially bound nation-state and focus instead on the notion of agency and the acts of different subjects, including migrants, important aspects of agency become visible.

Like McNevin (2011) and Isin (2012), however, I do not want to develop my own conceptualisation of agency purely theoretically but base it in empirical evidence from my work with alter-European activist networks. I will thus now turn to discussions of social movements in order to situate the acts and practices of these activists into the wider discussion of how agency has been understood in social movement studies, demonstrating how my own conceptualisation of agency contributes to existing scholarship.

5.4. Social movements as historical actors: re-thinking agency across sites

5.4.1. Approaches to agency in social movement scholarship

As the actor I am primarily interested in in this thesis is a social movement, I want to return, in this final section of this chapter, to social movement studies and introduce how some scholars in this field have discussed the question of agency. In social movement studies, the concept of agency might arguably be closely related to the idea of *collective*

action. Munck offers a useful definition of social movements in this sense, conceptualising them “as a type of collective action oriented towards change by a decentralized mass or collectivity of people led, in a non-hierarchical fashion, by a social actor” (1995, p.672; see also Melucci, 1989). Yet, despite this common interest in collective action for change, there seems to be no consensus regarding exactly how this type of action, or sense of collective agency, is to be understood or evaluated. Bearing in mind that certain distinctions made between American and European traditions of social movement studies are sometimes crude and false at worst (as Flesher Fominaya and Cox, 2013, have demonstrated), some scholars suggest that different approaches to agency have emerged on either side of the Atlantic.

In relation to the question of agency, Jasper suggests that one of the main differences between American and European approaches is that they prioritise either a “materialist” or a “culturalist” view respectively (see 2010, p.969). Similarly, Munck sees one of the main differences between the American and the European literature in their focus on strategy and identity respectively. Most influential in the American tradition have been approaches such as resource mobilisation, rational choice theory and Tarrow’s political process model, all of which pursue, according to Munck, an “actor-centred approach”, which prioritises questions of material resources and “social co-ordination” (1995, pp. 669-670), that is “the process whereby a social movement is constituted as a movement” (p.673). European approaches, on the other hand, would understand movement actors primarily as structurally constituted and thus rather focus their attention on issues such as identity formation, which the American literature somewhat neglects despite its actor-centred approach (see pp. 670-672). As Munck argues, European discussions of actor and identity formation can be understood “in terms of the shared experience a set of people have, in the context of a structural crisis, that ‘things could be different’” (p.672). In other words, he highlights two aspects that are central to the emergence of collective identity and collective action: “a vision of a new order” and “the structure of the old order” (p.672) against which this is formulated. Munck refers to the work of Alain Touraine here, whose ideas of post-industrial society describe “the structure of social conflict” and social movements as historical actors (p.673; see for instance Touraine, 1985). Another in-depth conceptualisation of collective action and collective identity in the European literature can be found in the work of Melucci (1989, 1995, 1996), who was himself influenced by Touraine’s work (as Flesher Fominaya, 2010, p.394 pointed out; see also Flesher

Fominaya and Cox, 2013) and whose idea of collective identity I have already applied to the context of alter-European actors in Chapter 4.

Different scholars have argued that neither American nor European traditions of social movement studies alone are capable of fully grasping and conceptualising a comprehensive “theory of action” (Jasper, 2010, p.699). A respective theory must arguably move beyond what Jasper sees as a “material/ cultural dichotomy” (p.696) and what Munck contrasts as two primary approaches to social movement studies: “a European approach stressing the notion of ‘identity’, and an American approach focusing on the notion of ‘strategy’” (1995, p.668). For Munck, one of the central aspects missing in both traditions is that “neither the American nor the European literature has adequately addressed the distinct challenge that movement founders face as they engage strategically with their political-institutional environment in an attempt to realise change” (p. 674). Jasper (2008) offers a possible explanation for why this dimension seems to have been neglected in the European literature: for scholars like Touraine, the emergence of what Jasper calls “post-industrial theories” and the new social movements was precisely about resisting the “contemporary ruling class of technocrats” (2008, p.72). As Jasper explains:

“post-industrial movements were less interested in gaining state power or even electing legislative representatives, less oriented toward establishing citizenship rights, and more suspicious of formal, especially hierarchical, organizations. Rather than aiming ultimately at changes in state policy, much of their activity was intended to change the practices and beliefs of members and other segments of the public” (p.70).

Similarly, Munck argues that “the problem of political strategy is shown to lie outside of the reach of either” (1995, p.668) American or European approaches, not least as “students of social movements were originally attracted to study them because they were seen as alternatives to more conventional forms of politics,” so that “little was done to theorise the link between social movements and national political institutions” (1995, p.668). While Munck holds that the American tradition “has focused quite explicitly on political-institutional *outcomes* and has considered the link between social movements and political institutions quite extensively” (p.674, emphasis added), referring, for instance, to the work of Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, he nevertheless holds that movements’ capacity to function as a strategic political actor has thus far been under-theorised. In other words, until a recently emerging interest in phenomena such as the

“movement parties” of the 21st century (della Porta et al., 2017; Flesher Fominaya 2020a, b), which I will discuss in more detail in one of the following chapters, movements’ strategic engagement with their “political-institutional environment”, Munck (1995, p.674) implies, received considerably little attention in the study of social movements in the second half of the twentieth century.

Jasper, who seeks to draft out a framework for a more comprehensive “theory of action” (2010, p.965) for social movement studies, highlights a second level of action that requires further attention. Like Munck, he complicates the shortfalls of both the American and the European traditions and the material/ culturalist dichotomy. Unlike Munck, who is interested in movements’ strategies towards political institutions, however, Jasper directs our attention to the microsociological level, that is towards a more everyday level of analysis that considers individuals’ choices, emotions and lived experiences. This level arguably already featured in Melucci’s work (1995; see Flesher Fominaya, 2010, p.395) and was subsequently highlighted by scholarship on different discourses including pragmatism, feminism and queer theory and cultural-historical activity theory (Jasper, 2010). Nevertheless, shifting our view away from grand theories towards the microsociological dimensions of human action, Jasper stresses that “[s]erious efforts to grapple with agency must remain close to agents’ lived experience” (p.973). Here lies the challenge to a conceptualisation of agency within contemporary social movements like alter-European activist networks: how can it take into consideration both Munck’s call for a focus on the more institutional and Jasper’s attention to the everyday dimension of human action?

Finally, there is the question how the border-crossing forces and processes that arose in the context of globalization (Chapter 3) might feature in this analysis – a question that is particularly relevant to understanding the nature of agency in alter-European activism as it started to become visible in events and campaigns like Transeuropa Festival and Transeuropa Caravans, both of which spread across national borders. Much like how territory bound notions of citizenship are challenged by different forms of migration, there is a conceptual need, here, to undercut, borrowing Kuus’ words, “the methodological nationalism that still creeps into ‘big picture’ accounts of politics, especially international politics, as it enables us to discern the emergent transnational connections that remain out of view in state-based studies” (2019, p.165). Similarly, Jasper argues that “[r]ecent theories of ‘globalization’ have forced social movement

theorists to rethink their obsession with the nation state and to recognize the importance of different arenas”, while highlighting that this simultaneously requires us to pay attention to “the microfoundations that make up global, national, and local politics” (2010, p.974). In order to explore these different dynamics further, it is useful to return to one of the actors I have already introduced in Chapter 3: the alter-globalization movement.

5.4.2. *Sites of agency in the alter-globalization movement*

Social movement scholarship on the alter-globalization movements, which I have already discussed in some detail in Chapter 3, provides an interesting starting point for how agency might be conceptualised for contemporary transnational social movement actors. This is not least because their struggle against neoliberal globalization – like the struggle of contemporary climate movements or the questions I raised regarding migrants’ agency in the previous section – points to the perceived lack of agency when it comes to contemporary political challenges. As Flesher Fominaya argues, besides their critique of neoliberal globalization, the alter-globalization movement started from the observation that “representative models of democracy were failing to represent the interest and desires of the citizens and did not allow citizens sufficient input into the decisions that affect not only their lives, but the lives of people around the world” (2014, p.53). Similarly, Pleyers highlights the need of “asserting the importance of social agency in the face of global challenges and against neoliberal ideology”, that is, that “[c]itizens and social movements can have an impact on the way our common global future is shaped” (p.11). Here, we are once again confronted with the question that drives both this chapter and this thesis more broadly, namely: how to act in the face of contemporary global challenges?

Against the perceived lack of agency in times of neoliberal globalization, Pleyers’ work offers a particularly useful account of different forms of agency in the alter-globalization movement as it explicitly focusses on the question of “social agency in the global age” (2010, p.23) and what he calls the “will to become an actor” (p.16). Pleyers argues that “[a]lter-globalization embodies a call for the *renewal of political citizenship and activism*” (p.23, original emphasis). For Pleyers, this sense of “renewal” is characterised by the alter-globalization movement’s shift beyond previous articulations of contentious

politics including new social movements, trade unions and international NGOs, as well as its ambiguous relationship to political parties (see pp. 23-35). More specifically, not dissimilar to the aforementioned distinction between the everyday (Jasper, 2010) and the strategic level of agency (Munck, 1995), Pleyers identifies “[t]wo paths to becoming an actor in the global age”: “One focuses on subjectivity and creativity, the other on reason and rationality” (p.11, original emphasis). In other words, one part of the movement, Pleyers argues, focusses more on “a transformation of social relations, rooted in everyday life”, while the other focusses more on “a regulation of the economy through technical measures and a democratization of international institutions” (p.181). While he also shows how the two approaches work alongside, absorb or cross-fertilise one another, such as in the cases of the World Social Forums or the gathering in Seattle (p.185; Chapter 3), Pleyers maintains this somewhat binary distinction between grassroots “activists” and expert “citizens” throughout his argument. The tension that Pleyers highlights here, has also been pointed out by other scholars of the movement (for instance de Sousa Santos, 2006; Juris, 2008a; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Flesher Fominaya, for instance, distinguishes “between Institutional Left and autonomous approaches to collective action”, (2014, p.66), while McDonald remarks that movements have often “been understood within a recurring dichotomy, one understood as either in *instrumental* terms (framed in terms of models of rational action) or in *expressive* terms (with an emphasis on identity, the symbolic or communities)” (2006, p.17).

The distinction between everyday and institutional expressions of agency in social movements is useful not least because it highlights an aspect of agency that might be crucial in conceptualising agency in the contemporary moment, namely the question of *political agency*, understood with regard to the movements’ relationship with political parties and institutions, and the question of intentionality. Pleyers (2010) discusses the alter-globalization movement’s ambiguous relationship with institutions, in which some grant existing institutions a central place in their struggle, while others want to get rid of them altogether. While he criticises the top-down approaches of some of the activists working with institutions, however, Pleyers also holds that “the potential role of existing institutions in strengthening democracy is often underestimated by activists” (p.221). Indeed, Pleyers shows that even the discourse of a radical rejection of anything state related that is pushed by some of the activists stands in contradiction to some of their actions and practices. Flesher Fominaya similarly argues that while some of the differences between Institutional Left and the autonomous left might have “prevented

unified collective action” at times (2014, p.67), the two strands can generally “be seen as complementing each other despite their real differences” (p.72).

How, then, do such previous findings compare to contemporary movements such as alter-European activism that are active nearly two decades after the alter-globalization movements? Thinking back to Jan’s speech at the Fridays for Future protest in Friedrichshafen with which I began this chapter, both registers of action seem inherently interlinked in his own involvement with alter-European activist networks. While engaging in direct action himself and actively supporting the students’ protest, the Transeuropa Caravan activist also urged the students gathering at the shores Lake Constance to take their struggle from the streets to the parliaments and supports the idea and efforts of movements running for (European, national or local) elections. A similar overlapping between an enactment of agency that relates both to its more political institutional and to its more everyday, social or cultural sense was also already beginning to surface in the aftermath of the movements of the squares and the new municipal movement parties that emerged from them, which I mentioned in Chapter 3 and to which I will return in more detail in Chapter 7. Featherstone’s (2008) conceptualisation of agency in the alter-globalization movement points to how it might be possible to rethink agency in a way that combines different registers of action. He starts from the idea of connection rather than boundedness and develops “an account of agency that is ongoing and in process”, and works through “the ongoing negotiation of cross-cutting relations of power” (p.7). Featherstone’s idea of agency takes into consideration different forms of power at play in times of neoliberal globalization but is neither bound to an abstract global understanding of agency, nor exclusively local. Instead, it focuses on different “routes of resistance” (p.188), that is, on the relations between heterogenous actors and places. What seems to be required to understand agency in alter-European activist networks, is a conceptualisation of agency that similarly works across different boundaries.

5.4.3. Conceptualising agency across borders

Taken together, how might the aforementioned approaches to agency in feminist scholarship, migration, citizenship and social movement studies be useful to make sense of agency in alter-European activism and to offer a conceptualisation of agency that might

be useful to investigate transnational social movements in the 21st century more generally?

In the 20th century, argues de Sousa Santos, insurgent internationalism depended on four central factors, namely “a privileged social actor (workers or workers and peasants); a privileged type of organization (trade unions and working-class parties together with their federations and Internationals); a centrally defined strategy (the Internationals’ resolutions); [and] a politics originating in the North” (2006, p.38). By the beginning of the 21st century, as I have shown in this chapter, the picture arguably looks somewhat more complicated. Feminists have argued that a serious challenge towards contemporary capitalism must work across struggles and “for the 99%” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019), including anti-racist, anti-imperial and eco-socialist movements, while climate strikers call for a radical transformation of “all aspects of society” (Klein, 2019, p.24). Irregular migrants and other inhabitants of the “global city” (Sassen, 2000) have challenged territorially bound notions of agency that wed citizenship to the nation-state in favour of more spatially flexible forms of political belonging, as different citizenship scholars have shown (for instance McNevin, 2011; Isin, 2012). Finally, recent social movement actors from the alter-globalization movement to the movements of the squares have further complicated the boundaries of political agency with regard to movements’ relationship with political parties and institutions. Reflecting on such changes, de Sousa Santos holds that the alter-globalization movement cannot be understood in the same way as the internationalism in the 20th century and “new analytical concepts are called for” (2006, p.8). Arguing that the World Social Forums drew on a more “hybrid political culture” that originated in the Global South, de Sousa Santos sees their politics as characterised by a greater social, cultural and political diversity (p.38), that is at once trans-scalar (p.128), “trans-thematic” (p.8) and transversal in terms of its political actions, strategies and actors. Consequently, his analysis focusses on processes of “transversality” (p.39), “translation” (p.25) and what he dubs, in passing, as “transpolitical” (p.xi).

The notion of the transversal or traversal has been running through this chapter and the different articulations of agency that I have discussed here. For instance, de Sousa Santos’ idea of a “*contact zone*” (p.133, original emphasis) that allows for processes of translation between different knowledges and practices is not dissimilar from Yuval-Davis’ *transversal politics* (1999) or Kennelly’s idea of “relational agency” (2011, p.112). Finally, Isin defines acts of citizenship as “traversal”, not only in geographic terms, but

in terms of other boundaries, too. Isin's concept of *traversal politics* or *traversal citizenship* (2012) focusses on the acts that transgress different frontiers through notions of rupture and transformation. While the traversal of national and geographic frontiers is at the heart of his *Citizens Without Frontiers*, Isin also shows that

“...political subjects traverse other boundaries such as identities, interests and affiliations and act across them. So traversing frontiers can literally mean to act across geographic boundaries but also figuratively indicate acting across social and cultural boundaries.” (p.150)

Isin provides different examples for the traversal of social and cultural boundaries, such as a Canadian governor general participating in an Inuit ritual as an act of solidarity or the case of straight men participating in a public “kiss-in” in solidarity with the rights of gay men, illustrating his conceptualisation of acts as creative, inventive and autonomous, which distinguishes the traversal from a global understanding of citizenship and agency (see pp.154-160). What is at stake in Isin's chosen examples, are acts that enact solidarity across difference. In other words, what is required when rethinking agency in the contemporary moment, are “new forms of counter-hegemonic agency” (de Sousa Santos, 2006, p.131) that take into consideration both the actors' capacity to translate between different thematic struggles, strategic sites and geographic scales, in order to enact social change on a personal, cultural and political level.

It is these three elements of transgression, then, which I address throughout this thesis in my investigation of alter-European activist networks: the transgression of boundaries between different *struggles*, *sites* and *scales*. Isin's theorisation of *acts of citizenship* (2008) which identifies four crucial dimensions of understanding agency in global times - *actors*, *sites*, *scales* and *acts* – is particularly useful here for my own conceptualisation of agency. My analytical framework takes from Isin's the dimensions of actors (struggles – see Chapter 4), scales (Chapter 6) and sites (Chapter 7). Moreover, I will expand these categories with reference to my context of alter-European activist networks by borrowing from social movement studies the question of political agency and what it means to work with institutions and translate between different *sites* of action. Thus, I will pay particular attention to “the work of inter-cultural and transpolitical translation” (2006, p.xi) as de Sousa Santos defines one of the most important questions of left-wing politics today with regards to the work of the alter-globalization movement, acknowledging that

“...the political strength of the WSF would depend on its capacity to formulate credible proposals and to generate enough political leverage to force them on to the political agendas of national governments and multilateral agencies... It is a long-range challenge because, for these proposals to become part of the political agendas, the national and transnational political institutions must be changed.” (pp.39-40)

To capture the struggle described by de Sousa Santos here and to offer a conceptualisation of agency that adheres more accurately to the different levels of action and the multiplicity and multi-layeredness of movements like alter-European activist networks, this thesis focusses in on the notion of the *transversal*, that is, the processes of translation between different registers of action. It is here, the thesis argues, where alter-European activists’ sense of agency emerges, as I will demonstrate in the chapters to come, moving towards a conceptualisation of what I want to call *transversal agency*.

5.5. Conclusion: towards a conceptualisation of *transversal agency*

In this chapter I reviewed a selection of scholarly approaches to the concept of agency that are particularly relevant to my own research field with the purpose to build a theoretical framework with the help of which I will further conceptualise agency in alter-European activism in what remains of this thesis. As in Chapter 3, the literature discussed here was largely selected based on the particularities of my own field, leading me to work with feminist scholarship, migration and citizenship and social movement scholars in particular, all of which I will rely on for my own conceptualisation of transversal agency.

The chapter started with a broad overview of how different scholars have understood agency across the social sciences. In this first part I demonstrated why it is necessary to re-think agency for the 21st century, based not only on my own experience in the field (for instance with Jan and the Transeuropa Caravans activists at the Fridays for Future protest in Friedrichshafen), but also based on ongoing, contemporary discussions in the political sciences (for instance regarding the state of democracy in times of border-crossing challenges). I also demonstrated why a re-thinking of agency beyond borders today, particularly in the context of alter-European activism, needs to take place through a feminist lens, as I will argue further Chapter 7.

The second part of the chapter drew on migration and citizenship scholarship to illustrate the limits of territorially bound notions of agency in the shape of national citizenship. Exploring citizenship as a potential route to agency, this part introduced Isin's theorisation of *acts of citizenship* (2008, 2009, 2012), which provides a useful frame for my own conceptualisation of agency beyond borders. I also began to introduce the level of the city and the question which role it might play for a sense of transnational agency – a discussion I will return to in more detail in Chapter 7.

Finally, the third part of the chapter returned to the field of social movement studies to which this thesis contributes. Reviewing different social movement scholars' takes on agency, I further expanded the notion of *sites* and the meaning of different (social, cultural, political) realms in which agency might be exercised. As I have shown in this part, the thesis picks up a discussion that has already surfaced in the alter-globalization movement, namely precisely how transnational social movements understand social change to take place and how they might contribute to it, that is, how agency is understood in contemporary transnational movements.

As I have begun to argue in the previous, final part of this chapter, this thesis puts forward the idea of *transversal agency* – an approach to agency that grants particular attention to processes of transgression, transformation and translation between different registers of action (struggles, scales, sites), which I will now turn to develop further in the remaining chapters. Having already investigated the dimension of *struggles* and how alter-European activists attempt to create events and campaigns that are able to translate between different actors and identities in Chapter 4, the following two chapters examine the dimensions of *scales* (Chapter 6) and *sites* (Chapter 7) in more detail, building on the literature reviewed in this chapter.

Picking up a central question raised by the migration and citizenship scholars consulted in this chapter, Chapter 6 asks where agency might be rooted if not within the territory of nation-states, returning to the case of Transeuropa Caravans and discussing other nomadic (media) practices in alter-European activism. Next, Chapter 7 will discuss alter-European activists' complex relationship with political institutions and explain the role feminism plays in the movement in more depth. I will also return to the discussion on the role of cities, which I began to sketch out here, and discuss the case of municipal movement parties in particular. Finally, Chapter 8 will tie together the transversal

understanding of agency that runs through this thesis' understanding of alter-European activist networks.

6. Nomadic activism: caravans, media and trans-scalar agency

6.1. Introduction

This chapter investigates the dimension of scale in alter-European activists' sense of agency. In other words, the chapter asks where – if not within the borders of nation-states – agency is *located* in the context of alter-European activism. The chapter also discusses different *sites* of action, such as the act of voting, the development of alternative media and the work with established media. As Isin argues, “sites and scales are not mutually exclusive and discrete but overlapping and connected elements of acts” (2012, p.133). Nevertheless, he holds that “[s]ometimes it is necessary to use site-scales together and sometimes as separate attributes, depending on the specific situation under investigation” (p.133). Thus, for the purpose of developing the argument I want to put forward throughout this thesis, I will address the issue of sites and how activists move between personal and institutional repertoires of action in the next chapter, while this chapter focusses on how they move and translate between different scales of action.

The first part of the chapter approaches the question of scale by broadly situating alter-European activist practices geographically. I begin, here, with an ethnographic anecdote describing a visit to Brussels, so as to illustrate where the particular brand of alter-European activism that is at stake in this thesis is *not* primarily located. Subsequently, the chapter will return to the Transeuropa Caravans campaign, which I already introduced briefly at the beginning of the previous chapter, following alter-European activists as they travel across the continent in the run up to the European Parliament elections in 2019. Situating the Transeuropa Caravans campaign within a wider history of activist caravanning practices, this first part illustrates how alter-European activism is at odds with an understanding of Europe that is located primarily in Brussels or Strasbourg and calls, instead for a more de-centralised understanding of agency.

Further exploring the role of territory, the second part of the chapter suggests that the spatial logic of alter-European activism might be understood as *nomadic*. Here, I will discuss how the figure of the nomad has been conceptualised by a variety of scholars, as well as pointing to the limitations of the nomadic figure and a nomadic activist practice.

The final part of the chapter returns to the question of agency, illustrating how the nomadic logic of alter-European activism underpins the movement's approach to agency. In order to make this point, I will draw in particular on alter-European activists' media practices, discussing both how they are at odds with the sedentary logic of national media as well as how nomadic activist media contributes towards a trans-scalar understanding of agency. Illustrating how activists' actions operate accordingly across different scales, this final part of the chapter highlights the role of different processes of translation for alter-European activism's transversal sense of agency.

Before I can turn to explore the trans-scalar logic of alter-European activism, however, I want to begin where one might locate alter-European activism at first glance, namely at the self-ascribed "heart" of European democracy: the European Quarter in Brussels.

6.2. The question of scale: situating alter-European activism

6.2.1. *Departure from Brussels*

"Welcome to the European Parliament, the heart of democracy in the European Union," reads one of the flyers I am handed upon arrival at Brussels Luxembourg train station, which has been transformed into a welcome centre for visitors to the parliament. My first research visit to the European Quarter in Brussels takes place in March 2019, more than two years into this research. I arrive exactly 65 days before the European Parliament elections take place, as I am being informed by a gigantic digital countdown installed on Simone Veil square. When booking my Eurostar ticket from London a few days before, I realised that I had not been to Brussels once in almost three years of research with European activists. This observation struck me as rather odd: if Brussels was the supposed "heart" of international politics in Europe, why had my ethnography with alter-European activists not yet taken me here? The purpose of this trip was to attend a meeting with left MEPs, which a group of academics and activists, including members of European Alternatives, had organised in order to present what they called the Charta2020. The Charta outlines a series of what the activists referred to as 20 "objects of political desire", which they believe need to be urgently addressed in the parliament's next legislative period, starting in 2020. These include, amongst others: a "European Workers Compact" that protects the rights of workers all across the continent, a "Common European Asylum

System” that improves sea rescue at Europe’s borders and allows refugees and asylum seekers to move freely across the continent, and “Green Public Investment” to “end the regime of austerity and unleash an EU-wide green transition to a zero-carbon economy” (Fieldnotes, Brussels, March 2019). Since it is my first time in EU-Brussels, I decided to arrive a day before the meeting in order to familiarise myself with the self-ascribed “heart” and “*de facto* capital of Europe” (Shore, 2000, p.156, original emphasis), and pay a visit to the European institutions.

“When Americans make a pilgrimage to Washington”, writes Berlant, “they are trying to grasp the nation in its totality” (1993, p.395). “Yet,” she continues, “the totality of the nation in its capital city is a jumble of historical modalities” and so a trip to Washington, Berlant suggests, might be viewed as a “test of citizenship competence”, a “pedagogy of patriotic performance” (p.395). Perhaps Brussels is meant to do something similar for Europe, I wondered at my arrival in the European Quarter – to represent the continent *in its totality* and install a sense of European patriotism in its visitors. Indeed, Shore, too, describes the European Union quarter with its EU gift shops and glass and concrete monuments as “Europe’s equivalent of Washington DC” (2000, p.157). At the European Parliament, there are three sites, or, indeed, *sights*, which visitors can access on their “pilgrimage” to EU-Brussels, as the flyer I was given at the transformed Brussels Luxembourg train station informed me: the “Parlamentarium”, the “Hemicycle”, where parliament meetings take place and the “House of European history” museum. I decided to first head to the so-called “Parlamentarium”. Given these rather extraordinary names alongside the futuristic architecture of the parliament buildings itself, I could not help but think of this quarter of Brussels as an alien spaceship that somewhat accidentally descended in the middle of this city. Later, one local activist told me that the institutions are perceived precisely as such – extra-terrestrial zones which might be geographically close, but at the same time far away from the local urban communities (see also Shore, 2000). Alternatively, the name “Parlamentarium” sounded, to me, more like a kind of parliament devoted theme park – which is precisely what it turned out to resemble.

According to my leaflet, the “groundbreaking” Parlamentarium will allow visitors of all ages to “experience the European Parliament as never before” (Fieldnotes, Brussels, March 2019) In other words, here, Brussels provides what Washington offers to U.S. citizens in Berlant’s *Theory of Infantile Citizenship*: the opportunity of “playing at being” (1993, p.395) European. Upon entering the Parlamentarium, I find myself in the midst of

large groups of students and school children speaking various languages, engaging with the “interactively” designed space. You can pop your head under lampshades with famous people’s faces printed on them and take a selfie as Mozart or Jane Austen. You can scan displays with the interactive device you are given in order to consume further information and videos about what you look at. You can push a robot around on an interactive floor map and learn more about how the European Union has supported different localities. After two hours of rather gimmicky edutainment, my head is buzzing, at the same time feeling overloaded with information as well as under-stimulated. While visitors can learn an awful lot about what the parliament is about, how it works, who its MEPs are, and listen to stories of how EU policy has positively influenced people’s everyday life, something essential seems to be missing here.

Despite the countless opportunities to engage in “pedagogy of patriotic performance” (here: scanning information, watching videos, pushing robots around), it remains unclear how people can actually participate in the *politics* taking place in the EU institutions, besides voting for their MEPs every five years. The lack of any opportunity for critical engagement is also visible in the themes which are missing in the timeline of major cultural and historical events that runs across a long wall in one of the rooms. While the timeline covers numerous important events - including the feminist movement and the successes of the Polish trade union Solidarność, besides references to Pasolini films and the fall of the Berlin Wall - two events that have occupied much of the attention of many of the activists I worked with in the last few years were – perhaps unsurprisingly – absent: the EU’s austerity measures towards Greece, and Europe’s so-called “refugee-crisis” in 2015. What seems to be promoted here, rather than a critical engagement with EU politics, is “a consciousness of the [in this case: European] nation with no imagination of agency – apart perhaps from voting” (Berlant, 1993, p.407). In other words, what takes place here, is a prioritisation of information over agency, of memory over transformation:

“The infantile citizen has a memory of the nation and a tactical relation to its operation. But no version of sustained agency accompanies the national [here: European] system here. It provides information but no memory-driven access to its transformative use” (Berlant, 1993, p.408).

Once again, I am reminded of something Antonio, a founding member of European Alternatives, told me in an interview: “citizens of Europe cannot exercise a political agency to transform policies at the European level” (Antonio, October 2017). In their

book *Citizens of Nowhere* (2018), Marsili and Milanese make a similar remark about the difficulty to exercise agency via the European institutions, talking about the difficulty to even get access to Brussels' institutions:

“It turns out that getting into the parliament is not so easy: you either need to be an accredited journalist, a lobbyist, or you need to have been invited by a member of the parliament, who sends an assistant to come and collect you... most of the members of parliament were surprised to see us, commenting that they get quite a few corporate lobbyists, but almost no citizens” (p.36).

Given respective observations, it might appear less surprising that my first trip to EU Brussels only took place several years into my fieldwork. To be sure, some of the activists I met in those years, like those from the “Charta 2020” campaign, arguably *do* think of Brussels as one of the key sites of struggle. For them, addressing, lobbying and moving around the European Parliament facilities was part of their everyday activism, as I observed during our meeting as some of them seemed to enter the parliamentary building as a matter of routine. Indeed, whether or not appeals or demands directed to EU institutions might be a fruitful avenue to agency and are worth pursuing is one of several contested issues amongst alter-European activists. For instance, as quoted in Chapter 4, while Fabio believes that “you need the European Commission” in order to address “the crisis of global capitalism”, Audrey finds agency primarily in local activism and community organising in order to address some of the most pressing issues experienced in her local community in South London. I will return to this issue regarding the role of institutions in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, my short visit to Brussels, as well as the fact that it only occurred once and very late throughout my fieldwork, also illustrates why most of their activities do not primarily look to Brussels or Strasbourg for progressive solutions. Indeed, perhaps rather tellingly, European Alternatives themselves – while having offices and groups operating in different European countries – do *not* have a permanent address in Brussels. What became clear during my visit to the European Quarter was that alter-European activism seemed to operate on a rather different scale. In other words, while Brussels might be the heart of European institutions, it does not seem the heart of European democracy according to these activists, and it certainly is not at the heart of much of the alter-European activism I have accompanied throughout my ethnographic fieldwork.

If EU-Europe was not the primary scale of action, where, then, is alter-European activists' sense of agency located? During my visit to Brussels, it dawned on me that the image of the train station, where I had started my tour of the EU Parliament, needed to be read the other way round: rather than being able to *arrive* at the heart of European democracy, you had to *depart* from Brussels in order for more radical expressions of trans-European agency to come to the fore. In order to begin to understand this, I needed to employ a different spatial image, moving from "Europe" to "Transeuropa". Thus, a few hours after our meeting in Brussels, I boarded a plane to Warsaw for a meeting with the campaigners from Transeuropa Caravans - an alternative kind of pilgrimage that sets out to find decentralised acts of agency everywhere across the continent, rather than in the museum-style "heart" of Europe.

6.2.2. *On the road with Transeuropa Caravans*

When I arrived in Warsaw only a few hours after the meeting at the European Parliament in Brussels, I had hardly had time to process my still fresh experiences of Brussels' Europe before meeting dozens of activists from all across and beyond the European continent who were ready to take action. The meeting in Warsaw brought together activists from two campaigns which were taking place in the run up to the European Parliament elections in May 2019. "European May", the first campaign, was going to organise local groups in different parts of Europe to mobilise for a week of parallel actions taking place in the week before the elections, reminding me of the transnational Euro Mayday mobilisations discussed by Mattoni (2012). I was to join "Transeuropa Caravans", the second campaign, the aim of which was to send five caravans travelling through 15 countries in the month of May. The campaign used the strategic moment of the upcoming European Parliament elections – when mainstream media looked to Europe's institutions in Brussels – to make visible alternatives that are growing in the shadow of mainstream media and EU institutions. The aim, according to the campaign's manifesto, was to "connect struggles and build alternatives" (European Alternatives, 2019d). To this end, each caravan, made up of a group of activists, facilitators, theatre practitioners and independent journalists, was to travel across three countries, each working on a different theme. The aim of the meeting in Warsaw was to get to know each other, organise and coordinate actions and receive trainings on relevant related issues – including a presentation on the rights of mobile EU citizens as well as workshops on

different forms of direct action – before the activists would venture out on their different routes to turn these learnings into a series of collective actions. It was decided that I would accompany two of the five routes for several days each. One of them would be the “Western Caravan” which worked towards the theme of “cities of solidarity” and travelled from Lisbon in Portugal via Spain to Paris in France to visit various groups and initiatives, including a feminist network in Barcelona that campaigns for women’s rights and gender equality on the European level, or rebel cities like A Coruña and Saillans, where citizen assemblies and local residents have taken control of their municipal governments (an issue to which I will return in the next chapter). First, however, I was to join the “Central Eastern Caravan” which paid particular attention to how local people resist the rise of the far-right and the shrinking of civic spaces in Germany, Austria and Hungary¹⁵.



Figure 12: Transeuropa Caravans activists on the road through Austria, May 2019; author’s photo

¹⁵ Other caravans worked particularly around climate change and environmental issues (“Baltic Caravan”, travelling through Sweden, Finland and Estonia), issues around migration and borders (“Mediterranean Caravan”, travelling through Italy, Slovenia and Croatia) or the radical potential of theatre and culture (“Visegrad Caravan”, travelling through Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia).

A couple of months after the meeting in Warsaw we hit the road. On the 9th day of our journey, with the European Parliament elections now only thirteen days away, we head to Bad Ischl, a rural town on our route through Austria (Figure 12). “We”, that is five participants of the Central Eastern Caravan. Besides Jan, whom we already met at the Fridays for Future gathering mentioned in the previous chapter, there is Billy, an environmentalist and organiser with Hungarian roots; Michelle, an Italian journalist who spends a lot of her time with family in Macedonia; Joanna, a Polish feminist who used to work in Portugal; and myself, a person born in a country that does not exist anymore (the GDR), who lives in London as a so-called EU migrant today. Thus, in the 30th anniversary year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, our caravan assembles activists who have experience transgressing the borders between East and West, taking the same route that many East Germans have taken to get to the other side of the Wall via Hungary and Austria, albeit in the other direction. At this point of the route, the Central Eastern Caravan has already driven more than a thousand kilometres from Berlin to Dresden, from Dresden to Munich and from Munich to Lustenau in Austria. Our journey, thus far, has been full of encounters and impressions: We have interviewed a social worker who is a candidate for the German left-wing party Die Linke in local elections to stand up against the rising far-right in East Germany; we attended the Fridays for Future protest in Friedrichshafen (Chapter 5); we taped the slogan “Another Europe Is Possible” on a market square in Munich on the EU-flag waving occasion of Europe Day to state our disagreement with the European status quo and point to already existing alternative possibilities such as the Green New Deal for Europe (see Figure 13, which reminds, once again of the clash of colours between “progressive” and “established” Europeans activists, see Chapter 4); we crossed our first nearly invisible land border from Germany to Austria, which artificially separates the identical looking Alpine landscape on either side.



Figure 13: Caravans activists' direct action in Munich, May 2019; Photo: Irene Dominioni

Then, we arrive at the train station of Bad Ischl, a rural Austrian town, where we wait to board a local train. Bad Ischl is a picturesque town near a beautiful lake surrounded by mountains. Indeed, everything seems very orderly here – the yellow station building is entirely free of rubbish and graffiti, the train arrives perfectly on time and even the public toilet in the station is spotlessly clean. The only thing that disrupts this picture-perfect image of an innocent Alpine town are the xenophobic, anti-migration and anti-EU FPÖ posters for the upcoming EP elections, of which we have seen many on the side of the roads while driving here. On the national level, the far-right party is already in power since forming a coalition government with chancellor Sebastian Kurz's conservative ÖVP. In the upcoming European Parliament elections, their aim, amongst others, according to the placards we pass in Attnang-Puchheim, is to “secure Upper Austria's interests in Europe” (Figure 14, my translation from the German). Thus, to counter the omnipresent nationalistic sentiment of these placards, our plan is to spark a more critical dialogue about how transnational elections matter in locals' everyday lives and encourage people in this remote part of Austria to discuss the existing avenues for exercising agency beyond the borders of the nation-state. We board the train armed with flyers, which we

hand out to passengers and distribute on the seats for those still to come. They read, translated from the German:

Dear Europeans, please end your silence!

*European elections take place on May 26th – go and vote on the future of Europe!
Please use this opportunity to talk to your neighbour about this topic.*

Transeuropa Caravans (Fieldnotes, Bad Ischl, May 2019)



Figure 14: EP election posters in Attnang-Puchheim, May 2019; author's photo

Our direct actions like the taping action in Munich and the intervention on the train from Bad Ischl to Attnang-Puchheim were but two of a variety of actions. Indeed, the actions taken on the different caravans' routes were as different as the routes themselves. What was central to almost all of the caravans' actions, however, was their reliance on a variety of media practices to engage with and report about the various initiatives and individuals they met. Firstly, they used social media to report from their journey and promote local actions as they travelled. This was facilitated with the support of European Alternatives teams located in Rome, Paris and Berlin who helped to coordinate actions and publish the content. Secondly, each caravan published impressions, reflections or interviews with

local initiatives on alternative media platforms, including the campaign's blog, as well as on European Alternatives' transnational online magazine *Political Critique* (see Appendix D). Thirdly, the caravans used different forms of local media interventions to engage with the different communities they visited in numerous ways, ranging from stencils, leaflets, stickers, taping actions and a mobile guest book. They also interviewed different grassroots and municipal actors, joined protests, collaborated with local initiatives to participate in or co-organise conferences, discussions or film screenings, or staged artistic public interventions, including on a boat from Stockholm to Turku, and, as mentioned, on a local train in Austria. Finally, the caravan teams additionally got in touch with established local, national and international media. This included a feature on the Franco-German public broadcasting TV channel *Arte*, as well features in national German and Italian newspapers, or an Austrian radio station, to which I will return later in this chapter.

This wide-ranging set of actions begins to point to the multi-scalar logic that underpins alter-European activists' sense of agency: reaching out to people in rural areas, like the train action in Bad Ischl, as well as in metropolitan areas and cities such as in Munich, but also trying to influence national public discourses while bringing to the fore transnational, European-wide issues. What also becomes visible, in contrast to what I observed during my visit to Brussels, is that this strategy is not primarily located within EU-Europe, but operates rather on a more decentralised idea of agency that spreads across geographical borders and might better be understood as “pan-European”, “Trans-European” or “transnational” than merely as European. Taking to the roads rather than the Brussels' institutions in the run up to the European Parliament elections was illustrative of where alter-European activists believe progressive forms of agency to be located:

“The challenges we face are transnational, touching the citizens of France, Poland, or Slovakia in the same way, so must be our organising... We will emphasise that politics doesn't begin and end at the ballot box, but happens every day, in our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our cultural venues and in the streets.”
(European Alternatives, 2019d, online)

As this quote from the *Transeuropa Caravaners'* manifesto begins to demonstrate, the potential for exercising agency is not exclusively located in EU-Brussels, but moves, rather, across different scales and sites – ranging from streets, neighbourhoods and workplaces to the ballot boxes in national and EU elections. How then, might one begin

to make sense of this multi-scalar strategy of alter-European activism that spans from European elections to the engagement to national media and, finally, to actions taken in local neighbourhoods and on the streets all across the European continent? In order to further conceptualise this issue of scale, it is useful to contextualise the Transeuropa Caravans campaign by situating it into a wider history of activist caravanning.

6.2.3. The practice of activist caravanning

The idea of activists traversing geographies in caravans in order to build connections across borders is not new. In fact, the practice of activist caravanning can be traced through different translocal mobilisations in recent decades. One noteworthy example is the peace caravans that drove through former Yugoslavia in 1991. As one of the older activists I interviewed, who was already involved in pan-European mobilisations then in the context of what later came to be known as the Helsinki Citizens Assembly, recalls:

“During that period, we conceived of the idea that there should be a permanent pan-European organisation for supporting civil society in difficult places and we wanted to call it a European Citizens Assembly... When '89 [the fall of the Iron Curtain] happened, we went ahead and decided to found it... Very soon after, the wars began in Yugoslavia... The first project was to organise a peace caravan which went all the way around Yugoslavia... It was 400 people that ended up with a human chain in Sarajevo that linked the Catholic orthodox church, the mosque and the synagogue... Our aim was to prevent war.” (Petra, November 2018)

According to Licht and Drakulić (2002), the peace caravans even brought together 500 participants from 13 countries, most of which rode on buses, while others arrived in Sarajevo by plane from Italy: “There were about 200 Italians and 30 Germans, plus several people from almost all the Scandinavian countries and from France, Hungary, and a number of others” (2002, online).

While women played a central role in the peace caravans, other examples of activist caravanning have taken to the streets under decisively feminist banners. Feminist activist caravanning can be dated back to even before the 1990s. We find this practice, for instance, in the Canadian Abortion Caravan, which saw a group of feminists travel from Vancouver to Ottawa in order to build national support for more comprehensive abortion rights in the 1970s (Rebick, 2013). In another account of activist caravanning in former

Yugoslavia, Braidotti (2006) describes a caravan of militant feminist activists that travelled across the region, along the sites of war atrocities and extreme nationalism, in 2002. As Braidotti writes: “The insanity of extremist nationalism and the atrocities it entailed are exposed by the proliferation of internal borders among the different portions of that once unified country” (2006, p.88). Thus, the aim of their project, entitled “Trans-Europeanness”, was to raise questions about nationalism and the notion of “border crossing” in the historically multi-cultural region. Understanding this campaign in relation to her wider project of developing a nomadic ethics (see also 1994, 2015), Braidotti dubs this campaign, in passing, “nomadic activism” (2006, p.88).

An even more recent example of activist caravanning emerged in the context of the alter-globalization movement. Here, it was the People’s Global Action (PGA) which developed a vital caravanning practice that spanned several years and continents, originating in the late 1990s and with caravan campaigns continuing to take place until as recently as 2014 (Routledge, 2017). Featherstone (2003, 2008), for instance, discusses the example of more than 400 Indian farmers who travelled to the German town of Leverkusen in 1999 as part of the PGA’s Inter-Continental Caravan for Solidarity and Resistance, in order to join a rally with local activists as well as speakers from Brazil and Nepal who mobilised against the toxic effects that chemicals by multinationals such as Bayer had on the environment, farming methods and people’s minds cross the world. Other caravans set out before and after conferences and meetings, such as the WTO protests in Seattle and Bangalore in 1999, as well as Cochabamba in 2001 (Routledge, 2003, 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2010). According to Routledge, the point of these caravans was not the travelling itself, but the movement building activities that took place on the way:

“Rather than being forms of political tourism, the PGA caravans are organized in order for activists from different struggles and countries to communicate with one another, exchange information, share experiences and tactics, participate in various solidarity demonstrations, rallies and direct actions, and attempt to draw new movements into the convergence” (2003, p.340).

Routledge explains that routes and places of the PGA caravans were selected according to strategic or symbolic relevance for the movement, which united globally in the fight against corporate globalization and neoliberalism (see Chapter 3). Cochabamba, for instance, was a site where “a popular coalition of students, business people, labour unions and peasant movements” had successfully resisted the Bechtel Corporation’s attempts to

privatise the local water supply (p.341). Despite various tensions, Routledge argues that PGA's "multi-scalar politics", can result in numerous advantages, including "national and international projection (e.g. through the media)", a "boost in morale", which local activists experience through visits by activists from other localities, or the "global local actions", which were once again sparked and perpetuated through respective meetings (p.341).

While there are certainly various overlaps between the PGA's caravanning practice and that of the Transeuropa Caravans campaign, there are also important differences that suggest a slightly altered focus in terms of the different caravans' spatial strategy. For instance, as Flesher Fominaya points out, two of the main purposes of the PGA were "to provide a loose network of regional networks that would coordinate and support actions by activists resisting the neoliberal capitalist development paradigm" and "to project an awareness of these struggles *globally*" (2010, p.65, emphasis added). Thus, while the Inter-Continental Caravans brought together activists from different localities and continents, it ultimately aimed to work towards social change on a *global* scale. By contrast, the Transeuropa Caravans campaign focussed on creating connections across one specific region¹⁶. In this sense, there might be more parallels with Braidotti's example of the "Trans-Europeanness" project (2006). Different to the alter-globalization movements' Inter-Continental Caravans which aimed to make connections between activists from different continents, the Transeuropa Caravans campaign seemed to be concerned with a different kind of border. Similar rather to Braidotti's example of the "Trans-Europeanness" caravan, the caravans focussed on the traversal across the borders of *nation-states* and thus put a particular focus on the role of national borders (instead of perpetuating the idea of a centralised, common European community). As long-term activist Étienne emphasised, the notion of "trans" in "trans-European" or "transnational" is crucial for alter-European activism:

"I think it's the trans in it, because transnational has something subversive in it, because trans- [*hesitates*] - there is transition, there is change in it... trans- as transgression, trans- as transformation... Transnational doesn't mean, you know, building relationships between organisations on different national levels, but meaning that we actually want to pierce through [national borders]..."

¹⁶ More recent campaigns like the "Climate Caravan, Gender and Food Sovereignty Caravan" (Routledge, 2017, p.106) which travelled through Bangladesh in 2011 and its follow up travelling across Bangladesh, India and Nepal in 2014 similarly focussed to bringing together activists and other actors from a particular region.

Transnational for me is almost a temporary word. It's a way we want to operate right now to actually make a change, but actually we don't want to call ourselves transnational, I guess. At some point we want to call ourselves something else" (Étienne, November 2017).

Étienne explained that one of the reasons why he finds neither "EU" or "Europe", nor even the term "transnational" appropriate to describe the scale of his activism, is that he finds the first term exclusionary, while the latter still depends too much on that which it wants to go beyond, namely the nation-state. Thus, in order to expand the vocabulary that might help to make sense of the multi-scalar politics of campaigns like Transeuropa Caravans, it is worth further investigating the term that Braidotti (2006) uses to describe the "Trans-Europeanness" caravan, which similarly highlights the notion of border crossing – the figure of the nomad. Indeed, what I will argue in the following, second part of this chapter is that the figure of the nomad might serve as a useful starting point to grasp the multi-scalar logic of alter-European activists' sense of agency.

6.3. The question of territory: Understanding alter-European activism as nomadic

6.3.1. *Introducing the figure of the nomad*

Although Braidotti only briefly mentions the term "nomadic activism" (2006, p.88), the figure of the nomad more generally takes a central role in her wider work (see, for instance, 1994, 2015). For Braidotti, the idea of the nomad provides an appropriate starting point for an "analysis of the new subject positions that have emerged in post-industrial times" (2015, p.101), and gives rise to "contested, multi-layered and internally contradictory subject positions" and "non-unitary identities" (p.102). These positions, holds Braidotti, "are hybrid and in between social categories for whom traditional descriptions in terms of sociological categories such as 'marginals', 'migrants', or 'minorities' are inadequate" (p.102). Braidotti remarks that the European idea holds the potential to inhabit such nomadic subjects, arguing that "being a nomadic European subject means to be in transit between different identity formations, but, at the same time, being sufficiently anchored to a historical position to accept responsibility for it" (p.105). If radically restructured in a post-nationalistic and post-colonial way, Braidotti argues, a nomadic European identity could give way to more flexible forms of citizenship, which

could “lead to a new concept of politics that would no longer be bound to the nation state” (p.107).

While Braidotti has employed the nomadic logic extensively throughout her work, the figure of the nomad has arguably gained a more general sense of popularity in the humanities and social sciences in recent decades, for instance in the context of a wider “mobility turn” or “new mobility paradigm” (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006, pp.1-2; Morley, 2017, pp.64-65). As Cresswell put it, for many scholars, “[t]he lived experience of exiles, migrants, and refugees is tied to the need to think nomadically. Mobile lives need nomad thought to make a new kind of sense” (2006, p.44). While the term “nomad” is commonly used to describe pastoralists or people whose livelihood is based on the principle of mobility and does not rely on fixed settlement (Engebriksen, 2017), scholars who explore nomadic thought often refer back to Deleuzian understandings of nomads and nomadology as discussed, for instance, in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Here, the figure of the nomad is employed in a number of ways to make a range of metaphysical as well as political points (Sutherland, 2014; Noyes, 2014). For one, the nomad is regarded in distinction to the migrant as a figure defined by *paths* rather than *place*. As Cresswell summarises, for Deleuze and Guattari, the nomad is “constituted by lines of flight”, while the migrant “slips back into the ordered space of arrival” (2006, p.49). In other words, in the sedentary logic, land is being distributed to people, while in the nomadic logic, people distribute themselves across the land (Aldea, 2014). Generally speaking, nomadic thought is characterised by anti-essentialist and anti-foundational tendencies that resist the establishment of order and discipline (Cresswell, 2006), shattering classifications which function as the foundation upon which hegemony and sovereignty are built (Engebriksen, 2017). As Engebriksen argues, Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad is centered around the idea of difference instead, which functions, here, as the potential for (political) transformation. More specifically, she argues, their nomad works against the state’s drive towards classifying and fixating in order to achieve stability. As such, for Deleuze and Guattari, the nomad is a figure at odds with the capturing mechanics of the state apparatus, such as nation-based citizenship (Georgiou, 2012; Sutherland, 2014). As Georgiou writes, “[n]omadism, in its constant questioning of the authority of the nation-state, presents a threat to the state” (2012, p.26).

Indeed, the state’s occupation with the ordering of mobile subjects like the nomad is not merely a modern phenomenon but can be dated back to the earliest of state forms. Before

the first walled, tax-collecting states emerged in 3,100 BCE and the era of “definite state hegemony” began in 1600 CE (Scott, 2017, p.14), humans have lived in mobile bands “for ninety-five percent of the human experience on earth” (p.5). Scott shows how the biggest threats to sedentary societies who lived off processes of domestication was the so-called “barbarian”, who operated in a zone of mobility and complexity and was thus “illegible” in the agro-economical system, which was based on relative simplicity (2017, p.33). According to Scott, these mobile figures represented a nuisance and had to be managed, or, ideally, kept out. Similarly, Cresswell (2006) shows how vagabonds in early modern society were branded like cattle, an exercise in making them *visible* for the purpose of social control. This need for branding, controlling and managing mobile subjects is founded on the premise that mobile subjects present, first and foremost, a threat to settled societies. This premise is grounded in a “*metaphysical sedentarism*” (Malkki, 1997, p.65, my emphasis), whereby the moral values of society are based on notions of rootedness, settlement, spatial order and place (Cresswell, 2006).

Malkki highlights how the idea of nations being *rooted* in a given territory has come to be perceived as the “natural order of things” (1997, p.71). Building, amongst others, on Anderson’s much-cited study *Imagined Communities* (1983), Malkki demonstrates how images of roots and rootedness are interlinked with the territorialisation of national identity. Her argument is that in discursive practices, the relation between people and nations is often naturalised by means botanical conceptions and metaphors such as plants, roots and soil. Displacing a plant from its soil or territory, in other words, uprooting it, would *naturally* be perceived as a threat. Applying this metaphor back to the world of nations, displacement – or the “denaturalisation” of people and “their” country – Malkki argues, is regarded as pathological in this logic. According to Cresswell, sedentary metaphysics are pervading modern, Western thought. Moreover, it might even be argued that they also pervade Western understandings of history in general, which is always narrated from a sedentary perspective, according to Deleuze and Guattari (Malkki, 1997; Sutherland, 2014), that is, from the perspective of the *static* (nation-)state. To take a nomadic point of view might thus mean to radically break with this tradition of metaphysical sedentism (Cresswell, 2006).

Before I can return to discussing how this idea of the nomad might help to explain the scalar logic of alter-European activism, it is important to acknowledge that the figure of

the nomad also faces important limitations. For the figure of the nomad has not only been celebrated as a transgressive figure but has also been widely and extensively critiqued.

6.3.2. Limitations of the nomadic figure

One important problem with the figure of the nomad – as with abstract mobile figures in general – is that it often lacks a consideration of sexual, ethnic and other differences. Cresswell, for instance, describes the postmodern nomad as “a remarkably unsocial being – unmarked by the traces of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography” (2006, p.53). Indeed, mobile figures such as the nomad, the pilgrim, the tourist, or the flâneur, are often built around an inherently masculinist framework (Sutherland, 2014). In this sense, Braidotti (2006) critiques respective discussions of the figure of the pilgrim for not addressing the politics of location. This critique points to a wider problem that the figure of the nomad has, in that it abstracts the very experiences of those lifestyles which it appropriates – a move for which Braidotti has been criticised herself (for instance Ahmed, 1999; Sutherland, 2014). According to Ahmed, we must problematise nomadic thought that is altogether abstracted from underlying social and material relations. In a similar vein, Noyes critically investigates the distinction that some scholars make between “actual” and “theoretical” nomadism, arguing that nomadism should be understood “not as a metaphor, but as a materialism” with specific reference to economic and historical contexts (2004, p.165). Engebriksen highlights how this might be done in ethnographic articulations of nomadic cultures such as Roma people, arguing that “[c]areful ethnographic attention allows us to complicate a reductionist notion of the nomadic figure” (2017, p.51) and helps to understand precisely what kind of challenges nomadic ways of being can pose vis-à-vis state and territory-based ways of organising society. What is at stake here is the lived experience of mobile subjects, which differs significantly based on a number of factors.

Another one of these factors, as highlighted by Ahmed (1999; see also Georgiou 2012, 2013), is the notion of choice and privilege – dimensions that are often neglected when migrants and nomads are essentialised or romanticised as figurations or metaphors of transgression. “There is a great difference,” as Said writes, “between the optimistic mobility, the intellectual liveliness, and ‘the logic of daring’ described by the various theoreticians [...], and the massive dislocations, waste, misery, and horrors endured in

our century's migrations and mutilated lives" (1994, p.403). Indeed, there is a significant qualitative difference here between those who are "wanted" and those who are "unwanted" (Verstraete, 2010), that is, between "nomad millionaires" and the "mobile poor" (Noyes, 2004, p.160). For Ahmed, the figure of the nomad – when relating to the former rather than the latter type of mobile subject – is "an example of movement as a form of privilege rather than transgression" (1999, p.335). It neglects that the free movement of some often occurs at the cost of the immobility of others. Thus, not only would it be wrong to postulate all forms of movement, nomadism or migration as necessarily transgressive of boundaries and categories; to romanticise or unapologetically celebrate either the figure of the migrant or the nomad in the contemporary context where millions are forced to seek refuge from warfare, hunger or prosecution would be at best naïve, and, more likely, fatal. This danger of romanticising the nomad is not least present because of the question how the figure of the nomad relates to wider dynamics of colonialism and capitalism. Cresswell argues that there is a risk that the nomadology of Deleuze and Guattari and others might contribute to a furthering of an Orientalist discourse where it is based on colonial accounts of the non-Western "other". "Indeed," he writes, "the use of the nomad is often nothing more than a form of imaginative neocolonialism" (2006, p.54). We might also point, in this context, to how mobile non-Western "others" are marked as supposed security threats on the basis of people's skin colour, religion or country of origin (Noyes, 2004; Khosravi, 2010).

Lastly, what scholars like Noyes (2004) and Sutherland (2014) also highlight is how nomadism is not only intertwined with colonial, but also capitalist relations. Quoting Deleuze and Guattari themselves, Noyes reminds us that "[n]omadism is not only a 'radically anti-capitalist strategy,' but also 'one brutal characteristic mode of capitalism itself'" (2004, p.166). The "cosmopolitan individualism" or "urban nomads", who celebrate their privileged and individualistic hipster lifestyle in gentrified urban communities (see Georgiou, 2012, p.37, 2013, pp.107-108) or the "flexible citizens" described by Ong (1999), whose privileged purchasing power grants them multiple citizenships, are a case in point. Moreover, according to Noyes, today's global economy produces at least two kinds of mobile lifestyles, that is, "the mobile rich," living the "ideal freedom of the disembodied wanderer," and "the mobile poor," such as the "brute reality of the refugee" (2004, p.160). In this sense, he argues, "the nomadic subject is both the failure of the global social order and the fundamental structure of subjectivity upon which this order can build" (Noyes, 2004, p.160; see also McNevin, 2011). These examples

illustrate not only that you have to be able to afford being nomadic in the age of neoliberal globalization, both financially as well as in terms of your legal status. They also remind us that today's global economic system is itself "premised on flexibility, circulation" (Sutherland, 2014, p.935). Massumi (2017) has pointed out how there has been a qualitative change in the movements of capital. This type of movement "actually exceeds the human" in the sense that "market mechanisms declared their autonomy, and the economy became a regime of power in its own right" (p.9).

Given these significant limitations, to what extent, then, does the figure of the nomad help to make sense of the multi-scalar politics of alter-European activists? That is, how precisely does nomadism feature in alter-European actions and what, if anything, is new about it, compared to how previous transnational mobilisations have been understood with regards to their relation to territory and the question where their collective actions were primarily located?

6.3.3. The nomadic logic of alter-European activism

In this thesis thus far, I have already introduced two acts that might straightforwardly be considered as nomadic. Firstly, there is Transeuropa Festival, as I discussed in Chapters 1 to 3, which could be understood as nomadic in that it is not rooted in any one location or country, but takes place in a different city (or, indeed, cities) every two years. Secondly, there is the case of Transeuropa Caravans, which I introduced in this and the previous chapter in order to demonstrate how acting nomadically can – quite literally – mean taking to the roads for the purpose of making visible the dots between various radical alternatives that already exist beyond Brussels and linking them across different scales and geographies. What, then is the radical potential of such nomadic formats and acts?

Firstly, following on from the previous section, it is important to highlight that a nomadic activist practice faces a series of limitations. The most obvious example for this dynamic would be when mobile activists get stopped at national borders. For instance, one activist with a Kosovar passport was not able to attend a workshop he was supposed to facilitate at Transeuropa Festival in Madrid, as Spain does not recognise Kosovo's status. When talking to a member of European Alternatives' staff about this, they told me that there had been a similar issue at Transeuropa Festival in Belgrade in 2015: two Syrian artists

were denied access into former Yugoslavia. At the height of the so-called “refugee crisis”, the organiser told me that this paradox had particularly upset them – that it was precisely at a time when the voices of those who are legally or geographically on the periphery should have been heard, that they were denied entry into European countries. What is therefore important to recognise here – as one of the Transeuropa Caravans campaign organisers pointed out at the training I attended in Warsaw – is that many activists in this network (including most of the Transeuropa Caravans participants as well as myself) are European nationals who hold the privilege of passports that allowed them to cross borders and participate in this project (Fieldnotes, Warsaw, March 2019). Another limitation to a nomadic activist practice that takes the shape of activist caravanning such as in the case of the Transeuropa Caravans campaign might be related to issues of class. While the caravans activists I interviewed come from different class backgrounds, many of the activists who participated in this project – including myself – found themselves in occupations in which they could afford or were allowed to take time off from their regular jobs. As already mentioned in Chapter 2, they also share the privilege of being university-educated and the ability to speak at least two languages, thus having the confidence and skills to navigate and translate between different national and cultural contexts.

Given these limitations of nomadic direct action as a *practice* and in line with the critiques mentioned in the previous section, it is therefore crucial to emphasise that the radicality of such projects does not lie in linguistic, cultural or physical acts of border crossing. What is transgressive about such campaigns, as I will demonstrate in what remains of this chapter, is that they point to wider problems regarding issues of scale and the question where political agency is situated. In other words, nomadic activism’s potential derives from actively challenging, “piercing through” – as Étienne put it – and thus revealing the sedentary metaphysics described by Malkki (1997), in which institutional political agency is *rooted*. It is in this sense that the adjective “nomadic” works as a useful and insightful descriptor that helps explain the spatial and multi-scalar *logic* of alter-European activism. This logic starts from a concern regarding the limitations on the level of the nation-state with regards to exercising agency while experimenting with and searching for ways of acting that deliberately *transgress* national borders. What nomadic activism thus calls for, is ways of enacting agency that are not explicitly rooted in a global, local or even a European framework, but that arise in the connections made between localities and across scales according to a nomadic logic.

To sum up, what I have argued in this chapter thus far is that the scalar logic underpinning alter-European activism might be understood – with the caveats discussed – as nomadic. What I have shown is that to identify the spatial logic of this kind of activism as *nomadic* (rather than, for instance, trans-European, transnational, migratory or diasporic) raises the question where agency beyond the nation-state might be situated. How, then, might alter-European activism’s nomadic spatial outlook contribute to imagining new forms of agency beyond the borders of nation-states? In order to approach this question, it is useful to pay closer attention to an aspect of alter-European activism that has been running through this chapter but that has to be analysed in more detail: the role of different media for alter-European activism’s nomadic outlook.

6.4. The question of agency: the trans-scalar logic of nomadic activism

6.4.1. *National versus nomadic media*

As I have already shown in Chapter 3, different media technologies have played an important role for social movements throughout history. Moreover, as I will show in this section, scholarly attention to how movements interact with media can lead to greater understanding of not only movements themselves, but also of the workings of social change. Investigating and conceptualising movements’ media practices, Mattoni and Treré argue, might not only “increase scholarly knowledge about the actual impact of media technologies on activism, but more broadly also on structures and processes of social change” (2014, p.253). Thus, throughout this thesis (for instance in Chapters 2 and 3) as well as at the beginning of in this chapter, I have already begun to outline the different media strategies employed by alter-European activists. As outlined in the beginning of this chapter for the case of Transeuropa Caravans, for instance, activists use social media to promote their actions or events in different localities, as well as transnational alternative media with the purpose to connect and report on different actors in the wider network, including print media such as books, magazines, pamphlets and flyers, as well as digital media like websites and alternative online media platforms. They also engaged with national mainstream media, including public radio and television broadcasters as well as print and online newspapers in different countries. In order to better understand the dimension of scale, it is this complex relationship with national

mainstream media which provides a particularly illustrative example of how the nomadic logic unfolds and is negotiated in alter-European activism.

As other scholars have shown, there are a variety of issues arising as social movements engage with mainstream mass media. Flesher Fominaya, for instance, highlighted challenges such as the mainstream media's tendency to rely on "'expert' opinions" rather than "grassroots movement spokespeople" (2014, p.116) or the issue of description bias (see p.118). While such challenges undoubtedly apply in the context of alter-European activists' relationship with mainstream media, one of the key obstacles for activists in this context that came out most strongly in my own fieldwork was mainstream media's nation-centred outlook, that is, how mainstream media serve to make and remake the hegemonic "imagined community" of the nation (Anderson, 1983). The example of television might be useful to illustrate this point. As Curran argues, with regard to a sense of "national introversion" of mass media that even influences web interactions, "television is organised primarily on a national basis", with many channels devoting only less than a quarter of their airtime to foreign news (2016, p.10). While stressing that it is partial, rather than determining, Berlant, too, highlights "television's role in constructing the hegemony of the national" (1993, p.398). A good illustration of this nation-centred focus of mainstream media is the weather forecast. While the weather is certainly a phenomenon that does not stop in front of national borders, it is usually narrated along the lines of a nation's borders (see Morley, 2000, p.106). Of course, what is less visible in this view, are the transnational connections and links between the different forces responsible for the turnout of the weather in a particular place. In consequence, the phenomenon is only perceived and imagined in terms of how it plays out within the borders of a particular nation, rather than discussed at its origins.

By contrast, much like in my discussion of the figure of the nomad in the previous section, the nomadic orientation of alter-European activism fundamentally clashes with the sedentary logic of national media. As Maria, one activist who spends a lot of her time producing and distributing media content, put it when I asked her about her work with established media:

"We don't do it as often as we like, because media outlets unfortunately are very national based, so whenever you tackle something that is beyond borders, they are just not interested." (Maria, October 2017)

Referring to an article on the alternative online media platform Political Critique, Maria points out the consequences of a nation-centred view of mainstream media for our political imagination:

“[It was an] article about fires in the South of Spain, and how this is an incredibly important environmental issue that cannot be tackled at the national level...In Spain only 3 people have died and in Portugal it’s 20 – this doesn’t matter! It’s the same environmental issue we are all Southern European countries, we need to tackle this together.” (Maria, October 2017)

At a workshop at Transeuropa Festival in Madrid, one long-standing European Alternatives activist highlighted that there was also a problem around the mainstream media discourse on the so-called “refugee crisis” as “the whole way of representing this issue was nationalised,” when what was and is required, in his view, is transnational narratives and solutions (Fieldnotes, Madrid, October 2017).

To be sure, there are some mainstream media that do operate on a transnational level as well. Eva, one of the Transeuropa Caravans activists mentioned an interview with of Arte (Figure 15), a Franco-German TV channel that also broadcasts online in English, Spanish, Polish and Italian:

“We have received media attention, maybe not as much as would be wanted, but nevertheless... I was just contacted by this producer of Arte in Germany, which I later found out is one of the best programmes in Germany and it’s also transnational, because they have a French version as well. I was very pleased to have been contacted by these guys and that they were taking an interest in what we were doing here... the fact that they came and they filmed us and they gave us this type of attention makes it all the more meaningful.” (Eva, May 2019)

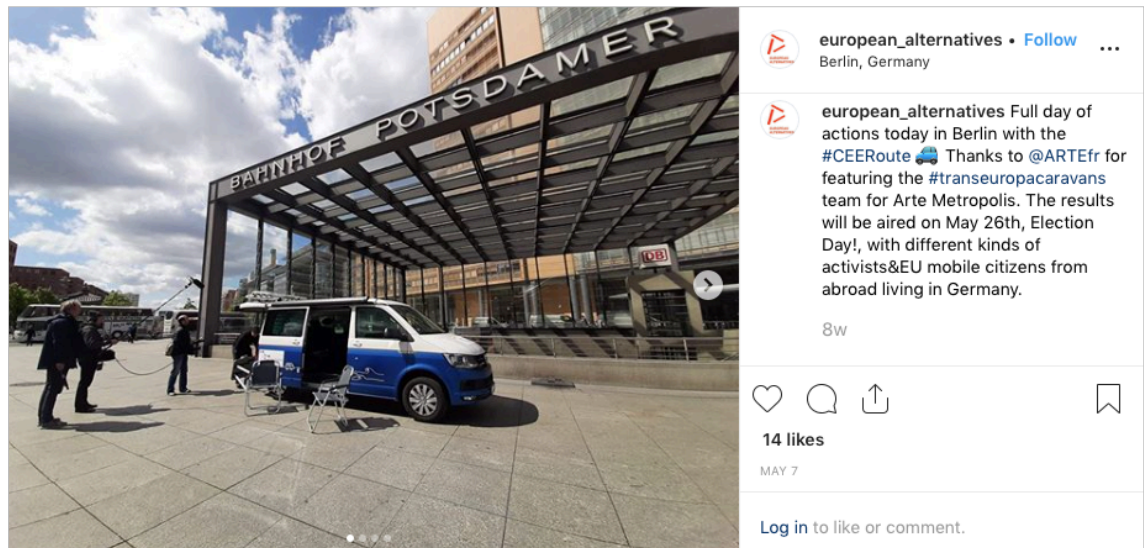


Figure 15: Caravans activists interviewed by Arte journalists, Berlin, May 2019; Image: Instagram screenshot (European Alternatives, 2019a)

Yet, despite ongoing discussions about whether a truly transnational or European public sphere might be emerging (see, for instance, Wessler et al., 2008), the fact that it remains largely absent today forces nomadic activists to try to enter and contest discourses on a national level. As Maria puts it,

“Unfortunately, we still have a media sphere that is only working on the national level and we need to enter there and fight from there [as well]. So we need to go into television, give many interviews in national newspapers... Whenever we organise something bigger and that has an interest for a general audience... we always try to contact media [in the respective nation-states].” (Maria, October 2017)

What these negotiations with national media landscapes illustrate, are the limits of the nomadic logic: while the nation-state is precisely what nomadic activists seek to work beyond, the hegemonic sedentary logic of mainstream media does nevertheless not allow them to fully ignore the communicative dimension of the nation-state. What Georgiou argues with regards to how diasporic communication is limited by the national status quo is true for alter-European activists as well:

“The nation-state aims at sustaining its power and legitimacy based on ideologies of singularity – or singular loyalties, of the singularity of the national space ownership and of clear-cut borders. Diaspora challenges national ideologies, but it often finds itself trapped in them.” (2006, p.9)

This is not least visible in the issue of funding and available resources for producing and distributing media content, which Flesher Fominaya highlights as “another key disparity [that] lies between the resources that political and economic elites and state actors have to influence media coverage and content, and those available to social movements.” (2014, p.119) The fate of the alternative online media platform Political Critique (Appendix D), of which I attended one of the founding meetings in Berlin in December 2016, when activists from the Eastern European network Krytyka Polityczna met with European Alternatives to talk about the launch of a transnational media platform that brings together activist perspectives from both Eastern and Western Europe, is a case in point. Only three years later, in November 2019, one of the editors told me at Transeuropa Festival in Palermo that the platform cannot continue to operate for the time being – apparently no one was willing to fund such a transnational project unfortunately, he told me with resignation in his voice (Fieldnotes, Palermo, November 2019). Funding structures, as another activist told me at the aforementioned workshop at Transeuropa Festival, are often nationalised and require an organisation to be registered in particular (EU) countries. Organising transnationally, they found, is something that is “not really foreseen by the set-up of the EU”, and it would be “difficult for citizens across Europe to express themselves politically unless they do it on a national level” (Fieldnotes, Madrid, October 2017). What their experience came down to, and what finally leads me back to the question of agency beyond borders, was this:

“[While EU nationals] can move freely as individuals, you can’t organise as a civic organisation very easily across European borders and you certainly cannot organise as easily as companies can.” (Fieldnotes, Madrid, October 2017)

It is such limitations regarding what Malkki calls “[t]he national order of things”, which “usually also passes as the normal or natural order of things” (1997, p.55), that drives alter-European activists’ use of digital media in order to produce nomadic formats. As Georgiou puts it with regards to diasporic media, “[d]iasporic populations still read the press and engage with it but electronic media in their nature are more compatible with diaspora” (2006, p.11).

6.4.2. *From nomadic media to the trans-scalar logic of alter-European activism*

How, then, do digital media technologies feature in advancing the nomadic logic, sense of belonging, and, ultimately, expressions of agency in alter-European activism? As I have argued in the previous chapter, migration scholars' work on how agency is exercised by mobile subjects can be particularly useful to make sense of alter-European activists' acts. What I have not yet discussed, however, is the role that transnational media play for transnational communities, which similarly helps to explain alter-European activists' nomadic media practices.

In recent years, media scholars have explored various issues with regards to the relationship between migrants, refugees or diasporic subjects and processes of media and communications (see Smets et al., 2019, for a comprehensive overview). This included, for instance, debates relating to the representations of mobile subjects in the mainstream media (for instance Zaborowski and Georgiou, 2019), transnational communities' consumption and everyday use of mainstream and digital media (Georgiou, 2006, 2012; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2016) or the further perpetuation of colonial injustices and discrimination faced by migrants and refugees in the context of datafication (for instance Madianou, 2019). In my own context of investigating alter-European activists' media practices, Georgiou's work on diasporic transnationalism (2006) is particularly useful.

Georgiou discusses "identity and community construction across and beyond boundaries" and investigates precisely how communities are "sustained across space" (2006, p.1), in particular with regards to the role that different media technologies play in this process, which offers useful insights for making sense of how media work towards and sustain the nomadic quality of alter-European activism. Indeed, Georgiou argues that investigating expressions of diasporic communication "can contribute to understanding how communities can be sustained, re-imagined and re-defined in global times and spaces and how they function as transnational networks" (pp.2-3). Thus, while there are certainly important differences between the nomadic and the diasporic condition – as I have shown in the previous section with regards to the difference between migrants and nomads – and the spatial logic that underlies them, a consideration of diasporic communication can nevertheless help to explain certain aspects of alter-European activism's nomadic logic. For instance, starting from the observation that "[t]ransnational connectedness depends more and more on information and communication technologies" (p.2), Georgiou demonstrates how media technologies "become both tools and contexts for constructing

identities and for imagining communities” (p.5). In other words, “sharing common media”, Georgiou argues with reference to Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), “advances the sense of belonging to a common project” (p.11). While Anderson’s focus was on the common project of the nation, however, Georgiou points to how diasporic audiences and diasporic media production has the potential to challenge and redefine “meanings of spatial and temporal restrictions and boundaries” (p.13).

The nomadic online talk-show format Talk Real is a good example to illustrate how nomadic media formats in alter-European activism challenge the meaning and centrality of national boundaries. Talk Real is described by European Alternatives as “the first nomadic talk show for the web” (2017c, p.81). This is because the nomadic audio-visual format is not based in one particular location or nation-state, but travels across and beyond EU-Europe in order to discuss urgent political issues and possible strategies for addressing them with local actors. Its first episode – filmed in Athens in 2015 – reflected on the Greek referendum in which 61% had voted “Oxi”, that is, against the EU’s imposed austerity measures, which were subsequently accepted by the Greek government nevertheless (Lowen, 2015). Since then, 15 English-speaking episodes have gone online (in addition to some earlier shows in Italian). Explaining how the nomadic programme came about in one of their flyers, European Alternatives state:

“We felt we needed a new mechanism to weave together the experiences and contacts we were making across Europe. If television remained primarily national, the web offered us an opportunity to imagine media that crossed borders” (2017c, p.81).

Besides Talk Real, European Alternatives works with other transnational online media, including collaborations with ROAR or OpenDemocracy during events like Transeuropa Festival, or its own web-based magazine Political Critique (Appendix D). Thus, here, as Georgiou puts it “[n]omadic ideological spaces emerge alongside – or inside – the highly diverse and transnational media environments” (2012, p.26).

Once again, what is noteworthy about the programme, is that its nomadic orientation operates on different levels. Geographically, the programme is not based in any one place. Episodes were filmed in the East, West, North and South of Europe, in various locations from Cluj and Tirana, to Germany and Gothenburg, or Italy and Madrid. Besides this geographical spread, the format also addresses a wide-ranging number of topics,

including environmental racism, nationalism and populism, the role of grassroots arts project in tackling hate speech around the so-called “refugee-crisis”, or the strategies of feminists and other social movements in the Balkans. In order to discuss these issues and make visible possible alternatives, the programme invites a group of four discussants from various different backgrounds, such as local activists, artists, academics, politicians or trade unionists. The programme usually commissions teams of local film- and media makers to produce the episodes. Thus, by working with local actors, both in terms of the discussants and the production teams, the format relies on local knowledges. Finally, the format travels across the boundaries of institutions, bringing people from local, national and European institutions in conversation with people from social movements and trade unions, as well as artists and academics. In addition to the usually 30-60 minutes long discussions, the format’s YouTube channel also offers shorter interviews or statements from local activists, as well as renown artists and intellectuals such as Naomi Klein or Tania Bruguera, and local, national or European politicians including Barcelona En Comú’s deputy major, Gerardo Pisarello, and Katja Kipping, the chairperson of the German left-wing party Die Linke.

What the example of Talk Real illustrates is how – in a similar sense to how media shape the diasporic identities explored by Georgiou – nomadic media contribute to a kind of multi-scalar spatial logic that runs through alter-European activists’ actions more generally:

“they bring images of distant cultures close, they assist the development of *absent copresences*, they allow the recombination and the re-appropriation of the distant in relation to the immediate, they represent and mediate meanings of localities, diasporas, *homelands* and communities.” (2006, p.12, original emphasis)

In other words, diasporic media, as well as the nomadic media of alter-European activists, point to the co-presence and inherently intertwined nature of how contemporary challenges play out in different localities and communities. Thus, what nomadic campaigns like Transeuropa Caravans and nomadic media formats like Talk Real call for is this: they change the logic of action, which, they imply, needs to run along the lines of relations rather than boundaries. Put differently, rather than locating agency in any one particular place, progressive action for another Europe, according to a nomadic logic, needs to take place on different spatial registers at once, that is, it needs to work across

different scales. This question of how agency moves across different scales in nomadic activism is what I will now turn to in the final section of this chapter.

6.4.3. Trans-scalar agency as a matter of translation

Returning to my overarching question of agency beyond borders, what, then, does the idea of nomadic activism tell us about how agency might work across different scales of action? One example that illustrates how the nomadic quality of alter-European activists' media practices translates into a trans-scalar sense of agency is the nomadic activist training programme *Act 4 Free Movement*. Here, the acronym 'Act' – advocacy, complaints and training – illustrates the different *sites* in which actions are taken, a question to which I will return in the next chapter. These include a report on EU free movements rights violations, petitions to the European Parliament, the filing of complaints to the European Commission and lobbying efforts on issues such as Roma rights or the loss of EU citizenship in the context of Brexit. Besides pursuing these institutional avenues, the nomadic training component of the programme seeks to equip a group of grassroots activists with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop a series of campaigns on freedom of movement issues. The group of more than a dozen people, whom I was able to accompany on three of four occasions, physically came together in Warsaw, Madrid, London and Florence (Figure 16) over the course of ten months in 2017 and 2018, with participants hailing from a number of different European and non-European countries, including Afghanistan, Albania, Croatia, Germany, Italy, Nigeria and Poland.



Figure 16: Nomadic activist training in Florence, July 2018; author's photo

We are set at the top floor of London's Arcola theatre in January 2018 as the sound of a news-jingle fills the room and the campaigner enters the makeshift stage next to the moderator and the two "experts".

Moderator: "Now we would like to invite Benjamin to talk about his initiative."

Campaigner: "Thank you for having me..."

The campaigner explains his project, which seeks to raise awareness of the disruptions experienced by pupils who have to cross the Austrian-Hungarian border on their way to school since border controls were re-introduced in the midst of the so-called "refugee crisis".

"... of course the best solution would be to just ignore this border. It has been an open border with absolutely no border controls up until 2015... However, I also think the physical border is one thing... but there is also this mental border in people's minds, you know, with the Iron Curtain. It's still – like – for Austrians, Hungary seems so far away and opening borders for students, especially in this

exchange is investing into the future to also open the mind-sets of people...”
 (Fieldnotes, London, January 2018)

This short scene took place during a day of media and communications training that was meant to provide the freedom of movement campaigners with media tools to support them spread their message on a transnational level. This included training on how to work with mainstream media, as enacted in the aforementioned scene, and how to use digital communications tools as well as strategies for lobbying institutions, including those of the European Union, working with ombudsmen, starting a European Citizens Initiative, which can lead to EU-wide legislation, and advice on how to write funding applications. Such skills, all of which relate to issues of *translation* – between different (media) audiences, between institutions, activists and funders, or between different cultural contexts – were useful to all eight campaigns developed as part of the programme, since they worked towards the same transnational topic of freedom of movement. Despite this transnational level, however, many of the campaigners actually started from local issues, or, as in the aforementioned campaign, from the lived experience of a particular mobile group. For instance, one participant took part in the training to develop a campaign entitled “Bloody Foreigners”, addressed the discrimination of Polish migrants in Ireland by encouraging them to donate blood, while yet another wanted to empower people in Bari, Italy, to lobby for the freedom of movement rights of EU citizen’s third country family members – issues that respective campaigners had to face in their own experiences as migrants or refugees. In the case of the Austro-Hungarian campaign, the interview simulation paid off a few months later. As the group regathered in Florence, the campaigner was interviewed by a “real” radio reporter from a Austrian public broadcasting station.

What the example of the Act 4 Free Movement training illustrates, then, is how the activists’ sense of agency operates across different scales, ranging from the local level (in terms of their campaign’s issues) to the national level (such as working with national mainstream media), and to the European (such as communicating with institutional European actors, for instance in the form of lobbying) or transnational level (for example when communicating through alternative online media like Political Critique). What emerges here, in other words, is a sense of agency that operates according to a trans-scalar logic to which *processes of translation are essential*. Marsili and Milanese, both co-

founders of European Alternatives, similarly pick up the importance of translation in their description of what another Europe looks like to them:

“Fortresses with clearly delimited boundaries, whether they are cities, countries or continents, give altogether the wrong image. Instead, we should imagine the European Union as a space of translation (etymologically from *crossing sides*), working to build democracy across linguistic, cultural, ethnic and other boundaries... Individual citizens need to become translators as well, with the cultural and educational resources to deal confidently with foreignness, to build understanding and collaboration where there may be incomprehension and fear... We must ensure that the translators, interpreters and those acting in solidarity outnumber the police and the border guards, as a matter of principle, as well as a matter of strategy” (2018, p.157).

Thus, it is in disrupting the sedentary order of the nation-centred political system while simultaneously refusing to reproduce this order at the European level, that alter-European activists point to the need for a sense of agency that works across a variety of geographical borders. To this end, nomadic activism suggests venturing out in search for different forms of agency at work below and beyond the nation-state as can be found in various localities, and to connect them across national borders, operating at once on a very local as well as a trans-local scale. Starting from common *routes* rather than national *roots*, nomadic activism thus works towards the need to connect different local initiatives to build trans-scalar forms of agency along the lines of common struggles, rather than along the borders of nation-states or a totalising idea of Europe which would once again contain agency within a given bordered territory. Transeuropa Caravans is one campaign that illustrates how the maps of resistance have to be redrawn in this sense (see Figure 17, in which the lines between nation-states are replaced with the lines of the caravans’ routes).



Figure 17: Illustration used in *European Alternatives Newsletter*, 25 April 2019; Image: *European Alternatives*, 2019c

Importantly, it is crucial to bear in mind that all of this does not mean that the nation-state, or indeed the level of the European Union, becomes irrelevant. Where there is the opportunity to collaborate with progressive national actors, the nation-state level can become part of a multi-scalar strategy. Nevertheless, what nomadic activism highlights is the need to build resistance across different local initiatives in particular, so as to build a routed sense of agency that “pierces through” the borders of the nation-state. It is in this sense that the nomadic logic, in Georgiou’s words, can offer the “possibility for new forms of citizenship” (2012, p.37) or, in my case, agency beyond borders. Here, “[i]n reflexively challenging the nation-state and the associated systems of representation, nomadism becomes a political discourse of resistance against culturalist hierarchies and exclusionary Eurocentric nationalist politics” (2012, p.37).

6.5. Conclusion: from roots to routes

In this chapter, I have considered the question how agency in alter-European activist networks spans across different geographic scales of action. My argument evolved in three steps.

Firstly, building on my findings from Chapter 4 with regards to the colour clash between “established” and “progressive” European activists, I demonstrated that (EU-)Europe is *not* the sole or primary scale of action for alter-European activists. Rather, as illustrated with regards to the campaign Transeuropa Caravans, the alter-European activists I followed in this thesis start from a more decentralised understanding of agency, located, to some extent, in European and national parliaments, but also, perhaps more importantly, in the streets, neighbourhoods and local and trans-local initiatives visited by the activists as part of their nomadic direct action campaigns. Thus, campaigns like Transeuropa Caravans decentralise our understanding of agency by making visible that social change is taking place everywhere across and beyond the European continent where grassroots initiatives are sprouting largely unseen in the shadow of mainstream media headlines and Brussel’s institutions.

Secondly, I suggested that the figure of the nomad provides a useful conceptual framework to explain the spatial logic of alter-European activism. Nomadic activism calls

into question the sedentary logic of territorially bound politics, searching instead for modes of agency that are able to operate according to a nomadic spatial logic. This is particularly urgent in times when agency – in terms of voting rights for instance – is largely nationalised, while contemporary challenges and the forces of neoliberal capitalism are largely exceeding the borders of nation-states, as I have argued in this and previous chapters.

The third part of the chapter illustrated both nomadic activism's daily struggle against national borders, as well as how alter-European activists work towards alternatives beyond nation-centredness at the example of their alternative media and communications practices. Similar to – though also distinct from – migrants' sense of agency or diasporic media engagement, alter-European activists' nomadic media practices point to how a trans-scalar approach to agency might be imagined, operating simultaneously on the local, national and transnational level. Here, rather than rooted in any one place, agency operates according to an underlying nomadic, trans-scalar logic, depending on processes of translation between two or more different positions. In other words, agency in alter-European activism is rooted not in territory but in transit, that is, in processes of translation. It depends on the actors' ability to move across and between various kinds of boundaries with the aim to build connections so as to act together towards common goals.

What I have not yet discussed in much depth, however, is that while geographically largely unbound, the nomadic or trans-scalar spatial logic in alter-European activism also faces certain limitations in the context of a hegemonic national order, of which the nation-centredness of mainstream media is but one example. In the absence of not only a mainstream infrastructure of transnational media, as well as of, for instance, transnational funding infrastructures, let alone transnational political infrastructures, how, then might alter-European activism exercise power beyond the production of nomadic media in a trans-scalar sense? Braudel argues that routes require resting points, where energies might be charged and bundled:

“And every route had its stopping places; a harbour, a foreign roadstead, a caravansary or *han*... Usually these halts, these resting places without which the routes would die, were the towns, the major staging posts where people hurried to get to and were pleased to arrive in.” (Braudel, cited in Mucem, 2017, p.26)

Here, we arrive at the level of the city and at the final register of action across which agency moves, that is, at the question of *sites* of agency, and in particular the role of political institutions. Building on the discussion highlighting how cities might offer particular routes to agency for actors like migrants and women (Chapter 5), the next chapter will turn in particular to the role radical municipalities in Europe might play for exercising the sense of transversal agency that I propose in this thesis.

7. Sites of agency: municipal movement parties and the feminization of institutions

7.1. Introduction

In this thesis thus far, I have argued that agency in alter-European activist networks might be understood as transgressing both a variety of *struggles*, involving a number of different actors (Chapter 4), as well as geographical *scales*, operating nomadically both beyond and below the borders of nation-states (Chapter 6). In this final empirical chapter, I now want to turn to the question of *sites* and what I have called *transversal agency*.

The chapter develops its argument on two distinct levels. The first three sections build an argument regarding the issue of sites, that is, in particular, the role played by political institutions and institutional actors in alter-European activists' sense of agency. This first part of the argument leads us, as I have already indicated in previous chapters, not primarily to the role of national or EU institutions, but to the case of municipal movement parties and the questions how institutions might be "feminized". Staying with the case of municipal movement parties yet moving towards the level of the overall argument of the thesis, the fourth and final part demonstrates how the case of feminizing institutions contributes to my paramount argument towards a conceptualisation of transversal agency.

Beginning with the question of sites and institutions, I demonstrate the wide-ranging perspectives that the alter-European activists I worked with hold towards established political parties and institutions. I also embed their views into a wider discussion on the crisis of political parties today and the resulting emergence of "movement parties" or "hybrid parties". Rather than on the level of national or European institutions, however, I demonstrate how, for many alter-European activists, it is on the municipal level where existing paths to exercising agency via institutions might be challenged.

The second part of the chapter returns to the Transeuropa Caravans campaigners in order to demonstrate how municipalism features in alter-European activism. In this part, I first situate the rise of new municipal actors into a wider discussion on the role of the city as a site of agency (building on my discussion in Chapter 5) and then show how radical new actors across Europe and the world have made use of it, taking their struggles from the streets to local institutions.

The third part of the chapter returns to the ethnographic field and my initial question regarding the role of institutions in alter-European activists' sense of agency beyond borders, discussing the example of how institutions might be "feminized". Investigating the role feminism plays both for new municipal as well as for alter-European actors, I argue that what becomes visible here is a sense of agency that moves across, translates between and brings together personal and party-political registers of action.

The final part of the chapter then moves on from this chapter's particular focus on the role of political institutions for alter-European understandings of agency to the thesis' overall argument towards a conceptualisation of *transversal agency*. Here, I will draw together the different findings of my ethnographic investigation of agency in alter-European activism based on the ethnographic data I analyse in this chapter and in the thesis thus far regarding how agency moves across different registers of action and how it might eventually lead to social change. I argue that alter-European activists' engagement with municipal movement parties illustrates not only how agency in alter-European activism moves across personal and institutional sites, but also across the registers of scales and struggles that I have discussed at length in previous chapters. In other words, alter-European activists' attempts to scale up municipal movement politics to a trans-European level (as illustrated by the ethnographic vignettes, interview quotes and examples of alter-European activists' alternative media texts I discuss throughout this chapter) are a hopeful example of transversal agency at work and point to how it can lead to tangible social change, not only on the local, but on the transnational level. It is this consideration of how alter-European activists play an important role in disseminating the learnings from municipal movement parties and creating connections beyond the borders of nation-states that this thesis contributes to the emerging scholarly discussions on movement parties.

Before conceptualising transversal agency, however, I want to first of all focus on the question of sites and hear from alter-European activists themselves regarding whether, and if so how, institutions matter in the context of their activism and sense of agency.

7.2. The matter of political institutions

7.2.1. Alter-European activism and institutions: a complicated relationship

To start with, before I can turn to the particular role of institutions in alter-European activists' sense of agency, it is important to highlight that I have already discussed a variety of sites of agency, as they are identified by Isin (2009), throughout this thesis. These included, for instance, protests, such as the Brexit related protests in London, the Rome Treaties' 60th anniversary protest or the Fridays of Future protest in Friedrichshafen (Chapters 4 and 5), alter-European activists' work with mainstream and alternative media (Chapters 3 and 6), and electoral politics and the act of voting as well as some activists' attempts to lobby or work with selected actors in established (EU-)institutions in a variety of ways, as in the case of activists like Jan who mobilise for a Green New Deal for Europe (Chapter 5), the "Charta 2020" campaigners in Brussels or the "Act 4 Free Movement" training participants mentioned in the previous chapter (Chapter 6). Expanding Isin's framework and contributing to most recent discussions within social movement scholarship regarding the emerging phenomenon of "movement parties" (for instance della Porta et al., 2017) and the question of how social movements imagine social and political change to take place (which I already introduced in Chapters 3 and 5), it is this latter aspect, namely alter-European activists' complex relationship with established political institutions and party politics and how they translate between different sites of action within, beyond and between institutions, that I want to turn to in more detail now in the first three parts of this chapter.

As I have already demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 5, the question whether or how social movements should engage with existing political parties and institutions is not new. Flesher Fominaya, for instance, who investigated the tensions between autonomous actors and actors of the Institutional Left in the alter-globalization movement, argues that such "tensions have characterized leftist and progressive social movements for many years and continue to do so, not only in Europe, but also in the US, Latin America and elsewhere" (2014, p.67, see also Flesher Fominaya, 2010). Unsurprisingly, then, the question of how to engage with political institutions is also an ongoing struggle within alter-European activist networks.

On a general level, many of the alter-European activists I interviewed showed a degree of sympathy towards established political parties across the left spectrum and remarked

that there should be some sense of overlap or alliance between movements and political parties:

“The rationale from a political party perspective is that having a good relationship with a movement that has an outreach which the party doesn’t have, might increase their share of votes. From the movement point of view, the rationale is that by having a good relationship with a political party perhaps the issue, their stance and the policy requests can be adopted by the political party, so it can be a mutually beneficial situation... I am personally in favour of this kind of contamination, especially in a moment in which the traditional structure of party politics are in crisis. And if there is a movement which is managing to interpret the political situation better, by all means, I think a political party has all the interest to try to be receptive to those instances.” (Fabio, December 2018)

“I think it’s important to see both things. I don’t think that all grassroots movements should become [part of institutional] politics, like, that’s crazy! But I think that sometimes it’s really good to have someone on your side in the parliament for instance.” (Šejla, March 2018)

Fabio’s and Šejla’s remarks about the advantages of a “contamination” or a “good relationship” between movements and parties illustrate a general recognition that I have witnessed amongst alter-European activists regarding the need for links and overlaps between the two. At the same time, many activists I interviewed also express clear reservations about mainstream political parties on the left and consequently organise primarily as activists, community organisers or as active members of different civil society groups and networks. Audrey, a British activist I interviewed, who is active in housing activism and community organising in London and part of a feminist direct action collective that campaigns against austerity explained her relationship with established parties as follows:

“I’m not in a party and I don’t have much of a relation with party politics. I’m very anti-Tory, that feels like my main party politics. I get involved when it seems really critical and vital that we stand up against the Tories... [like when] there was an election last year. I really love door-knocking, it’s a community organising tactic... I have a difficult relationship with Labour because some of the Labour politicians and politics are spot on... but, to be honest, if I was to get involved in party politics it would have to be more radical. At the moment it doesn’t go far enough, it’s not for me. I see Labour’s manifesto but then I see them treating vulnerable people in my borough with absolute contempt and disregard and so I just can’t buy into it fully, so I can’t get behind it.” (Audrey, November 2018)

Interestingly, even those activists I interviewed who *are* members of political parties similarly point to the limitations of mainstream Left party politics and point to the need for parties to work more closely with social movements. Petra, a long-term party member who has spent a lot of her activist life lobbying and working with the Labour party in Britain and even once stood for election has told me:

“I think the same frustration that we felt then that we feel now is that when we get our ideas accepted, they are kind of translated by politicians in the wrong way... There are certain politicians that come out of movements that were really fantastic... but by and large, when you have these professional politicians, they don't get some of these issues.” (Petra, November 2018)

Similarly, Mark, whom I already quoted in Chapters 2 and 4, who pointed to the limitations of the alter-globalization movement with regards to their institutional political impacts, admitted:

“I joined Labour in the summer of 2015 at the beginning of the Corbyn campaign... [However] I think that I'm primarily a social movement person in the sense that I only do campaigning for the Labour party in general elections... I'm not active... I suppose where I contribute... it is a bit more of a coordinating between different organisations and political [parties] and MPs... more at the point at which civil society meets politics.” (Mark, December 2018)

This, then, is the first important observation to highlight regarding alter-European activists' relationship with established political parties on the left spectrum and with political institutions more generally: while most of them seem to not categorically be against the engagement with institutional politics *per se*, many perceive a gap regarding the opportunities that current institutional frameworks might provide for radical social change, as it is understood by social movement actors. How, then, do these activists imagine a more productive relationship with political parties and existing institutional infrastructures? Before I can turn to this question, it is important to highlight that alter-European activists are not alone in criticising the status quo of institutional politics. Indeed, their remarks have to be embedded within a wider discussion about the crisis of political parties and new actors that have emerged from this moment of crisis in recent years.

7.2.2. *The crisis of political parties and the emergence of new actors*

We live today, argues Fraser, through a moment of “global political crisis” (2019, p.8). According to Fraser, one of the characteristics of this crisis is “a dramatic weakening, if not a simple breakdown, of the authority of the established political classes and parties” (p.8). This weakening and the seeming beginning of the end of neoliberal hegemony, as Fraser shows, is accompanied by the rise of far-right forces of which Trump, Brexit and the upsurge of racist, xenophobic rhetoric in different places across the world are but some of the most illustrative examples. In Europe, this crisis recently became visible in the results of the European Parliament elections in May 2019. Perhaps in light of the ongoing presence of Fridays for Future demonstrations as well as Extinction Rebellion in the streets and the media of Western Europe, it is less surprising that the Greens have been one of the big winners of this election, as many commentators have argued (for instance Graham-Harrison, 2019). In Britain, where the results were undoubtedly influenced by the ongoing negotiations of how the UK might leave the EU, Nigel Farage’s newly founded Brexit Party got 31.7% of the votes. At the same time, however, smaller, but explicitly pro-European parties (Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP, Change UK, Plaid Cymru) have gathered more than 35.8% of the votes themselves, in sum (see Clarke, Gutiérrez and Hulley-Jones, 2019 for the UK’s EU election results). Both of these developments, the rise of Green parties and of nationalist parties like Farage’s Brexit Party, also highlight who the big losers of these elections were: the two mainstream parties – Labour (-11.3%) and the Conservatives (-14.8%). This tendency of mainstream political parties losing out in recent elections is neither specific to the UK, nor to the last European Parliament elections. In fact, this trend has been so present in recent years that some have come to wonder whether the successes of the likes of Farage, Trump and others, who mobilise with the use of nationalist, anti-elite and anti-globalisation rhetoric, might not point to the potential end of the political party, or, at least the end of the electoral professional party (see Davis, 2019)? Thus, Davis asks, “if many centrist, professional electoral parties are struggling to maintain power is there a new party model taking their place” (p.71)? In other words, what might come after the party as we know it in liberal Western democracies?

Indeed, the crisis of representative democracy and the established political parties in Europe has also led to the emergence of a new political actors in recent years: the “movement party” (della Porta et al., 2017) or “hybrid party” (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a).

Della Porta et al. define movement parties as “political parties that have particularly strong organizational and external links with social movements” (2017, pp.4-5). In a similar sense, Flesher Fominaya defines a *hybrid party* as “a party that seeks to maintain links to, but also characteristics of, participatory democratic social movements, while still being firmly committed to winning elections” (p.234). Links between parties and movements are, of course, not a new phenomenon as such. As della Porta et al. show, movements and parties have related to one another throughout history in numerous ways, for instance as movements lobby parties or create coalitions and alliances on particular issues. They also remind us that many parties on the left have themselves originated from movements, such as in the case of social democratic parties emerging out of the labour movement or contemporary Green parties having their roots in environmental struggles (see also della Porta and Diani, 1999; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a). Moreover, more recent articulations of movement parties have already existed in Latin America in the 1990s (see, for instance, Van Cott, 2005). Despite this rich history of different forms of overlaps and alliances between movements and parties however, della Porta et al. argue that there remains a gap in academic scholarship on such phenomena, as “social movement studies mainly framed [social movements] as a social phenomenon whose political aspects had to be relocated outside of political institutions”, while “literature on political parties grew more and more biased towards institutions, forgetting about the linkages with the society” (2017, p.3). In practice, despite existing alliances between the two, social movements' role has commonly been the raising of awareness for particular issues, privileging “action in society, [and] leaving parties the job of bringing their claims into institutions” (p.6). With the emergence of new movement parties in the context of ongoing austerity politics, della Porta et al. argue that it is necessary to pay particular attention to this new phenomenon and the environments within which they emerge. Essential for the emergence of movement parties in Southern Europe, for instance, was the “precarization of labour as well as a proletarianization of the middle classes” (p.9; see also Harvey, 2013, p.xiv) as a result of decades of neoliberalism. Here, movement parties emerge on the back of centre-left parties' dramatic loss in citizens' trust following their functioning as “leading forces in the implementation of neoliberal reforms” (della Porta et al., 2017, p.10).

As I have already briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, the rise of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain might be the two most well-known and widely discussed cases of the phenomenon of national movement parties in Europe (see, for instance, Douzinas, 2013,

2017; Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; Fenton, 2016a; della Porta et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2017, 2019; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, b). Podemos, which might be considered as an “unintended consequence” (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, p.222) of the 15-M, the Spanish movements of the squares, marks a particularly interesting case in the context of my own discussion of how alter-European actors’ understanding of the role of institutions for political agency. Contrasting two broad strands of political theory, namely “those who view autonomous grassroots horizontal and nonhierarchical networked movements favorably” on the one hand, “and those who are sympathetic but argue for the need for a construction of renewed political hegemony of the people” on the other, Flesher Fominaya argues that “[t]he 15-M movement has come close to successfully integrating both autonomous and neo-Gramscian understandings of collective action” (2020a, p.15). Podemos, she holds, marks a “departure from previous waves of mobilization, where the cleavage between the two approaches was much more marked”, thus representing “a shift towards more hybrid forms of autonomy” (p.15), rather than merely “a “natural” evolution from (naïve) mass mobilization to “real” (mature) politics” (p.223). Indeed, what is important to highlight, here, is that the rise of Podemos – the party’s initial electoral success in the European Parliament elections in 2014, three years after the 15-M had occupied Spain’s squares, and, subsequently, its way into the Spanish national government – occurs in the context of a wider “democratic turn” in which the “15-M was *already* shifting from a pure autonomous to a more hybrid movement that engaged with democratic institutions” (p.224, original emphasis) and “a greater disposition to institutional engagement as an arena of political action” (p.232). While discussing a number of tensions that come with this move, Flesher Fominaya holds that respective developments “can still bear fruit on transforming new party logics” (p.281).

While the case of Podemos has been quoted by various scholars as a hopeful case for how the route via national parliaments might indeed hold the potential for much needed radical change (for instance Errejón and Mouffe, 2016) and much can be learned from the particular case of hybrid parties like Podemos that focus primarily on the level of national elections (see García Agustín, 2020, p.54; although see also Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, p.221 on the links between Podemos and “municipal lists”), other recent scholarship has argued that new “resources for hope” and “a revitalisation of the political imagination” might be found not only in the national political arena, but also on the level of radical municipalities (Featherstone, Littler and Davison, 2020, p.4). As Featherstone, Littler and Davison argue, “[l]eft municipalism seems to offer a convincing alternative to a descent

into disaster capitalism, one that addresses the causes of the defeat and offers solutions” (2020, p.5). The authors advance this argument in the particular context of the “crushing political defeat that was the December UK general election” for the Labour Party (p.4). In such contexts, municipalism might present an alternative route to radical institutional change where there are no political opportunities to be sought for social movements or other radical forces to intervene at the level of (in this case: conservative) national governments. Similarly, as Fraser admits for the context of the U.S., while the “progressive populism” of the Bernie Sanders campaign might be “our best chance”, she reserves that “even that might not be a stable end point. Progressive populism could end up being transitional – a way station en route to some new postcapitalist form of society” (2019, p.39).

While the case of municipal movement parties has received curiously little attention in academic scholarship thus far, my analysis of alter-European activists’ alternative media texts revealed that radical municipal actors are frequently discussed in alter-European activist networks. For instance, the publication *Shifting Baselines of Europe* (Büllesbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017 – see Appendix D) includes an entire section entitled “Shifting Cities”, which assembles learnings from radical mayors and municipal actors in Madrid, Barcelona, A Coruña, Naples, Messina and Belgrade, as well as activists’ proposals for how cities might work together across borders for a more progressive refugee politics or in order to resist surveillance. Such discussions also re-appear in other alternative media channels, including the nomadic talk show format Talk Real, which I discussed in the previous chapter and which has published several interviews with municipal actors, or in the following piece that two European Alternatives members wrote for OpenDemocracy, in which they draw out municipal action as a possible route for challenging nation-state based understandings of agency:

“On the one hand, European nations are increasingly unable to address the global challenges brought about by technological innovation, migration, climate change, or financial flows. Even more, the perseverance of national divisions and reciprocal vetoes leads to a worsening of policy choices and a narrowing of democratic spaces for all. This is dramatically evident in the European Union: where the inability to construct a transnational democracy leads to dysfunctional economic policies, lack of any credible policy on migration, tax competition between states and a race to the bottom on workers’ rights. On the other hand, the nation state is being challenged from below. From Barcelona to Naples, citizens

increasingly demand the right to greater participation in the decisions that affect their lives.” (2017, online)

Indeed, the alternative route to power that takes progressive politics via municipal rather than national governments also featured as a second important observation from my interviews with alter-European activists regarding their relationship with institutions. Several have highlighted the potential of municipal institutions as sites of agency:

“The problem is that, in Croatia, I really never had the platform where I would go to. I really didn’t want to be with the Social Democrats... I know a couple from the party who are doing a really great job, and also some young people, which I will always support. But at the same time, they are just [*hesitates*] – I don’t think that they are doing any good... in the way of this politics in the traditional way... This is why there are a lot of discussions about Zagreb je naš ["Zagreb is ours"] as well, because a lot of those people are primarily activists... now going to sit in the city council” (Šejla, March 2018).

“For example, the Green party here [in Czechia] are really neoliberal... They don’t frame their ecology argument anti-capitalist, so I don’t want to be part of the Greens - or any political party... I like the idea of autonomy, municipality... [as it is] being performed in Kurdistan – obviously another environment altogether.” (Ana, November 2018)

What, then, might be the advantage of the municipal route from the perspective of alter-European activists, as opposed to the “traditional” route via national or even European institutions, as Šejla put it? In order to investigate precisely what role municipal institutional actors play for alter-European activists’ sense of agency, I want to return to the ethnographic field, joining the Transeuropa Caravans activists on their visit to some of the municipal movements in Europe who have taken from the streets to the municipal institutions in recent years.

7.3. Municipal movement parties and the transformation of local institutions

7.3.1. *The municipal route: municipal actors in alter-European activism*

With its charming cobblestone streets and approximately 1,500 inhabitants, it is easy to mistake Saillans for what might be called a sleepy town. On this drizzly day in May 2019, we hardly meet anyone out in the streets (Figure 18). In what seems to be the town centre,

we find one shop each for everything you might need here: a *boulangerie*, a corner shop, a small clothes boutique, a fruit and vegetable store, a wine shop, and a few bistros or restaurants. All of them, however, are closed now, as we arrive just after noon. Four activists from the all-female Western route of the Transeuropa Caravans project have come here to speak to one of the people who have taken back power over the decisions considering everyday life in their town. For as we will find out, Saillans is everything *but* a sleepy town. Saillans is one of the rebel cities where the municipal revolution is taking place.



Figure 18: Transeuropa Caravans activists in Saillans, May 2019; Photo: Adriana Díaz Martín-Zamorano

Before I joined them in Marseille, from where we departed to Saillans, the four activists – who hold five citizenships in total (Brazilian, Swiss, Romanian, Spanish, Italian), speak eight languages between them (Catalan, Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, Italian, Romanian, Arabic) and have each lived in at least one country other than the one they were born in – have already met with several similar groups and initiatives along their route from Portugal via Spain to Paris. By the end of their journey, they will have met with a European network of feminist activists in Barcelona, visited a local anti-racist initiative in Lisbon, met with and interviewed several city councillors and activists from municipal movement parties in A Coruña, Marseille and Saillans, and met with migrants' rights campaigners, community organisers and young activists in several places along the

way. In the car on our way here, I already transcribed an interview, which one of the caravanners conducted with a member from Marea Atlántica (the municipal movement party that took office in the municipality of A Coruña, see Figure 19), which is supposed to go online later that week.



Figure 19: Transeuropa Caravans event with Marea Atlántica in A Coruña, May 2019; Photo: Adriana Díaz Martín-Zamorano

Now, in Saillans, a young Frenchman named Paul is already waiting for us, sitting on the steps of the lime-stone coloured townhall while smoking a cigarette. He leads us up the stairs into a room where a gigantic map of the local area which illustrates how the town is split up into thematic sections (indicating, for instance, residential area, farmland, commercial town center) covers an entire wall. On the opposite side of the room you get a glance of a what Saillans looks like in real life, with greens and greys of its pre-Alps landscape peeking in through high window frames. “It all began with a supermarket”, the young Frenchman, who is an urban planner by training, begins to explain. We learn about how Saillans used to be a rather ordinary commune until a few years ago, when the mayor announced the building of a supermarket on the outskirts of the town. At the last municipal election, in 2014, things changed in Saillans. Worried that the announced supermarket would destroy the local shops in the town centre, inhabitants got together to

end the reign of the mayor, who had been taking decisions alone up until this point, according to Paul. This hierarchical system has been replaced since the newly formed citizens list *Saillans Ensemble* took office in order to redistribute decision-making power to the inhabitants. Since then, all important decisions are discussed and taken together via public assemblies, which are made transparent on the town's website and Facebook page.

Paul explains that the daily operations of the town are facilitated through a series of democratic practices built on the principles of collegiality, transparency and participation. Rather than running to execute a particular programme, the town operates on the basis of these principles. This results in issues being discussed as they occur – whether on questions of urban planning, salaries and social services, or welcoming migrants. Rather than delegating these decisions to representatives, the municipality employs different mechanics for finding solutions in more self-organised ways, as Paul elaborates in the interview that later gets published on the campaign's blog:

“For all the decisions, we go for three steps: first, we aim for consensus – meaning, everybody agrees –, if it fails, then we aim for consent – nobody opposes –, and if it is still not possible, then we have to vote on it.” (European Alternatives, 2019b, online)

One of the decisions made recently in this way revolved around the discussion of how the town centre might be freed from cars and turned it into a more pedestrian friendly place. According to Paul, participatory planning examples like this one, in which decisions are based on dozens of public meetings and people can take control over how their local environment develops, are one of the biggest early successes of the new municipal governance in Saillans. (Fieldnotes, Saillans, May 2019)

What this ethnographic anecdote from Saillans begins to demonstrate is not only how radical changes can take place on the municipal level, but also how alter-European activists' acts and media practices draw connections between radical municipal actors across geographical borders. Indeed, on our route thus far we witnessed that Saillans is not the only French (or, indeed, European) municipality where citizens take control of the municipal governance. On the day before coming here, we have met a group of activists only a few kilometres further South, who were attempting a similar strategy, calling themselves *Marseille En Commune* – an allusion to one of the first and perhaps the most well-known citizen platform forming in Europe in recent years, *Barcelona En Comú*.

Indeed, it was the Spanish brand of municipal movement parties that had left a lasting impression on my fellow caravanners after they met with Marea Atlántica in A Coruña. It was *en route* with the Western Caravan, after our meeting in Saillans and having listened to the other caravanners' enthusiastic reports on their action with the radical municipal actors in A Coruña, that it became clear to me just how important the role of municipal movement parties might be for alter-European activism. Penélope, one of the caravans activists, for example, believed that what they had seen on their route, for instance with regards to community organisers providing spaces for elderly people to exercise agency in the city of Lisbon, or with the electoral success of municipal movements like Marea Atlántica, needed to be made more public to inspire similar actions all across the continent:

“Many of my friends act individually and think that’s enough, for example being vegetarian and using less plastic. It’s good to do all these things, [but] for me this should go hand in hand with a greater ambition... I think Transeuropa Caravans was really an example of this – of how we can... spread the word..., for example to open an organisation like the grandmothers one in Lisbon, or... to open something like Marea Altántica in A Coruña.” (Penélope, May 2019)

As Penélope’s observation from the caravans begins to illustrate, alter-European activists play an important role in sharing the experiences made and alternatives in the making that emerge from radical municipalities through a variety of acts. Indeed, the Transeuropa Caravans campaigners’ visit to and reporting from some of Europe’s radical municipalities was not the first time I encountered municipal actors in the field. As I began to show in the previous section, the engagement with radical municipalities can be traced through various events and many of the alternative media outlets reviewed in this thesis (see Appendix D). For instance, municipal actors were present at all three Transeuropa Festivals I attended between 2015 and 2019, such as on panels and workshops where they shared and exchanged experiences or made plans for future collaborations and shared campaigns. More than that, they played a key role in co-hosting the festival – as in the case of local actors’ involvement in Transeuropa Festival in Madrid (see Chapters 1 and 3) or the radical mayor of Palermo co-hosting the festival in Palermo in 2019 (as I will discuss later in this chapter and in Chapter 8). Another example is the Campus event, an activist workshop in the East German countryside which I will return to later in this chapter, at which several municipal actors from across the continent were present.

Key learnings from such events are usually captured on alternative media platforms, including in the aforementioned publication *Shifting Baselines of Europe* (Büllesbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017) and on Talk Real, which is used as a platform to spread the voice and learnings from several municipal actors, including an interview with Barcelona En Comú's vice mayor Gerardo Pisarello and others. Besides the physical gatherings at events, these media function as crucial spaces of convergence in which municipal actors come together from different geographies as well as other transnational actors in a way that allows them not only to share knowledges and exchange their experiences as well as resources, but in a way that enhances their agency not only on the local, but on a transnational level. The ongoing development of an alternative refugee politics that can be traced from different events though to different media as well as the most recent From the Sea to the City (2020) campaign which brings together municipal and other actors in order to collectively resist regressive and inhumane national and European refugee politics is a case in point.

What role, then, did these actors play for how agency was enacted and understood in alter-European activism with regards to the site of institutional politics? In order to begin to explore this question, it is necessary to embed the case of municipal movement parties into wider discussions on why the level of the municipality matters as a potential route to agency in today's political context.

7.3.2. *The role of cities as sites of agency*

As I have begun to argue in Chapter 5, the city has been a site of agency throughout history. Cities already played a central role for democracy in the Greek poleis or in the late Middle Ages (Caccia, 2017). Urban social movements and the notion of *rebel cities*, as Harvey (2013) shows, can be traced alongside examples from 1968 Paris to 2011 Occupy Wall Street. Drawing on Lefebvre's idea of the *right to the city*, Harvey argues "that revolutionary movements frequently if not always assume an urban dimension" (p.xiii). Thus, at first glance, it might seem that Occupy and the movements of the squares are but the most recent articulations of a historical trajectory of similar mobilisations, albeit with a technological update and distinct in the way the different movements inspired one another and spread across countries (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, despite

this long history, the role that cities and municipalities might play as a site of agency might be particularly important for rethinking a sense of agency that works for the 21st century.

Today, as various urban scholars have pointed out, life in cities is defined by numerous particular characteristics that illustrate some of the main challenges and contradictions of the contemporary moment. Cities, as Sassen (2000) argues, are both the heart of global finance capital, as well as key sites of the resistance against global inequality and the 1%, as in the case of Occupy Wall Street. Cities, as Dawson (2017) shows, are both the biggest contributors to climate change, while simultaneously at the forefront of fighting it, by developing technologies against sea level rise, through urban social movements calling for change, or by municipal governments disobeying regressive national policies (see also Milman, 2018). With the majority of the world's population living in cities and thirteen of the twenty largest cities being port towns, Dawson (2017, p.5) also shows that many cities are particularly vulnerable in times of rising sea levels, which is only further exacerbated by "stark economic inequality, the defining urban characteristic of our time" (p.6). Moreover, cities, as Georgiou (2013, p.92) and others have shown, are significantly shaped by migration. Transnational and diasporic communities, argues Georgiou, contribute to constituting the city both as "a space of belonging, but also a node that belongs to transnational networks" (p.92). Indeed, it is this networked quality of the city (see also Smith, 2001, p.60), that blurs national borders and relies, unlike the nation-state, more on connections made with other places than on bounded territory, that make the city a particularly useful starting point for rethinking agency in a way that is at once local and transnational.

One possible way in which this might be done has been put forward by Barber in *If Mayors Ruled The World – Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (2014). Barber suggests a way of scaling up municipal agency to the global level through a global parliament of mayors. Arguing that the model of "the nation-state is failing us on the global scale" (p.3) and that people "have everywhere grown cynical about government and its capacity to deal with pressing issues" (p.xviii), Barber holds that the city "has in today's globalizing world once again become democracy's best hope" (p.3). Barber starts his analysis by "distinguishing interdependent cities from independent nations", arguing that "while states are by definition sovereign territorial entities, cities are interactive web flows in which interdependence is the key factor driving culture, trade, immigration,

transportation, and other intercity activities” (p.xxi). In other words, in that they inherently rely on the notion of interdependence rather than a claim for territorial sovereignty, municipalities might serve particularly well to address many contemporary challenges, which are at once globally spread but locally felt. For Barber, a global parliament of cities could be a way to “facilitate global cooperation by bringing democratic legitimacy and political efficacy to decision making on an ever more interdependent planet” (p.xvii). Such a collaboration between mayors, which is, in fact, already emerging in practice, would neither replace national or international institutions, nor grow into a “top-down “world government” of cities” (p.xvii). Rather, Barber sees a global parliament of mayors as acting in collaboration with existing intercity initiatives, such as the climate network C40, or the organisation United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

While Barber’s idea certainly has its merits, his argument also falls short in a number of ways. For instance, while he offers examples from different continents, it is striking how of the eleven mayors he profiles the vast majority of them are older than 60 years and only one of them is a woman. While Barber caveats this by stating that “[w]omen are still rarer in city government than in national government” (p.xiv), it is also the case that a global government of mayors would consequently be made of a majority of older men, if it does not actively work against such issues. Moreover, while he addresses issues such as inequality in different chapters, he also profiles different mayors from all across the political spectrum on somewhat equal terms. Barber’s view, he argues, would be “city centered not just mayor centered. This is crucial because mayors come and go, while cities stay” (p.xii). As a result, profiles of mayors such as Leoluca Orlando, who gained popularity in the 1980s by successfully fighting the Palermitan mafia and who, more recently, welcomes migrants arriving in the city’s ports as Palermitan citizens, calling the EU’s migration policies “genocidal” and demanding an abolishment of the residents permit which forces many migrants into a life of illegality (van der Zee, 2017, online; see also Scharenberg, 2020), appear next to mayors as different as the Conservatives’ Boris Johnson during his time as Mayor of London, whose campaign during the UK’s EU referendum was built on and fed xenophobia and anti-migration sentiment (see Seidler, 2018). In Barber’s account, Johnson is “profiled in this book as one of the stellar municipal leaders with a global reputation” (2014, p.xiv), whose bike scheme, gaiety and “wacky” (p.82) character is somewhat celebrated, while the fact that he publicly supported his party’s national austerity course while in local government and has since

consistently voted in favour of austerity policies as an MP (Partington and Grierson, 2019), not to mention the 43 million pounds from public money which he spent on the eventually unrealised garden bridge (BBC, 2019a), paints a rather different picture. What such accounts show, is that there is nothing inherently progressive about the municipal level. In other words, if mayors like Boris Johnson would rule the world, it would hardly look any different from the neoliberal status quo. As Georgiou shows, “[n]eoliberalism sustains a good grip on the city” (2013, p.152):

“Neoliberal, individualistic and thin articulations of cosmopolitanism represent a vision exported by global corporations, city governments and elite cosmopolitans. This cosmopolitanism either reaffirms existing boundaries or gives rise to new ones that advance inequality by capitalizing on cultural diversity, global flows of communication and interconnectivity.” (p.151)

Thus, as Featherstone, Littler and Davison, who are more interested in a dedicatedly “Left municipalism” (2020, p.5) or what García Augustín calls “progressive localism” (2020, p.57), remind us, “the local, as Doreen Massey often argued, does not by itself signify any particular political stance” (Featherstone, Littler and Davison, 2020, p.7).

I engaged with Barber’s (2014) work here despite these reservations, because his idea of a global parliament of mayors and the role played by radical mayors more generally features in alter-European activists’ alternative media texts (for instance Büllsbach and Marsili, 2017; Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017) for the progressive potential that radical mayors like Leoluca Orlando have regarding the level of the city as a potential route to exercising agency beyond borders. This became evident to me at Transeuropa Festival in 2019 – which was in fact co-hosted by the city of Palermo and its mayor – where Orlando discussed the need for cities to enter into coalitions for a more progressive refugee politics with the mayor of İzmir (see Scharenberg, 2020). Their meeting does not only illustrate how alter-European activists work to create connections between radical mayors in Europe, but also how such acts might challenge European borders themselves by connecting progressive actors across and beyond them. However, besides the role of individual mayors, there is another municipal actor that features prominently in alter-European activist networks and that deserves further attention: municipal movement parties.

7.3.3. *The rise of municipal movement parties*

In order to better understand how municipal movement parties feature in alter-European activism, it is first of all necessary to consider how the recent formations of new municipal actors in Europe came about. This story of the radical municipal actors who have been attempting to transform local institutions in Europe in recent years might be told beginning with the movements of the squares which I have already discussed in Chapter 3. For after the occupations were evicted, tents taken down and the immediately visible expression of the movement disappeared, the actions continued. Flesher Fominaya recalls this moment of dismantling the camps in the context of the Spanish 15-M on Madrid's Puerta del Sol square:

“After a few weeks, on 12 June 2011, in a move consistent with the movements' roots in local collectives, the Camp made a deliberate decision to leave the square rather than continue to resist repression, and return to the neighbourhoods to continue working in weekly local assemblies, organized around different themes (such as economy, general strike, short-term actions, coordination, education, feminism, migration and mobility)... Although mass participation has declined, dozens of assemblies continued, and continue, to be organized every week.” (p.174)

In the case of several Spanish cities, this moment of what could be read as a *retreat* to the neighbourhoods was in fact what allowed them to *advance* their struggle to another level, as I was told by one of the city councillors of Ahora Madrid at a European Alternatives event in 2016. It was the ongoing work in neighbourhood assemblies, he insisted, that eventually led the movement to take from the streets to the municipal institutions (Fieldnotes, Casekow, August 2016; see also Büllesbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017).

Four years after the occupations of central squares in Madrid, Barcelona and several other Spanish cities, a series of new political actors entered the stage of parliamentary politics. This new actor might be called by many names: “new municipalism”, “fearless cities”, “rebel cities”, “shelter cities”, “cities of change”, or “municipal lists” (Büllesbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017; Caccia, 2017; Barcelona En Comú, 2019; Russell, 2019; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a; Font and García-Espín, 2020). Most well-known perhaps is the case of the citizen platform Barcelona En Comú, whose recently re-elected mayor Ada Colau used to be a housing activist. Yet, Barcelona was not the only city where what might be called *municipal movement parties* have managed to get elected in order to begin to tackle

grievances expressed during the movements of the squares in the municipal institutions. Other examples in Spain include Marea Atlántica in A Coruña, Ahora Madrid, Málaga Ahora, València En Comú or Zaragoza En Comú. Indeed, as a recent publication edited by Barcelona En Comú (2019) shows, this new expression of radical municipalism is not merely a Spanish phenomenon but might even be understood as what the book subtitled as a “Global Municipalist Movement”. Municipal movement organisations can be found in several corners of the world including in Beirut, Frome, Hong Kong, Jackson, Łódź, Rojava, Messina, Valparaiso, and, as I have shown in the previous anecdote, in Saillans (Barcelona En Comú, 2019) and have, in many cases, run and made it into municipal institutions. Despite this wide geographic spread, however, municipal movement parties have received curiously little academic attention thus far, at least in the English-speaking literature. While the cases of new national political mobilisations and movement parties like Syriza and Podemos are widely referenced and continue to spark ongoing interest amongst European scholars (for instance Douzinas, 2013, 2017; Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; Fenton, 2016a; della Porta et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2017, 2019; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, b), municipal movement parties seem to have largely escaped the radar of academic analysis thus far. As Russell puts it, the rise of new municipalist movements “appears to be running ahead of theory” (2019, p.991) and deserves closer attention – a gap which I want to contribute to closing in this chapter.

The aforementioned municipal movements and municipal movement parties vary in terms of their local context, how they came about and the elements that define them, in other words, there is “no blueprint for what a municipalist strategy looks like” (Roth and Russell, 2018, online). As Barcelona En Comú’s publication *Fearless Cities – A Guide to the Global Municipalist Movement* (2019), which provides an overview of strategies and toolkits at work in 50 initiatives from 19 countries and all continents, demonstrates: the issues and priorities tackled on the municipal level are as varied as the different locations themselves. In Valparaiso, Chile’s second city, activists are fighting municipal debt, poverty and regular fire outbreaks; in Beirut, Lebanon, activists ran in municipal elections with the objective to take on the city’s poor air quality and waste management; in Jackson, Mississippi, with its strong roots in the civil rights movement, Black and Latino communities organise in workers-owned cooperatives, working towards both racial justice and a democratisation of the local economy; while activists in Belgrade, Serbia, fight to take their waterfronts back from global property investors. As Barcelona En Comú point out, “each context is different”: “each local area has its own traditions, its

own political culture, organizations, movements and parties, and each organization needs to find the structure most useful to its project” (2019, p.50). Nevertheless, despite local differences, there are some common characteristics that might be drawn out.

On the broadest level, Caccia, for instance, defines “new municipalism,” as attempts to radically “reinvent democratic practices from the local dimension” (2017, p.39). Similarly, García Augustín defines municipalism as “a form of progressive localism in which city councils act institutionally, in cooperation with civil society” (2020, p.57). In Barcelona and other Spanish cities, the idea of “confluence” (2019, p.49), is used to describe “alliances between related political projects (parties, movements, citizens’ platforms and individuals), which try to move beyond the logic of traditional coalitions” (p.57). Importantly, however, as Barcelona En Comú put it:

“Municipalism is a movement that aims to go beyond changing public policy or sending ‘better’ people to pre-existing institutions: it also wants to change how politics is done, to take back the city, and to use the strength of the people to put local institutions at the service of the common good. It is not enough for us to have a good manifesto or leaders who are clever and committed.” (2019, p.49)

Thus, Russell argues, “it would be wrong to read them primarily as electoral phenomena”:

“These new municipalist initiatives must not be understood simply as left political parties looking to implement progressive policies at the municipal scale. Engagement with institutions and elections should be understood as a component of broader strategic approaches, rather than the defining feature of the new municipalism.” (p.997)

Consequently, “more than a mere ‘coalition’ of parties” (Barcelona En Comú, 2019, p.50), “electoral ‘confluence’”, according to Russell, might be understood as “an opportunity to build a new form of political power, one that aspired to take the ethos of these social movements and find ways to apply them to the governance of their city” (2019, p.992). This model, according to Russell, is “neither anarchist nor socialist, neither radical nor reformist” (p.991), but, in the case of Barcelona En Comú, “brought together activists with no previous experience of formal politics along with individuals from three other parties” (p.993). In García Augustín’s words, Barcelona En Comú’s approach meant not only “replacing the former leaderships of local authorities, but, more ambitiously, to modifying ways of doing politics” (2020, p.58).

Indeed, there are many more aspects about these new municipal movements that require further attention and scholarship. For instance, much can be learned from how municipalities can transform local economics, as seen in Preston and its plans for a peoples' bank (see Featherstone, Littler and Davison, 2020, p.4) or in Jackson's investments in co-operatives and community ownership with aims at "empowering the structurally under- and unemployed sectors of the working class, particularly from Black and Latino communities" (see Barcelona En Comú, 2019, pp.168-169). Nevertheless, for the purpose of answering my particular question of how municipalism matters in alter-European activism, I want to focus on a selection of aspects that particularly stood out in my own field of study and which helps to explain alter-European activists' understanding of agency and the role of institutional sites in this context.

The particular case of how Barcelona En Comú's Gerardo Pisarello defines three characteristic dimensions of their brand of municipalism is useful for my own context. Firstly, he highlights that "the 'how' of politics is just as important as the 'what'" (2019, p.8). This aspect refers to the idea of "the feminization of politics, which involves both questioning patriarchal modes of organization and power and putting care work at the centre of both the political agenda and modes of organization" (p.9). A second important dimension of municipalism according to Pisarello is "its focus on concrete action" (p.9), referring to the fact that despite regional differences in its makeup and culture, "local politics centres on concrete issues that affect people's daily lives" (p.8). Finally, the third important dimension he highlights is the "internationalist commitment of the municipalist movement", building on the realisation of the "global nature of the challenges we face in our neighbourhoods" and the need to address them through a network of municipal actors (p.9).

In the context of my own study of agency in alter-European activist networks and in particular with regards to this chapter's question regarding the role of institutional sites for how agency is enacted in this context, I want to draw out and focus, in what remains of this thesis, on these same three elements, as these featured most strongly in my own field: (1) the role of feminism (see section 7.4.1 and 7.4.2), the question of agency (see 7.4.3) and the role of scale (see 7.5).

7.4. From personal to institutional agency: the “feminization” of institutions

7.4.1. The feminist challenge towards established political institutions

Returning to my initial question of how institutions feature in alter-European activists’ sense of agency, I want to finally turn to the idea of “feminizing” politics. This call to make institutions more feminist, as I will show in this section is not only an important aspect of the new municipalism as it is prosed by Barcelona En Comú (2019) and other radical municipalities. It is also illustrative of part of what is currently “wrong” with political institutions from the perspective of respective activists and many of the alter-European activists I met throughout my years in the field, some of whom we have already heard from at the beginning of this chapter.

First of all, however, what does the idea of “feminizing politics” mean exactly? To start with, while it addresses issues such as equal rights, the so-called “feminization of politics”, as it is proclaimed by cities like Barcelona, is about more than women’s rights and “ensuring that women play a prominent role throughout leadership and representative positions” (Russell, 2019, p.1004). As Roth and Shea Baird put it, feminizing politics “is about the way politics is done” (2017, online). According to them, the feminization of politics

“aims to shatter masculine patterns that reward behaviors such as competition, urgency, hierarchy and homogeneity, which are less common in — or appealing to — women. Instead, a feminized politics seeks to emphasize the importance of the small, the relational, the everyday, challenging the artificial division between the personal and the political.” (2017, online)

Indeed, some feminists would argue that the very term “feminizing” is problematic in the sense that it risks essentialising particular characteristics as supposedly masculine or feminine. For instance, Lister has shown how the last decades of feminist scholarship and activism have put different challenges “to the false universalism of the category ‘woman’” (1997, p.72), raising a number of issues including white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia and xenophobia, challenging feminists to think not only about equality but also the importance of highlighting certain differences. Roth and Shea Baird acknowledge and clarify this point as follows:

“We don’t make this argument from an essentialist perspective. Gender roles are, of course, the product of patriarchy itself. Rather, we see a need for “feminine” values and practices because the predominance of “masculine” styles pushes women, who have not been socialized into using them, out of the center of the political arena. Such a shift in the way politics is done implies attacking patriarchy at its root: through the practices where gender roles themselves are reproduced. What is more, if our goal is to deepen democracy and empower people, promoting “feminine” ways of doing — collaboration, dialogue, horizontality — will help to include all sorts of disadvantaged groups and should be a priority independent of the question of gender.” (2017, online)

In short, for Russell, feminizing politics “is fundamentally a radical democratic concept, one that puts a focus on transforming how decision-making takes place, who has a right to speak, and how we engage with one another” (2019, p.1005). It is about “transforming the political institutions and movements themselves from the inside through daily feminist actions in both public and domestic spaces” (Cillero, 2017, online). In other words, one might argue that the feminization of politics is about making political practice not more feminine, but more *feminist*. In fact, rather than of “feminization”, some activists suggest that it might be better to speak of a “de-patriarchalisation” (also spelled “de-patriarchisation”) of politics (Barcelona En Comú, 2019, p.56; see also Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, p.267).

The call for a feminization of politics has to be understood in the context of how women have historically been excluded from citizenship and institutionalised forms of political agency, as already mentioned in my discussion on citizenship in Chapter 5 (see, for instance, Lister, 1997; Isin 2002). Lister argues that this exclusion from citizenship might be understood with regards to “citizenship as both a status and a practice” (1997, p.145). In terms of the former, Lister shows that “[f]or much of history, ancient and modern, women were denied the formal status and rights of citizens” (p.66). Such exclusions were justified on the basis of “an essentialist categorisation of men and women’s qualities and capacities”, denoting male “citizens” as “rational”, “impartial”, “heroic” and situated in the public sphere, while female “non-citizens” were portrayed as belonging to the private sphere and as being “rooted in nature”, “emotional” and “passive” (p.69). While the gap in rights has arguably been closing over the course of the last century and women have gained citizenship rights, including the right to vote, essential rights are still being fought

for until today, as the recent Black Protests in Poland have shown with regards to the question of the right to abortions (Kriki, 2017).

However, it is with regard to “acts of citizenship” and “citizenship as a practice”, that the need for a feminization of politics becomes particularly visible. Citing figures from the Human Development Report, Lister illustrates “[t]he gap between women’s formal political status and their actual power in the formal political sphere” (p.146). While these numbers have certainly increased in the last two decades since the publication of Lister’s book, the most recent UNDP report clearly states that it is still the case that “[n]o place in the world has gender equality” (UNDP, 2019, p.148). For instance, the report shows that in 2018 only 21.2% of the seats in European and Central Asian parliaments were held by women, with even the highest number of women in parliaments, which can be found in Latin America and the Caribbean, only amounting to 31.0% (p.149). While “[w]omen and men vote in elections at similar rates”, the report argues, “[t]he higher the power and responsibility, the wider the gender gap”, citing a gap of nearly 90% with regards to heads of state and governments worldwide (p.150). Lister contrasts this “masculine sphere for formal politics” (1997, p.146), in which women from minority groups “are virtually completely absent” (p.148), with the “feminine sphere of informal politics” and different women’s marked commitment and presence in “both local community-based action and national and international ‘new social movements’” (p.147) as well as in workplaces. Nevertheless, she notes that “when formal leadership and formal management positions emerge, or a protest campaign shifts to the national level, there is an observed tendency for men to take over” (p.148).

In the context of alter-European activist networks, several women I interviewed have named a number of reasons for why they preferred to focus their actions on the community or social movement rather than the institutional party-political side of collective action. When asked whether they would be willing to stand in elections, they articulated a number of reasons, including care responsibilities, dissatisfaction with how this system asks them to present themselves, or with the system as such:

“They asked me if I ever wanted to go into politics... The thing is that I always think that I’m not ready to expose myself like that, although... I started actually to think about it... maybe I would like to do it ... I think I was always much more for political activism. I like thinking also about culture and thinking about books.

Through your own experience, your own texts. In that way, I was always much more in women's politics, or women's issues." (Šejla, March 2018)

"You just don't know, once you put something into the existing political structures, it often starts performing in those structures... You see it even a little bit with Podemos in Spain, as much as they're trying to resist. And even our mayor of Barcelona [Ada Colau], who was a super activist before she was put into that role, she has to perform certain scripts that are associated with that role of mayor. I think there is an importance of being involved into the political structures, but I don't know if that's where I want to concentrate most of my efforts, especially since I don't have voting rights [in Europe as a U.S. citizen]." (Alexandria, November 2018)

"I just didn't enjoy it at all... you do have to be very careful about what you say and I hate doing that. And, also, I had small children and I thought: 'they're the nicest thing in my life, why do I want to be an MP and not see them?'" (Petra, November 2018)

"I think, for now, I wanted to understand what was happening around me and what my neighbours were doing, living in a big city. I wanted to be connected to more people... I wanted to understand the place I was living in, what are the topics here in South London. The council are particularly bad with certain things, housing, not supporting women... It's about deciding where you put your energy and I decided that that's activism and community organising." (Audrey, November 2018)

These quotes demonstrate an ongoing problem for alter-European activists: contemporary political institutions in their current shape do not provide a similarly straightforward path to exercising agency for all actors in alter-European activist networks. While this data must not be read as representative of women's engagement in alter-European activist networks, nor as confirming essentialist notions of women's capacity or interest in formal politics, such answers do point to how the current formal political system appears to these activists as unable to incorporate a series of differences and acknowledging the importance of community organising. The quotes also show, as Lister argues, that "women are also deterred from entering the political system by the masculinist, combative, alienating culture which often permeates it" (1997, p.163). Thus, Lister holds that, while "women will also have to engage with the formal political system", there is the need for "changes in the formal political system itself so as to make it more open both to individual women and to the kinds of informal modes of politics" (p.155), citing municipal examples of such practices such as in the context of the former Greater London Council (see also Wainwright, 2020) or a municipality in Brazil where urban planning

was attempted from a feminist perspective, as well as of women's networks in EU institutions (Lister, 1997, pp.164-165). Lister also suggests that “better links between informal and formal political institutions might encourage more women to make the transition from one to the other” (p.164).

How, then, does the feminization of politics as it is practiced in the context of new municipal movement parties work in practice, why does it matter for my analysis of alter-European activism, and what, finally, does this tell us about how institutions might feature in alter-European activists' sense of agency? Indeed, I discuss feminist issues here not only because they surfaced as a recurring theme in my interviews with alter-European activists – as illustrated by the aforementioned quotes – as well as regularly being debated in alter-European activists' alternative media outputs (for instance, Cillero, 2017; European Alternatives, 2017a, c). Perhaps even more tellingly, it is in the way in which the feminization of politics plays out in practice during events and activist meetings that best illustrates how feminism features in alter-European activists' understanding of agency and their complex relationship with established institutions. In order to further demonstrate this point, I want to return, once more, to Transeuropa Festival in Madrid in 2017, where this thesis began.

7.4.2. Alter-European activism and the feminization of politics

At Transeuropa Festival in Madrid in 2017, the workshop “De-patriarchalising politics” was hosted in one of the rooms of the occupied school-come-social centre La Ingobernable in the city centre and was run by a local feminist scholar and activist. She asked the approximately twenty participants, a majority of which were women, one of whom brought her toddler, to split into two groups – one Spanish speaking, one English speaking, for language too can be a barrier to political participation. In these groups we discussed three questions: 1) why do we need feminism, 2) how can feminism be incorporated in our personal and political lives, and 3) what are the most uncomfortable feminist proposals (see Figure 21)? In my group, participants discussed how in order to “de-patriarchalise politics” as a whole, we have to start in our personal lives and in our activist organisations. This includes paying attention to everyday instances, such as who commonly makes decisions and who does the cleaning up after a protest. One participant also remarked that to make politics more feminist also means recognising that patriarchy

does not only oppress women and persons from the LGBTQ+ community, but that men too have various disadvantages from patriarchal structures. As a passionate argument about inclusiveness and representation unfolded between two participants and began to take over the group discussion, something else interesting happened. One of the women in my group caused an intervention by asking: “Can I just ask us to reflect what is happening here right now?” Her intervention reminded the group that in order to make politics less patriarchal and more feminist means to be collectively responsible for the political spaces we create, and to make them less competitive and more cooperative. (Fieldnotes¹⁷, Madrid, October 2017)

My experience of a feminization of politics at Transeuropa Festival similarly reoccurred in some of the interviews, as activists brought up the need be mindful of who takes up how much space in meetings and to challenge power and privilege accordingly:

“I really enjoy organising with other women and non-binary people, mainly because we do often listen to each other a lot more than in other spaces I’ve been in. I feel like we’re very open for learning and making mistakes... [There was this] workshop, straight away we were talking about power in the room. I really love talking about these sticky issues and being critical of our behaviours... I recognised gender inequalities in the room - most of the women weren’t talking as much as the men in the room, I think someone did bring that up at some point. We did replicate in that space the common thing of men talking a lot more than women.” (Audrey, November 2018)

“Something that was very interesting [at one workshop organised in the context of Transeuropa Caravans] was that we were mainly women – there were three men – and actually two men were monopolising the conversation... At some point I just started to moderate... I created the rule that people have to raise their hand [if they wanted to speak]. I would always give the turn to somebody who hadn’t spoken before... I don’t think men do it because they recognise it, but it’s about time they start to recognise it... [*She draws on a Black feminist philosopher from Brazil, who pointed out*] how much white men take over the whole place and you don’t have enough [space] for other people to talk. You have this level of order: first white men, and then white woman, and then black men and black women... we have to fight for our space.” (Ruth, May 2019)

Barcelona En Comú similarly highlight that an active effort has to be made in order to challenge patriarchal power structures that are easily reproduced in everyday situations:

¹⁷ A previous version of this ethnographic vignette has appeared on the blog I used to share the knowledges produced by this project with research participants (see Chapter 2).

“There are a large number of organizational studies which show that men tend to speak for longer and this usually leads to their enjoying increased legitimacy when it comes to taking decisions. This means we need to adopt practices in our meetings and assemblies such as alternating between giving the floor to men and women, or, if women are not speaking saying so in order to acknowledge our lack of participation.” (2019, p.22)

Importantly such measures to ensure equal participation do not only benefit women. As I have shown in Chapter 4 and as Ruth’s remark highlighted, several activists stress that the same must be done so as not to preproduce inequalities with regards to issues of, for instance, white supremacy and heteronormativity. More generally, besides active measures to ensure equal participation, Barcelona En Comú holds that

“We must also consider why we consider someone to be an expert. Must they have a university degree? Must they be a candidate for office or an official spokesperson? Must they always be the most well-known person from the movement?... Precisely because municipal problems are everyday problems, every resident is an expert of their neighbourhood. Their contributions must be put front and centre and treated as expert knowledge in such debates.” (2019, p.22)

Consequently, as Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona, put it:

“You can be in politics without being a strong, arrogant male, who’s ultra-confident, who knows the answer to everything, had no doubts. There are other ways. I had the goal of showing that you can be in politics, aiming to win, without those characteristics, and with doubts and contradictions like normal people, and to show this and to talk about it openly.” (Colau 2016 cited in Russell, 2019, p.1005)

Thus, what these last quotes illustrate is that efforts to make meetings and institutions less patriarchal are not only about women’s presence in institutional spaces, about the role of care work or a prioritisation of women’s issues in policy debates. It is about questioning the values which our current institutions are built on. As Cillero puts it in a piece written for European Alternatives’ online platform Political Critique (see Appendix D), “it is not enough to reclaim more representation in the institutions, we also need to reflect about the structural conditions of society that leave us underrepresented” (2017, online). In other words, rather than empowering women to participate in a system that merely perpetuates the status quo in the spirit of the “lean in” feminism criticised for instance by

Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) and Fraser (2019), the idea is to change the very system itself. Thus, as Cillero concludes: “No progressive political movement, tentative of new party, or social institution will succeed today if it is not led by feminism and with women” (2017, online). Or, in the words of Barcelona En Comú: “without feminism there can be no revolution: without an intervention in daily life, in what is happening all the time, no real change is possible” (2019, p.21). This, then, finally leads me to overall question of this chapter regarding how institutional sites matter for alter-European activists’ sense of agency.

7.4.3. *Translations: agency across personal and institutional sites*

To sum up, in the chapter, thus far, I have explored the level of *sites*, and in particular the question how institutions matter in alter-European activists’ understandings of agency. As I have argued at the beginning of this chapter and demonstrated in previous chapters, institutional sites are not the only sites in which alter-European activists enact agency. Rather, alter-European activists seek to enact agency across a variety of sites including the organisation of and participation in protests, the fight for citizenship rights such as migrants’ right to vote, the use of established and alternative media platforms, as well as through cultural and artistic expressions such as the “Rebuild Refuge Europe” exhibition at Transeuropa Festival which I mentioned in Chapter 1. In this chapter, however, I have focussed on the role of institutional sites and party politics, not only because the question of how institutions matter in the contemporary context is a topical one, but also because it illustrates the logic of agency at play here, as it moves between personal and institutional registers.

As Wainwright points out, one of the main problems in contemporary politics today is “people’s political alienation, their experience of having no control over the decisions shaping their daily lives” (2020, p.15) Municipalism, as some, including many alter-European activists, would argue, and as I have shown in this chapter thus far, might provide a hopeful route to agency that leads to local institutions precisely because it puts a focus on everyday actions that can produce tangible results. This prioritisation of concrete local concerns and a “politics of doing” has the advantage that “[a]chieving concrete results, however limited, empowers people and encourages them to stay motivated and take on bigger challenges” (Barcelona En Comú, 2019, p.35). As Lister

argues, “[t]o act as a citizen requires first a sense of agency, the belief that one *can* act; acting as a citizen, especially collectively, in turn fosters that sense of agency” (1997, p.38, original emphasis). With regards to feminist politics, Lister highlights that “[s]mall-scale political action at the neighbourhood level can be important in helping to strengthen women’s self-esteem, particularly in the case of disadvantaged women and this, as argued already, is one reason why such action should be recognised as citizenship” (p.39). Russell calls this the “politics of proximity” (2019, p.1000). This idea of proximity, Russell argues, does not simply relate to physical or geographical closeness itself:

“The feminisation of politics speaks to a shift away from a politics of separation—*they* govern, from afar, alienated from the everyday—towards the politics of proximity—*we* govern, in a close way, connected to the experience of the everyday.” (2019, p.1005, original emphasis)

To be sure, a respective understanding of how agency might be exercised both via everyday acts *as well as* within political institutions is not entirely new. Similar to how today’s radical municipalities seek to “feminize” institutions, Wainwright, who was part of the GLC in the 1980s recalls her experience of how she realised that in order to change institutions in this way, you had to start by acting differently within the institutions on a daily basis:

“From the start we knew that if we were to create this support for popular movements, we had to change the relationships of the GLC itself, both those within the GLC and the relation of the GLC to the people of London and their needs, desires and struggles. And, partly from my experience in the women’s movement, I had a strong sense of how existing oppressive relationships depended on people being complicit and reproducing them, even those who suffered under them. I knew from the women’s movement that if you refused to reproduce them you could say, ‘hang on a minute! *We can* do things differently and we will’. So you could be a modest force for change, simply by your own action and the relationships that you create. Over time and through sustained collective action we began to create a new institutional framework ‘in and against’ the GLC.” (2020, p.18, original emphasis)

However, while Wainwright’s account demonstrates that the challenges faced by radical municipalities and alter-European activists with regards to institutional powers today are not new, my experience at the “de-patriarchalising politics” workshop at Transeuropa Festival also highlights that respective challenges are still with us today.

To conclude this first part of the chapter, what alter-European activists' engagement with municipalism and the feminization of politics demonstrate, is that while institutional sites do play a role for alter-European activists' understanding of agency and social change, the site of institutional politics is not separate from more mundane, everyday understandings of agency. Rather, what workshops like the one at Transeuropa Festival highlight, is an understanding of agency, that traverses both institutional and non-institutional sites. Such an understanding of agency disrupts the often-artificial separation between social and political agency – challenging us to think both registers of agency together. It is such moves between and across different sites of agency that mark an important aspect of the idea of transversal agency which I propose in this thesis overall and to which I will now turn.

7.5. Towards a conceptualisation of transversal agency

7.5.1. *Enacting transversal agency across struggles, scales and sites*

Having illustrated how agency moves across (institutional and non-institutional) sites in this chapter thus far, I finally now want to show how this traversal across sites contributes to the overall argument of this thesis regarding how agency in alter-European activism moves across different registers of action. In order to illustrate this point, I want to start by recalling a gathering of alter-European activists and municipal actors that occurred right at the beginning of this project, in August 2016, during the time when I was in the process of transitioning from activist to activist-ethnographer, only a couple of months after the UK's EU referendum¹⁸.

Two months after the UK's EU referendum, in August 2016, we gathered in an old townhouse in the East German countryside, somewhere between Berlin and the Polish border. On this occasion, the “we” is constituted of approximately 80 participants including activists, city councillors, artists, academics and community organisers, who

¹⁸ Although European Alternatives' staff members were, of course, aware of my changing position from activist towards activist-ethnographer at the time, I will rely, in the following anecdote, only on auto-ethnographic observations and information that is publicly accessible via European Alternatives' media outputs (for instance Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017, which subsequently brought together some key aspects discussed at this event), since this particular occasion occurred prior to the formal beginning of my fieldwork.

have arrived, once again, from across and beyond Europe. Over the next three and a half days, we will be roaming around the big premises, which include a beautiful green garden, a small wood and farmhouses in which we are accommodated, and where we will be working on a number of different issues. My group, the “networks” work stream, will later re-gather outside in the sunshine to discuss the opportunities of forming a transnational political party across different transnational organisations, to run in the European Parliament elections in 2019. Others in the “artivism”, “cities” and “media” work streams will look at how municipal institutions can work together with citizens and social movements to form a transnational network of cities, or consider how art, culture and different forms of media can support the development of progressive trans-European alternatives. On this first evening however, we gather on the ground floor of the townhouse, for the programme’s opening debate, entitled “Shifting baselines of Europe”, which is set up as a so-called “fishbowl” discussion.



Figure 20: Fishbowl discussion at European Alternatives’ “Campus” event, Casekow, August 2016; Photo: European Alternatives

For this format, all chairs are arranged in a circular shape surrounding a group of discussants (Figure 20). A former member of Syriza, a city councillor from Madrid, a community organiser from Moldova and a representative of a transnational civil society organisation from Italy make a start, sharing their perspectives on and critiques of the European status quo. The other participants have taken a seat on one of the many chairs,

sit on the floor or lean in the open doorframes. At the same time, there is a lot of movement in the room as discussants and listeners rotate throughout the debate. Any “audience” member can come to the middle and swap any of the “panellists” to bring their perspectives to the discussion. A designated facilitator who took a seat close to the table takes approximate stock of speaking time to ensure no one discussant is dominating the conversation while occasionally encouraging seat swaps. Throughout the conversation people move in and out of the room, taking a seat on the steps towards the garden, or going out for a smoke on the terrace from which the conversation can still be followed as discussants’ voices reach outside of the widely opened windows before fading into the mild summer evening air (Fieldnotes, Casekow, August 2016).

The “fishbowl” discussion and the following days at European Alternatives Campus event in August 2016 are illustrative of alter-European activists’ sense of *transversal agency*, as I want to conceptualise it in this thesis. Firstly, it brings together activists, social movements and members of civil society organisations with (here: progressive municipal and national) institutional actors, operating across different *sites* (as argued in this chapter). Secondly, the participants of the event hail from different geographic contexts, coming to Casekow in the East of Germany from different geographies all across and beyond the European continent and operating across (municipal, national and trans-European) *scales* (Chapter 6). Finally, the participants of the Campus – similar to the activists I introduced in Chapter 4 – situate themselves in different thematic *struggles*, ranging from migrants’ rights activists like George and Giulia and feminists like Maria and Silvia to de-colonial activists like James and Habibah as well as the right to the city campaigners we met in this chapter (see also Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017). Thus, more than connecting radical municipal actors, the fishbowl discussion acts as a space of convergence for different approaches to agency and social change come together across thematic, geographical and institutional borders and different registers of action.

Conceptualising what takes place at European Alternatives’ aforementioned Campus event and the different actions I have accompanied throughout my time in the field, I take inspiration, here, from feminist scholarship, in line with the theme of this chapter and the orientation of the activism at stake in this thesis. I draw inspiration, in particular, from the idea of “transversal politics”, which I have already briefly introduced in Chapter 5 – a term which originated in radical feminist circles in Bologna in the late 20th century (see Cockburn and Hunter, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1999). Cockburn and Hunter offer a useful

definition of an orientation that has already been enacted and shared by many feminists then and since: “Transversal politics is the practice of creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant political differences” (1999, pp.88-89). For Yuval-Davis, transversal politics is about “a dialogue between people of differential positionings”, that “assumed *a priori* respect for others’ positionings – which includes acknowledgement of their differential social, economic and political power” (1999, p.95). What follows from this, for Yuval-Davis, is a kind of coalition politics that “does not privilege *a priori* any positioning or identity”; rather:

“the same value system might simultaneously prioritise different political projects from different standpoints. For example, where campaigns about women’s control of their own bodies might prioritise struggles for legalisation of abortion in one location, they might prioritise against forced sterilisation in another.” (p.98)

Yuval-Davis example reminded me of the comments made by some of the interview participants I quoted in Chapter 4. Think, for instance, of Central and Eastern European activists like Agnieszka or Šejla, who told me that their particular local contexts required them to engage with the idea of Europe in quite a different way to how activists from Western Europe might relate to it. It might also resonate with what London-based community organiser Audrey observed with regards to how different perspectives on what type of action might be required in the context of a particular campaign came together in one workshop, about how important it was “to hear different opinions and to disagree, but respectfully have these conversations and understand that everyone had something to contribute” (Audrey, December 2018). Applying the same logic of transversal politics to how agency works across a variety of borders in alter-European activism, then, we might argue that agency, in alter-European activism, is not exclusively located in any one particular struggle, geography or site. Rather, the point of transversal agency is that it does not prioritise any one aspect of agency but that it arises in processes of translation between different perspectives and registers of action. Activists’ capacity to enact social change, in this view, thus depends on our ability to act in common across a variety of borders. It is in these processes of translation, then, where a sense of what might be called *transversal agency* can arise and social change can take place.

7.5.2. Possibilities and limitations of transversal agency

To illustrate the logic of transversal agency I want to conclude by recalling some examples of its potential effects on some contemporary political questions, as well as noting some of its limitations in the contemporary political moment. While I want to give one example for each register of action I have discussed in this thesis (struggles, scales and sites), it is important to bear in mind that each of the following examples does arguably not only cross one, but two or more registers.

Firstly, with regards to the transversal of *scales*, social change might come about in the form of rights demanded for mobile people. The Let Us Vote campaign I cited in Chapter 4 is one example of how a coalition of different alter-European actors and migrants' rights campaigners can come up with concrete proposals that exceed the sedentary logic of national politics. Demanding the right of *all* residents in the UK to vote in the in national elections without perpetuating the hierarchy between EU and non-EU citizens, arguably starts from a nomadic, rather territorial logic of nation-state-based politics.

With regards to the traversal of *struggles*, the Green New Deal for Europe campaign I quoted in Chapter 5 is an example of how different concerns might feed into a concrete policy proposal that might be exercised on a EU-wide level. As Jan, one of the Caravans activists, has put it, in order for such a proposal to become reality, it is crucial to act on different levels. Indeed, activists like Antonio or Fabio would argue that it might even require a variety of actors, including activists, organisers, social movements and radical party-political actors, to come together in electoral coalitions and stand for European elections, not unlike how Marsili and Milanese describe it in their call for a "transnational interdependence party" (2018, p.159) or how it has been attempted by DIEM25, which formed an electoral wing to run in the European Parliament elections in 2019 on a programme around the Green New Deal for Europe, which Jan called the most radical programme on offer in those elections (Chapter 5).

Another way of exercising agency beyond borders, which similarly transgresses not only geographies but also institutional boundaries and, as I have shown in this chapter, different *sites* of agency, is the creation of an emerging network of rebel cities, which alter-European activist networks contribute to. As European Alternatives put it in one of their flyers with regards to how they contribute towards a network of "Cities of Change":

“European Alternatives has long been committed to supporting social dynamics, citizens’ platforms, and local governments in the construction of transnational networks and exchanges. Since 2015, we discuss the establishment of an active network of cities with alternative and progressive governments and/ or municipal movements with the aim to share experiences, knowledge and best practice of successful governance from the local to the transnational.” (European Alternatives, no date)

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the construction of transnational networks of radical municipal actors referred to in this quote takes place in different sites, including physical gatherings of actors from different localities as well as through direct actions and alternative media practices like the flyer from which the aforementioned quote is taken. For instance, the Campus event I have discussed here, the Transeuropa Caravans campaign (as discussed in this and the previous chapter), the case of Transeuropa Festival (see Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 8) and the various alternative media platforms like Talk Real (Chapter 6) or the online platform Urban Alternatives which assembles radical municipal projects online (see Appendix D and Figure 22), are but some examples of sites of transversal agency where respective social change can take place. Of course, alter-European actors like European Alternatives are not the only ones providing such spaces, as the example of Barcelona En Comú’s Fearless Cities summit (Barcelona En Comú, 2019; Russell, 2019) or the Atlas of Change mentioned by García Augustín (2020) illustrate. Importantly, more than sharing and spreading local knowledges, the result might be radical yet concrete policy proposals such as in the case of an alternative trans-local refugee politics, which I mentioned in Chapter 1. Here, European funds might be transferred directly to municipalities, cities and towns which are open to newcomers yet who might lack the required local infrastructure to do so – thereby bypassing regressive national governments which might prefer to close border rather than finding respective solutions.

As the capacity to scale up local alternatives, as the alter-European activists in this thesis are attempting to do, has been identified by a variety of scholars as an important question and perhaps a hopeful possibility for contemporary progressive struggle in the context of 21st challenges (see, for instance, Russell, 2019; García Augustín, 2020; Featherstone, Littler and Davison, 2020; Wainwright, 2020), such attempts at establishing a sense of agency beyond borders deserve further scholarly attention. As Featherstone, Littler and Davison put it, “the potential of making trans-local connections offers further important

ways of renewing left solidarities and imaginaries in the current political conjuncture” (2020, p.8). It is these emerging discussions on the potential of trans-local connections of radical municipalities to which my thesis’ discussion of how municipalism might be scaled up contributes in particular, beyond the thesis’ wider contribution of the idea of transversal agency.

Lastly, then, as respective scholarship on municipalities has pointed out, there are, of course also certain limitations to respective attempts at building a sense of agency beyond borders. For instance, as Barcelona’s vice mayor Gerardo Pisarello puts it in a video interview produced by and published on Talk Real’s YouTube channel – one of alter-European activists’ alternative media platforms, which I discussed in the previous chapter (see also Appendix D) – there is, rather pragmatically, the issue of limited time and resources:

“Sometimes it’s hard, because we have to multiply ourselves, we have to intervene on so many scales. For instance, we are trying to change the everyday life in our city, but we have to intervene on the state level in Spain... We have to intervene in the same way in Europe, we need a constituent debate in Europe, we need to rethink all these rules of functioning in Europe, because if we don’t do it, it will be too late. So we have no alternative. We have to intervene on many levels, the local, the European, the global at the same time, and we have to involve a lot of people, because if it is just the work of a tiny minority of intellectuals and activists, it won’t work. So we have to involve social movements, we have to involve common people, maybe people who have not identified themselves as leftists, but who have suffered all the effects of austerity politics and of crisis. And if we can build this plural and broad network, I think we might succeed.” (Talk Real, 2017, online)

Secondly, as I have shown throughout this thesis, organising across borders is not easy or straightforward. While digital media technologies are arguably at the heart of facilitating the daily interactions of transnational activism, it is these technologies that can undermine the level of proximity that makes organising on the neighbourhood level effective. As activists like Étienne and Silvia have pointed out with regards to the use of digital media and in the context of transnational organising in Chapter 3, “[t]he sense of belonging is more difficult to generate” (Silvia, December 2017).

Some scholars and activists highlight that it is once you scale up from local to national and international institutions that existing power dynamics might more easily be

reproduced. As Gerbaudo points out, Podemos' leadership has also been criticised for "bypassing internal processes and overlooking the opinion of local circles" and gearing online voting "towards a plebiscitary model, in which party members were simply asked to support decisions already taken by the party's executive" (2017, p.225). In other words, once municipal politics are scaled up to the national or transnational level, they risk losing the sense of proximity that makes the feminization of politics possible. As Roth and Russell argue:

"It's no coincidence that as soon as one starts trying to win in "higher" levels of government, organisations become more hierarchical, men usually take the lead, discourses become more theoretical, and urgency tends to trump the trust in collective intelligence." (2018, online)

Roth and Shea Baird provide an example of how discourses shift from concrete issues to more theoretical, and thus perhaps less accessible, discussions:

"Municipal narratives also tend to avoid theoretical abstraction in favor of concrete goals, with a focus on the practical aspects of problems. By way of example, while some new national parties in Spain communicate in Gramscian terms of "hegemony," municipal platforms tend to talk about concrete issues like air quality, the use of public space or the price of rent, putting the emphasis on how these affect people's daily lives." (2017, online)

It is such questions of *translation across and between different scales* that are at the heart of building transversal agency in alter-European activist networks.

Finally, as I have shown in Chapter 6 and throughout this thesis, alter-European activism and the power of radical municipalities is limited by the borders of nation-states. The proposal for an alternative refugee politics is as much a case for hope as it illustrates just how much power the nation-state currently has over the allocation of respective resources. As Barcelona En Comú's Laia Forné explains in one of European Alternatives' alternative media outputs:

"The state does not fund local integration policies, even though it receives European funds for this very purpose. For example, in the period between 2014 and 2020 the Spanish state will receive more than 330 million Euros, most of which, however, is being invested in border control measures." (Forné cited in Büllesbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017, p.51)

As is illustrated in this example, the shift from limiting agency through national borders towards agency that might be enacted locally and *across* borders is thus a continuous struggle with the conceptual and physical borders that continue to be perpetuated by nation-states.

To conclude, the question what the future of democracy looks like is one of the burning issues of today. What this thesis contributes to this question is an exploration of how agency might be enacted beyond the borders of nation-states. As demonstrated throughout this thesis and in particular in this chapter with regards to the role of institutions in alter-European activists sense of agency and the case of “feminizing politics”, in order to understand how such forms of agency beyond borders might emerge, we must pay attention to processes of translation – between the local and the transnational, between movements and political parties, between the personal and political institutions, between localities in different geographies. Alter-European acts and alternative media practices – as my discussion of ethnographic material in this chapter and previous chapters has illustrated – play a crucial part in facilitating these processes of translation across borders. Agency, here, might be understood as transversal in the sense that it operates across, between and simultaneously on different registers of action. Thus, what these findings contribute to the discussion on the state of radical democratic politics today, is that our ability to build a sense of collective agency and a counter-hegemonic force to tackle neoliberal globalization will depend on our ability to translate between different political scales, struggles and sites.

8. Conclusion: From Transeuropa to the idea of transversal agency

A few weeks after I returned home to London from my journey across the continent with the Transeuropa Caravans campaign, I received a short email from Palermo that came across very much like a postcard, sent by one of my fellow travellers on the Western caravan. On its “front”, that is, in the attachment, was the image of a map (Figure 21).



Figure 21: Al-Idrisi's World Map, 1154, sent to me by a fellow activist; Image: Wikimedia Commons

On its “back” stood the following note:

Ciao ragazza,

Thanks again for joining the caravan...

As a gift..., here's a map of the "world" (it includes mostly Africa and the Mediterranean area of course) by al-Idrisi, an arab geographer (born in Spain during the great kingdom al-Andalus and who lived in Palermo) from the XII century. He drew the south where we normally put the north and vice versa, but I am sure you will spot Italy and the arab peninsula.

As I was writing up this thesis in the months following the European Parliament elections in May 2019, trying to make sense of what I had observed throughout my participation in the Transeuropa Caravans campaigns and other gatherings, protests and events I attended all across the continent throughout my three years in the field, there was something about Laura's email and the map she sent that stuck with me.

A few months later, during Transeuropa Festival in November 2019, it became more and more obvious that Laura's map contained an important learning and illustrated a crucial aspect of the activism at stake in this thesis. Walking the streets of Palermo, where the festival took place in that year, I remembered what Laura, who studied Arabic and understands herself as Mediterranean rather than European (Chapter 3), told me about her adoptive hometown Palermo and why she loved living there:

“Firstly, you have such a cultural mix. If you go to Ballaro, one of the markets, it totally looks like Tunisia or Morocco, it's a Souq. Then there is the architecture, the squares: you have Sicilian Baroque on your left and on your right, you have a building that looks like a mosque, that has three domes, the only one in Europe where you can find it, otherwise they are in Syria. Palermo is also one of the few Italian cities, like Venice, that have an Arab name. You have some streets that are named in Hebrew and in Arabic. All of this is always reminding you that Palermo is a place where everyone lived - you had the Spaniards, you had the Nomads, you had the Arabs, you had everyone, literally everyone. Maybe this is why I feel so good there, it's a city for everyone.” (Laura, May 2019)

Laura's understanding of Palermo as an intercultural city where everyone is welcome is also echoed in the city's radically progressive migration politics that have been put forward by its current mayor Leoluca Orlando. Orlando, who is also part of a pilot project for a global parliament of mayors (Barber, 2014), regularly disobeyed Italy's former deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini's orders and goes to greet newly arriving people in Palermo at the harbour, rather than closing its ports, as he explains in one of the festival's

panels, which brought him in conversation with the mayor of İzmir to talk about the role mayors and municipalities can play in addressing global challenges (as discussed in the previous chapter; see also van der Zee, 2017; Scharenberg, 2020).

Besides such expressions of emerging forms of trans-municipal institutional agency, however, Laura additionally told me that her love for Palermo was not only based on the city's cross-cultural and trans-national "roots", but also derived from concrete forms of agency and community expressed in her local neighbourhood:

"You have the dimension of the neighbourhood, because your neighbours really care about you... People live in the street, literally everything happens in the street. And people really care about it. In my street, for instance, there is this guy, who did something amazing. We have a bit of problem with waste and there was a corner where people would just leave their garbage. So the guy just planted some flowers in this corner. The result was that no one throws their garbage there anymore and we have very nice and beautiful plants. Of course he didn't ask for permission. It's a bit anarchist, Palermo, people just take the public space, they don't ask anyone. But they really care, you know." (Laura, May 2019)

What struck me about these Palermitan stories and Laura's map was that it seemed that in order to understand the politics at stake here, which seem to refuse to neatly fit into national or institutional frameworks and categories, we need an alternative vocabulary (see Isin, 2009, 2012) – a new set of maps – that can help make sense of how people exercise agency on different levels at once, that is, how they perform a sense of agency across borders. Such maps, like Al-Idrisi's map of the Mediterranean (Figure 21) would have to challenge what is taken for granted – such as the borders of nation-states – and turn our existing maps "upside down", as Laura put it: a decentralised map drawn alongside connections and links between already existing alternatives rather than new centres and national borders. Thus, it is here in Palermo with a view on the Mediterranean – a key site of Europe's history, present challenges and the potentially more progressive futures indicated by local actors and radical municipalities leading the way to what another Europe might look like – that my journey through Transeuropa comes to a conclusion.

8.1. Key research findings

What, then, can be learned from my journey with alter-European activists following on from the research questions I have set out at the beginning of this thesis? In the following three sections, I want to summarise some of my key findings regarding how agency is understood in the context of alter-European activist networks with regards to (1) the emergence of a collective actor, (2) the nomadic scale of their actions, and (3) the role different (institutional) sites play for their sense of agency. The section “from networks to transversal agency” that subsequently follows will then build on these key findings to show what this thesis can contribute to the study of transnational social movements today and recap the possibility of a sense of agency beyond borders that I have conceptualised throughout this thesis.

8.1.1. From Europe to Transeuropa: connecting actors across borders

As I have shown throughout this thesis and particularly in Chapter 4, alter-European activists’ relationship with “Europe” is a complex one. Like in preceding pan-European mobilisations, a Brussels-institutions-centred EU-Europe is not only much criticised but often also curiously absent in alter-European activism. For many – though admittedly not all – of the activists I interviewed, the relationship with Europe is a pragmatic, rather than a passionate one. Europe, here, might be a means to an end rather than an end in itself. What, then, does this mean for the movement’s sense of collective identity and its capacity as a collective actor?

As discussed in Chapter 4, I agree with Kavada (2015) and Flesher Fominaya (2010) that Melucci’s understanding of collective identity as a process is useful here. Rather than a shared sense of collective European identity or even a shared vision of Europe, the collective identity formation in alter-European activism can be understood as a process of bringing together a series of actors from all across and beyond Europe and from different struggles, including: migrants campaigning to expand citizenship rights beyond nationality, feminists, Afro-Europeans and activists working to de-colonise Europe, Eastern European and Mediterranean activists or Greens and socialists working towards a European Green New Deal. A better term that holds these alliances together than “Europe” might thus be the term “Transeuropa”, which features in several of the campaigns I have discussed in this thesis. Here, the notion of “trans” is more important than the idea of “Europa”, not least because it implies and prioritises processes of

transgression, transit, transformation or translation between those different actors over the idea of a fortress, “with clearly delimited boundaries, whether they are cities, countries or continents”, as Marsili and Milanese (2018, p.157) suggest. It is in these processes of translation and different moments of convergence where collective action and a sense of trans-European agency might arise.

In other words, agency, in this context, is not based on the premise of a bordered European territory. Rather, if the idea of Europe is to be meaningful to these contemporary activists at all, it needs to be understood in a de-centred and less bordered way. Here, Al-Idrisi’s map (Figure 21), which puts basic assumptions that people who are used to Euro-centric maps might hold “upside down”, as Laura put it in our conversation, might be particularly helpful. Viewing Europe from the Mediterranean, which literally describes a location *between* lands, is a reminder that Europe has indeed always been a place of exchange and translation between different actors and that this, rather than the idea of a fortress, a centre or a bordered territory, is where an alternative transnational politics in Europe must start from in the eyes of many alter-European activists. Similarly, Balibar proposes an idea of Europe which “is not and never has been made up of separate regions (“empires,” “camps,” “nations”), but rather of overlapping sheets or layers (*de nappes qui se recouvrent*), and that its specificity is this overlapping itself: to be precise, an East, a West, and a South” (1998, p.225). The word “Transeuropa” speaks, for the present lack of a better term, to such an ambition to transgress, overlap and intersect both national and European borders and binaries. In this sense, Transeuropa is an alternative to both Fortress Europe as well as to the right-wing forces that continue to fuel xenophobic nationalism all across the continent. Transeuropa, rather than a bordered territory, describes the spaces of translation where those who act for another Europe from below come together to act across borders.

8.1.2. *From nations to nomads: redrawing the maps of politics*

My second finding, discussed in particular in Chapter 6, highlights one of the characteristic aspects of alter-European action that runs not only through their alternative media practices but also through events, protests and other ways of organising, namely their nomadic quality. The idea of organising across borders is, of course, not new, as I have shown throughout this thesis with regards to recent transnational mobilisations,

namely the alter-globalization movement and the movement of the squares. However, more than building alliances across borders, nomadic activism challenges the very assumption that political agency and political community need to be sedentary, that is, rooted in (national) territory.

Once again, Brexit provides an illustrative starting point. As I am writing up the findings of this thesis, after more than three and a half years of negotiations, the UK has de facto left the European Union in January 2020. Although the future relationship between the UK and the EU is still being discussed at the time of writing, the end of Britain's membership became formal on the day British representatives ended their service in the European Parliament. However, while the future relationship between the two unions remains unclear, what is already decided is that mobile EU citizens who have exercised their right to freedom of *movement* and who want to stay in the UK after Brexit will have to apply for what is called *settled* status. This status, as a migrants' rights activist has told me (see Chapter 4), will be particularly difficult to obtain for those who have family in different countries and might thus be unable to proof consecutive residence, as well as for already more vulnerable groups such as people without housing, care workers, sex workers, or "illegal" workers and people with disabilities, who might have difficulties complying with the process of applying for rights they already had. This effort to proof *settlement* is but one recent example of nation-states' continuous effort to contain mobile groups behind national borders and make them manageable with regards to their territory-based logic.

In contrast, nomadic direct-action campaigns like trans-European caravans, or campaigns like Let Us Vote, which demand rights based on routes or residency rather than nationality point to how political community and political agency might be organised based on a different logic. Here, alliances and communities arise on the basis of routes rather than roots, connected by the lines drawn alongside different struggles rather than the lines drawn around national territories. The alternative media website Urban Alternatives (Figure 22) illustrates how a nomadic logic results in a different kind of map. Here, the map of Europe is largely rid of human-made borders, including not only the borders between nation-states, but also the borders usually drawn between land and sea, suggesting, perhaps, that with rising sea levels even these more "natural" borders will become more fluid than they already are. Open to all sides (and to new sites of resistance which can directly be added to the website), what functions as reference points on this

map are the particularities of local contexts (here: the differences in heights in the local landscapes), and the cities and municipalities in which alternatives to the status quo are emerging. Thus, while making no claims to ownership over territory, nomadic activism, unlike the nomadism of urban elites (as rightfully criticised by Georgiou, 2013), crucially does not operate outside of space in a free-floating way but is anchored in important sites of local resistance and concrete struggles. What, then, does such an alternative map tell us with regards to the question of agency?

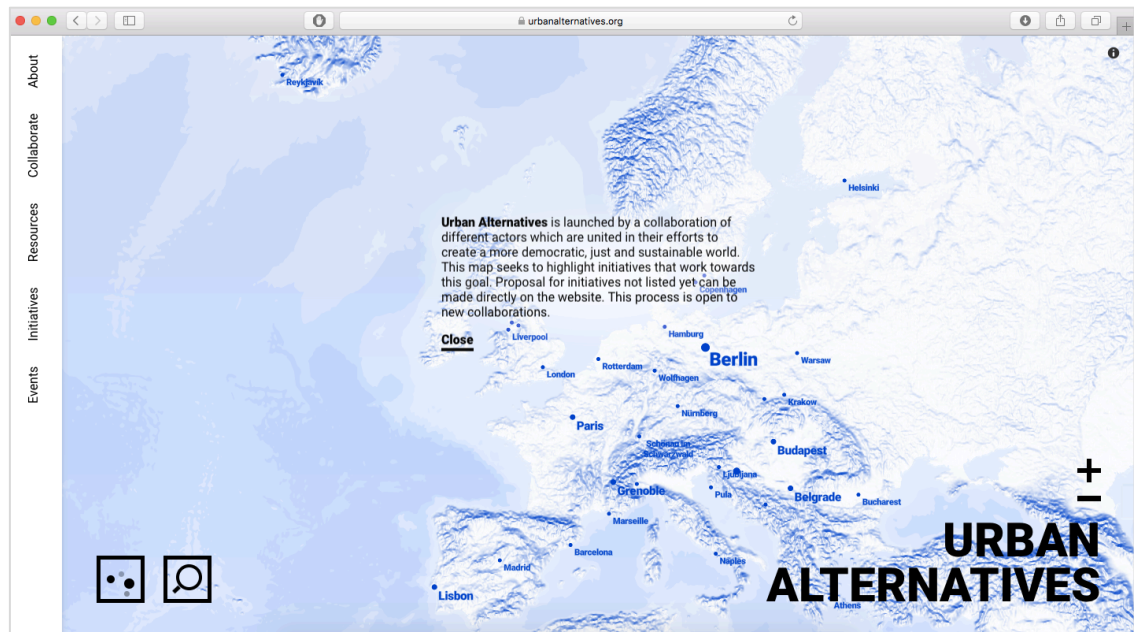


Figure 22: Urban Alternatives website landing page, February 2020; Image: urbanalternatives.org

The question of scale is crucial for rethinking agency in times when the feeling of lacking agency comes from threats like climate change or neoliberal globalization that remain largely abstract on the one hand but still have tangible consequences locally on the other. In times when nation-states are increasingly unable or unwilling to address contemporary global challenges, while political agency remains largely tied to nation-based frameworks such as national citizenship, nomadic activism explores possibilities for trans-scalar alliances, rethinking political belonging and agency alongside shared journeys and struggles, rather than bordered territories – whether those of nation-states or those of Fortress Europe. Nomadic activism invites us to re-imagine agency instead across different scales, from the local to the transnational, as a “circulatory system” (Braudel, cited in Mucem, 2017, p.26). Here, rather than centring transnational agency in Brussels, it is local actors linked together by the same route that are taking a central role: “towns and cities, small, medium and large all holding each other’s hands” (p.26). Thus, what

this “circulatory system” depends on its actors who move and translate between different scales in order to bring about a sense of decentred, yet trans-scalar agency that depends neither on supposedly fixed borders of the nation, nor those of the EU.

8.1.3. *From movement parties to radical municipalities: rethinking institutions*

Finally, how do activists reimagine different forms of political agency in relation to local or European political institutions? More specifically, in times when established political parties are in crisis and losing the trust of voters in many parts of the globe, what can be learned from alter-European activists’ relationship with political institutions regarding how we might begin to address what Fraser calls a “global political crisis” (2019, p.8)?

Firstly, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the actions and ideas present in alter-European activist networks need to be understood with reference to two preceding waves of transnational mobilisation – the alter-globalization movement and the movements of the squares. While there are many overlaps and continuing ideas and processes with both of these movements, for instance their transnational scope or their resistance against neoliberalism, it is alter-European activists’ complex relationship with local and European political institutions that marks a key difference to these preceding movements, which emerged in the context of a wider “electoral” or “democratic turn” that already started with the Spanish 15-M (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a, p.232). While the cycle of contention – in the analysis of some social movement scholarship – often ends with the last tents being taken down, alter-European activists’ actions also consider how crucial demands and, indeed, the movement itself, might take the squares into the (local or European) institutions. Although there have always been close links and overlaps between movement and parties, the emergence or rise of the “movement parties against austerity” like Syriza or Podemos in Europe throughout the 2010s might be understood as a new set of actors that demands social movement scholars’ close attention, as della Porta et al. (2017) have argued. What this thesis contributes to this emerging discussion of movement parties within social movement studies is that while the case of national movement parties is certainly crucial, social movement scholars should also pay attention to the rise of *municipal movement parties* and to the links between movements and parties that are emerging below and beyond the nation-state.

The emerging network and the rise of municipal movements and municipal movement parties in various locations across and beyond Europe also contains an important learning with regards to the question of agency in the contemporary moment. If Brexiteers' cry to "take back control" is illustrative of a perceived lack of agency that many people feel in the face of global challenges, as I have argued at the beginning of this thesis, then municipalities might be a key site for re-installing a sense of agency starting from the level of the neighbourhood. By opening up local institutions to the participation, ideas and suggestions of local population, municipal movement parties can grant locals greater political agency with many decisions that affect their everyday lives, including with regards to issues such as public transport, public spaces, housing, common goods and services, or the local economy. More than merely another party with a more radical programme, municipal movement parties seek to radically transform the institutions by making them more feminist, recognising not only political agency, but also the level of personal agency, so as to allow for the participation of those who are otherwise under-represented or unheard due to the often exclusionary political culture in formal institutions such as women and migrants, who lack political representation on the national level. Such developments on the municipal level and the idea of "electoral "confluence"" (see Russell, 2019, p.992) also raise important questions about how national and international institutions might have to change and become more open to social movements and currently unrepresented actors if they are to overcome the current crisis of representation.

Finally, there are, of course, numerous (global) challenges today, which no individual nation-state, let alone an individual municipality can address. Here, municipal and trans-national actors already come together in trans-municipal networks on the basis of common ideas of campaigns, for instance with regard to resisting multi-nationals like Airbnb or international trade deals like TTIP (see Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017). More than resisting, however, such networks are already putting forward proposals for radical democratic reform, for instance with regards to fighting climate change or developing a more sustainable migration politics which might be able to bypass regressive national governments and distribute international funds directly to municipalities and cities who are willing and able to welcome more people. Such proposals are illustrative of emerging forms of trans-local agency that might point to a way out of the contemporary political impasse and the retreat behind walls and national borders, which, as Brown (2010) has shown, does not lead to greater agency, but rather illustrates the very lack

thereof. Instead, trans-municipalism might be an emerging example of how bridges built across different actors and registers of agency can point to more progressive alternatives that might begin to address today's global challenges and contribute to social change.

Thus, while scholars of the social and political sciences have investigated urban movements and the sphere of local resistance for a long time, these more recent developments in radical municipalities and the emerging trans-local network of trans-municipal actors and municipal movement parties, which, at present, remain largely under-investigated (with the exception of some recent publications from which I drew here, such as Büllsbach, Cillero and Stolz, 2017; Barcelona En Comú, 2019; Russell, 2019; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a; Font and García-Espín, 2020; García Augustín, 2020; Featherstone, Littler and Davison, 2020) deserve closer attention by social movement scholars.

8.2. Contributions to knowledge: from networks to transversal agency

This thesis originates from a particular strand of media studies, which seeks to investigate media and communications processes not for the sake of understanding contemporary media, but for the purpose of understanding the role that different media play with regards to issues of politics, power and inequality. On a general level, this thesis thus draws on and contributes to a particular strand of media scholarship that understands media in relation to such issues and which aims to alter and intervene into the deeply unequal and unjust contemporary status quo (for instance Curran and Couldry, 2003; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Curran 2016; Fenton, 2016a, b; Freedman, 2017; Davis, Fenton, Freedman and Khiabany, 2020). In this spirit, the thesis makes two specific contributions to media studies.

Firstly, the thesis contributes to scholarship on social movements' media practices, particularly with regards to the role of digital networks in movement politics. The question how digital networks and different media technologies have influenced social movement politics has already occupied media scholars for at least the last two decades (for instance Fenton, 2011, 2016a, b; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017, 2019; Mattoni and Treré, 2014; Barassi, 2015; Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Jeppesen et al., 2017; Postill, 2018). As I have shown in Chapter 3, the network logic has

been an important analytical tool to make sense of social movement politics and how activists operate across borders, which continues to be relevant today (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a). Nevertheless, as this thesis has shown with regards to alter-European activist networks, there are aspects of contemporary social movements that the network logic does not capture, including recent movements' "democratic turn" (Flesher Fomiaya, 2020a, p.232) and their changing relationship with political parties (Chapter 7). As the metaphor of the network reaches its limits in explaining these recent developments, this thesis suggests that we have much to gain from centring the question of agency. However, the question of agency has only been explicitly conceptually employed by a few scholars in the social and political sciences and media scholars thus far in recent years, the latter having begun to theorise agency with regards to digital communications practices (Kaun, Kyriakidou and Uldam, 2016; Kavada, 2016) or datafied environments (Milan, 2018) throughout the years during which this research took place.

The thesis contributes to such emerging discussions in both media studies and interdisciplinary social movement scholarship by putting forward the idea of *transversal agency*. Drawing on findings from my ethnographic investigation into how alter-European activists seek to act across borders, the thesis argues that we need to understand agency across a wide spectrum of acts, from social to political agency. As my investigation of alter-European activist networks has shown, transversal agency refers to activists acting across different boundaries and contexts: bringing together people from different thematic struggles, different geographical contexts, operating on different scales and across not only national, but also institutional borders. Here, transversal agency arises, for instance, where feminists, city councils, neighbourhoods and transnational civil society work towards a progressive trans-European migration politics, or to bring together economic and ecological concerns in the fight against climate change and for a European Green New Deal. Rather than prioritising or centring a particular location, struggle or site of agency (personal or institutional), transversal agency aims to create a bridge across and think different registers of action alongside one another, prioritising notions of transgression and translation over modes of bordering or exclusion. Theorising agency in this context thus requires us to acknowledge both institutional political acts as well as more every day forms of social agency as described by feminist scholars, or understood as *acts of citizenship* (Isin, 2008, 2009, 2012), or *street agency* (Georgiou, 2013), recognising that like in the feminist idea of transversal politics (Yuval-Davis, 1999), in the context of alter-European activist networks too *agency arises in the process of*

translation between different registers of action. Transversal agency might thus be understood as the capacity to translate between different registers of action across *struggles, scales* and *sites*, in order to achieve social change on a trans-local scale and address today's border-crossing challenges. In other words, activists' capacity to enact social change depends, here, on their ability to act on different levels at once and translate between thematic, geographical and organisational contexts.

Secondly, considering activists' different media strategies as a key site of struggle that operates across different scales and geographies according to a nomadic logic (Chapter 6), I contribute to ongoing discussions around diaspora media and transnational media and the agency of mobile subjects as advanced by media and migration scholars such as Georgiou (2006, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018) and others (for instance Morley, 2000, 2017; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Verstraete, 2010; Madianou, 2016, 2019; Smets et al., 2019; Zabrowski and Georgiou, 2019). Importantly, like Isin (2012), I start here not from the *moving*, but from the *acting* subject. In other words, my interest was not in how mobile subjects communicate, engage with, shape and are shaped by different media technologies, but zoom into how alter-European media practices seek to actively "pierce through" national borders, as Étienne, one of my interview participants, has put it. As my respective analysis of alter-European media practices in Chapter 6 revealed, the nomadic logic of alter-European actors' media practices challenges the nation-focussed orientation of mainstream media (see, for instance, Berlant, 1993; Morley, 2000; Curran, 2016) in a way that is similar yet distinct from diasporic media practices, because it actively sets out to question the sedentary logic that underlies contemporary politics more generally.

Finally, the thesis makes a wider, interdisciplinary contribution regarding the relationship between movements and parties that speaks to scholars with an interest in contemporary politics across the social and political sciences. Drawing out the case of municipal movement parties, the thesis demonstrates that in order to understand transnational agency today, we need to focus not only on radical changes taking place within national parliaments and EU institutions, but also on alternative ways of acting that emerge in radical municipalities across and beyond Europe, growing in the shadow of mainstream media headlines and Brussels's institutions. This realisation led us to the theoretically largely under-investigated case of municipal movement parties, which I discussed in detail in Chapter 7. I contribute here to emerging scholarship on the changing relationship between movements and parties, which has begun to explore this relationship on the

national level in recent years (for instance Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; della Porta et al., 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a), but which has given surprisingly little attention by comparison to the level of municipalities. I add to these discussions a consideration of how municipalities are not only changing politics from the local level, but how alter-European actors aid the spread of radical change across the borders of nation-states through different acts including the organisation of physical gatherings and direct actions as well as their use of alternative and digital media. Such a discussion will be of interest not only to scholars of transnational social movements in different disciplines, but also to critical media scholars writing about contemporary questions of power, radical politics and the future of democracy (for instance Couldry and Curran, 2003; Davis, 2019; Davis, Fenton, Friedman and Khiabany, 2020). This is not least for while new progressive actors might have a key role to play on the stage of national politics and continue to do so, the national scope will ultimately be insufficient in addressing the global challenges of our time, as I have argued throughout this thesis. Here, the emerging network made up of radical municipalities and progressive transnational actors deserves further attention by those with an interest in radical left politics in the coming years – particularly in contexts where there might be no political opportunities for radical actors to intervene on the national political stage, as Featherstone, Littler and Davison (2020) have argued.

Indeed, it is important to highlight that this thesis aimed to contribute not only to academic knowledges, but to also intervene into a wider discussion amongst activists as well as in the context of a general public debate regarding how it might be possible to enact agency beyond borders today. The alternative refugee politics discussed by city councillors at Transeuropa Festival in 2017 is but one such example (indeed, the recently founded “From the Sea to the City” coalition, 2020, of which European Alternatives is a part, illustrates that these efforts continue beyond this research project). More than sharing knowledges and experiences amongst radical municipalities, my discussion in the previous chapter demonstrated that a coalition of radical cities might have the potential to resist regressive national politics and, indeed, put forward concrete ideas and policies for progressive change on a trans-municipal level. The case of municipal movement parties shows that such alternatives can be about more than policies and how social movements’ demands might enter more established institutional spaces. By equally taking feminist understandings of agency seriously, they have the potential to simultaneously transform not only policies, but our everyday political cultures, translating between people’s everyday lives and institutional processes. In this sense, the

emerging trans-local network of radical municipalities might be an illustrative expression of how transversal agency might work in practice.

8.3. Methodological reflections: the limits of engaged activist ethnography

As stated at the beginning of this thesis, my aim with this study was not only to contribute to academic knowledge. The thesis is also driven by the desire to understand and intervene in some of the urgent political questions of our time, interrogating alternatives in the making so as to make a difference and, ultimately, contribute to social change. This starting point has shaped my methodological approach, as outlined in Chapter 2, and underpins the aforementioned findings of this thesis. Returning to my epistemic framework at the end of this thesis now, I ask myself: has it *worked*? Reflecting on how I have negotiated the production of *contested knowledges*, as well as the tension and limits of doing engaged activist ethnography, I want to draw out two key methodological learnings.

Firstly, doing engaged ethnographic research with activists can be an emotional strain on the part of the ethnographer. In an attempt to negotiate my contradictory triangular position as activist-ethnographer-person, I was forced to navigate not only the typical ethnographic guilt, but the constant feeling of falling short on at least one of those roles, for instance: not publishing enough academic articles, not being useful enough to the struggle at stake, or not taking good enough care of my own mental health in this process. Which of those roles was more important at any one time was a question I asked myself nearly on a daily basis. While shifting perspectives continuously and interrogating different positions had the advantage of not getting stuck in either the position of the activist or the ethnographer, it was also a rather overwhelming split at times, a feeling that is shared by other engaged ethnographers. It is worth returning, once more, to Juris' reflection on his "militant" ethnographic approach here:

"I attended hundreds of meetings, protests, and gatherings and also took part in online discussions and forums. I lived the passion, excitement, and fear associated with direct-action protest, and the exhilaration and frustration of working with activists from such diverse backgrounds. I also became embroiled in movement debates, at times aligning myself with certain groups and against others. This often made me feel uneasy, given my dual role as activist and observer, but I came to

realize that only by taking clear positions could I grasp the complex micropolitical dynamics of transnational activist networking. At the same time, I hope this book will prove useful to activists. What impressed me most about so many of those I came to know and respect during my time in the field was their fierce dedication to egalitarian, collaborative process, which demanded of me a politically engaged mode of ethnographic research.” (Juris, 2008a, p.6)

In search for something to “hold on to” as I kept shifting between positions I found the accounts of other engaged theorists – in particular Juris “militant ethnography” (2007, 2008a), Scheper-Hughes “militant anthropology” (1995) and feminist texts like Haraway’s “situated knowledges” (1988) – a helpful reminder of what was at stake and how to negotiate conflicting roles. In fact, rather than the starting point for my methodological approach, the epistemic framework I developed in Chapter 2, evolved throughout this research and is the result of my own struggle regarding how engaged activist ethnography might be navigated. As such, it might be understood as the methodological contribution of this thesis and hopefully aid future scholars with an interest in engaged activist ethnography in navigating the ethnographic field in a similar way to how Juris (2008a), Scheper-Hughes (1995) and others’ accounts have helped me.

Secondly, my time as an engaged activist ethnographer with alter-European activists was a lesson in humility. Similar to how Scheper-Hughes (1995) describes her return to a field as an ethnographer, which she had previously inhabited as an activist, I was forced to ask myself what difference my account of alter-European activism has ultimately made and in what ways it might have contributed to social change. After all, while the protagonists of this study were *acting* on a daily basis to try and make a difference, however limited it might be at times, the ethnographer in me, as Scheper-Hughes problematises, was comparatively passive: to observe, describe and understand. Moreover, many of the activists I have interviewed and got to know in the past few years were not only acting, but also continuously self-critically reflecting on their own positionality, the limitations of their activism, and the question what difference it might make.

Moreover, another difficulty of being an engaged *activist* ethnographer is that every critical reflection falls back on your own position *as an activist*. Thus, I was forced to constantly ask myself whether my own activism and – in many ways – privileged position lived up to the critiques I encountered and developed in the field. In this context I found that perhaps the greatest benefit of my role as a critical ethnographer might not be to come

in with a theoretically informed view that is supposedly superior, but to assemble and make space for the different critiques and contradictions that *already exist* within the movement at stake, as well as including my own reservations and thoughts. This includes, for instance, the different, at times contradictory, perspectives on Europe, as outlined in Chapter 4, or the feminist struggle with political institutions discussed in Chapter 7. If the engaged ethnographer's role, as Scheper-Hughes suggests, is to keep the "record" of the community at stake, I found that I can make myself most useful – politically and theoretically – by compiling and taking seriously the different perspectives found in the movement and by presenting them in a way that embeds them within their respective historical and theoretical context.

Like Juris (2008a), what I am ultimately hoping to achieve with this approach, is that such a compilation of different perspectives, critiques, histories and contexts will not only contribute to academic scholarship, but prove useful to activists as well and contribute to wider societal discussions on how, as Fenton puts it, we can "live together well" (2016a, p.3) in the face of global challenges. For as Scheper-Hughes (1995) argues, the activist ethnographer is indeed not only accountable to science, but also to history. This, of course, is equally the ultimate limitation of the activist-ethnographer: they cannot know how history will turn out. What the movements in question will have achieved can only be judged by future generations, who will have the advantage of evaluating today's struggle from a position of historical distance. However, acknowledging that social movements are often "nothing more, but also nothing less, than creators of history" (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014, p.54), the role of the politically engaged ethnographer might be to step up to the responsibility of functioning as a kind of editor who captures, translates, contextualises and brings to life these histories as they unfold.

8.4. After Europe: potential paths for future research

As indicated in the previous section, there are, to be sure, certain questions that this thesis was unfortunately unable to address. One of its major shortcomings is that it is somewhat contained within the very European borders that the activists in this study seek to transgress. In other words, one of the tensions I had to negotiate in this thesis is how to write a thesis on activism in Europe without reproducing Eurocentrism? I have tried to mitigate this bias by problematising how the very idea of Europe always risks reproducing

an understanding of Europe that exists without an “outside”, and by involving the perspectives of those who have been forced in the role of Europe’s “other”, as Hall (1991, 1992, 2002) has criticised. Thus, ongoing investigations into what Europe looks like from its peripheries, whether from postcommunist perspectives in Europe’s East, from the perspectives of those forced to move through Europe “illegally” (Khosravi, 2010; McNevin, 2011) or from the perspectives of those who are confronted with European racism on a daily basis (El-Tayeb, 2011; Emejulu and Sobande, 2019; Pitts, 2019) are essential and need to be at the heart of the struggle for another Europe.

Moreover, in times when some of the most interesting political questions regarding life and politics in times of climate change are raised by indigenous peoples’ actions and more-than human understandings of agency (see for instance de la Cadena, 2010; Kuus, 2019; Youatt, 2020), a focus on Europe might seem less relevant, given the urgency for planetary solutions. In this sense, it might be possible that our thinking about media, activism and politics might have to be liberated from any territory, nation, or state-based starting point – whether local, national or trans-national – and take a different starting point altogether, for instance, the perspective of a mountain (de la Cadena, 2010), commons like water and air (Milun, 2011; Venn, 2018), or, indeed, the planetary ocean (Starosielski, 2015; Jue, 2020). Such accounts might truly take us beyond a politics rooted in territory-based nation-states, as they operate not only across the thematic, geographical and institutional borders, but also across the borders of different environments and species (see, for instance, Youatt, 2020). The recently founded “From the Sea to the City” coalition (2020) mentioned above suggests that starting, for instance, from the sea, rather than from the territory-bound logic of nation-states, might lead to an altogether different understanding of politics. It is such issues that I would be interested in investigating further towards an even more comprehensive theory of agency beyond borders.

The other problem that a European starting point brings with it besides its boundedness to Europe and the risk of perpetuating Eurocentrism is that it is not only not planetary enough, but not local enough either. Stuck between a rooted localised account and an unbound global vision, a trans-European perspective is neither universal nor particular. While this might have certain advantages, in that it illuminates precisely the processes of translation, which, as I have argued in this thesis, deserve further attention, it also lacks the contextual knowledges that a more localised account can offer. For instance, while I have focussed on the processes of translation between different municipalities and trans-

European actors in this thesis, accounts on how new progressive actors negotiate everyday tensions in particular (local or national) localities can be highly insightful. Mukherjee (2018), for instance, has problematised the difficulties faced by a group running for municipal elections in one of London's boroughs, while Flesher Fominaya has provided an in-depth account of the problems and contradictions Podemos had to negotiate in Spain en route to entering a government coalition with the PSOE (2020a, b). This thesis should be read not in contrast, but as complementary to such accounts, and more research on how municipal movement parties unfold in different contexts would be desirable. As Flesher Fominaya and Cox (2013) have argued, much can be learned by venturing beyond the Anglosphere. For instance, as Errejón and Mouffe (2016; see also Van Cott, 2005; della Porta et al, 2017) point out, the rich recent history of the complex relationship between social movements and political parties (as well as indigenous actors) in South America is highly insightful regarding the discourse of (municipal) movement parties and could have enriched my own argument in this regard but would have exceeded the scope of this thesis.

Nevertheless, as I negotiated these limitations while writing this thesis, I also came to realise that in the face of ongoing austerity and inequality, the Covid-19 pandemic, the looming climate catastrophe or people continuing to lose their lives in the Mediterranean and in camps at the European periphery, in short, in the context of some of today's most pressing contemporary challenges in Europe, it still seemed important to contribute to thinking about how things could be otherwise. Thus, far from proposing a general recommendation or a blueprint for how agency should be exercised, the argument in this thesis remains contextually bound and deeply situated in the present moment of politics in Europe. Rather, what I meant to show was that within the necessarily insufficient remit of this context and limitations of European nation-state-based politics, radical alternatives to the status quo are not only possible, but that another Europe is, already, in the making today. These emerging expressions of transversal agency enacted by alter-European activists might thus be understood as possible ways of attempting to carve out modes of acting in sync with the transnational condition of the challenges of our time.

Epilogue: a note from another Europe

As I am writing the final words of this thesis in the summer of 2020, Europe is closing down. Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with which I began this thesis, the world is marked by shutdowns, lockdowns and closing borders. The Covid-19 pandemic has – at least temporarily – put an end to the free flow of goods, services and (at least certain) people across EU-internal borders. Europe appears to be an altogether different place from a few months ago when five caravans of alter-European activists were travelling across the continent in search for another Europe – albeit not the one they had been hoping for. It is almost as if I am writing this from another time altogether. Bad timing, in any case, for a call for agency beyond borders, or so it might seem at first glance.

While the full implications of the pandemic are yet to be seen and much remains unclear at the time of writing, what is already beginning to surface is who the winners of this crisis will be. The announcement of Jeff Bezos set to be the first trillionaire (Spocchia, 2020) is but the most illustrative example: global pharma, global tech and digital platforms like Amazon will be even richer after this crisis. At the same time, as the pandemic leads to the further acceleration of already existing global inequalities, something else starts to become clear too: in times of pandemic, more solidarity is needed across borders, not less.

As the repercussions of this latest crisis are unfolding, what starts to become obvious is that it is those who were already vulnerable before the pandemic who are likely to suffer the most from the current situation and its longer-term effects. For instance, what does a lockdown mean for those suffering from domestic violence? Will there be material implications for how care and health work is regarded? How are those stuck in camps at the European periphery coping without access to even the most basic health facilities? And what about precarious workers and zero-hour contractors, including cleaners and delivery drivers, who are at a higher risk of falling ill – all of this in a context when many take to the streets across the globe under the banner of Black Lives Matter, resisting long-standing racialised inequalities that are only further deepened by this latest crisis?

These and other issues are, of course neither new, nor can they be understood as separate from one another or specific to a particular nation-state. The pandemic, this much seems clear, leaves a mess that will occupy social movements for some time to come and future research will have to investigate its effects on social movement politics. One question

that post-pandemic politics will have to undoubtedly find ways of addressing, however, is how to build bridges across different struggles and geographies, rather than competing for even further limited resources.

It is in this context, then, that the search for agency beyond borders – as it is being practiced by the alter-European activists I accompanied in this thesis – continues to be a highly topical question four years after I started this research project in the aftermath of Brexit in the autumn of 2016. Their attempt at exercising agency across borders might be more difficult in times of nation-states shutting down borders. It also becomes perhaps even more important than ever before.

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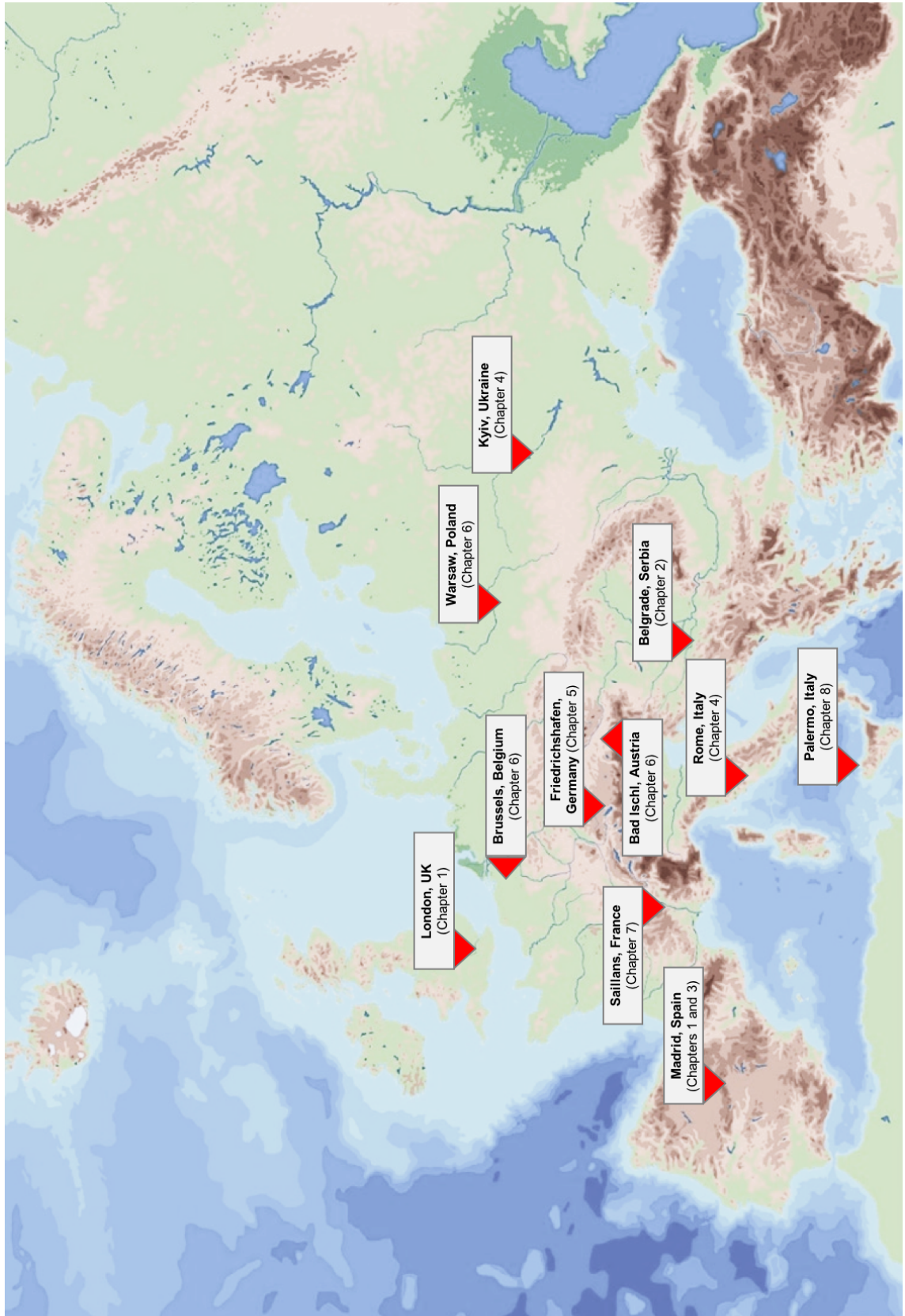
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Appendices

Appendix A: Map of selected fieldtrips



Appendix B: Selection of key acts discussed in this thesis

Campaign/ event	Description/ engagement
Trainings and workshops:	
European Alternatives' "Campus" (Chapter 7) <i>Casekow, August 2016</i>	The "Campus" is part of European Alternatives' continuous and wider effort to provide trainings and workshops to activists, that are aimed at providing information, networking opportunities and techniques to "scale up" their efforts. In 2014 and 2016 "Campus" workshops took place in Casekow, East Germany, the latter of which I attended together with approximately 80 other participants across four workstreams ("media", "artivism", "networks" and "cities" – see Chapter 7).
"School of Transnational Activism" (Chapter 6) <i>Madrid, October 2017</i> <i>London, January 2018</i> <i>Florence, July 2018</i>	The 2018 edition of the "Campus" specifically dealt with the issue of freedom of movement and was organised in the context of the training programme "Act 4 Free Movement" and European Alternatives' wider efforts to bundle the trainings provided under the umbrella of a nomadic "School of Transnational Activism". The project "Act 4 Free Movement" accompanied a dozen activists over the course of almost a year, of which I attended three occasions (see left column).
<i>Kyiv, April 2018</i> (Chapter 4)	I also accompanied a European Alternatives staff member on to a workshop with other alter-European campaigns, organisations and projects in Kyiv where the idea of the School was presented.
Protests:	
Brexit related protests (Chapters 1, 2 and 4) <i>London, June 2016 to October 2018</i>	Over the course of the first two years of this research, I accompanied European Alternatives and Another Europe is Possible actors to various Brexit related protests and gatherings in London, which regularly took place in the months following the UK's EU referendum in June 2016. This included a protest and "mass lobby" in Parliament dedicated to defending the rights of mobile EU and UK citizens in September 2017 (Chapters 2 and 4) and the "Left bloc" at the people's vote march in October 2018 (Chapter 4) as well as the referendum results "watchalong" I mention in Chapter 1.
Rome Treaties' 60 th anniversary marches (Chapter 4) <i>Rome, March 2017</i>	Members of European Alternatives from different parts of Europe and other alter-European groups and organisations such as DIEM25 attended the "progressive" march at the 60 th anniversary celebration of the Rome Treaties in Rome in March 2017, which also marked the 10 th anniversary of European Alternatives. After the march, I participated in various discussions, events and exhibitions that European Alternatives organised to mark this latter occasion in the following few days.
Events:	
Transeuropa Festival (Chapters 1,2, 3 and 8)	In total, I attended three editions of Transeuropa Festival prior to, during and just after the formal end of my fieldwork with

<p><i>Belgrade, October 2015</i> <i>Madrid, October 2017</i> <i>Palermo, November 2019</i></p>	<p>European Alternatives. The biennial, nomadic festival brings together actors from art, activism, media, politics and culture in a series of workshops, exhibitions, discussions and events and takes place in a different city every year, working with local actors. In the case of Transeuropa Festival 2017, besides its main location in Madrid, the festival also took place in the shape of local events in 12 other cities including an event in London to which I contributed in the run-up to the festival. Subsequently, I went to Madrid for three weeks in October 2017 to accompany and support European Alternatives with the preparations and facilitation of the main part of the festival. The first Transeuropa Festival, then called the “Festival of Europe”, took place in London in 2007 and was one of European Alternatives’ first events as an organisation, organised in the context of the Rome Treaties’ 50th anniversary celebration.</p>
<p>Campaigns:</p> <p>Charta2020 (Chapter 6) <i>March 2019</i></p> <p>Transeuropa Caravans (Chapters 6 and 7) <i>May 2019</i></p>	<p>While individual activists travel to and lobby EU institutions more frequently, the campaign “Charta2020” – to which European Alternatives contributed amongst other actors – presented one of the few opportunities to accompany the alter-European activist networks at stake in this thesis to Brussels. The campaigners met with progressive MEPs to present and discuss what they believed needed to be priorities in the upcoming electoral cycle starting in 2020 – including demands related to matters such as refuge and migration, or environmental and workers’ rights – which they had developed in a series of preceding workshops.</p> <p>In the context of the Transeuropa Caravans campaign which travelled to visit rebel cities, grassroots organisers and local projects throughout Europe in the run-up to the European Parliament elections in 2019 (after a first edition in 2014), I accompanied two activist caravans on parts of their routes: the Central Eastern Route from Germany to Austria, and the Western Route from Marseille to Paris. Along these routes, the caravans activists participated a series of local events, stages their own direct actions or met with selected local actors from a variety of different struggles related to feminism, anti-fascism, migration, climate change and new municipalism.</p>

Appendix C: List of Interviewees in alphabetical order

No	Pseudonym	Countries¹⁹	Age	Gender	Date
1	Agnieszka	Poland	20-30	female	Jun 2018
2	Alexandria	U.S.A./ UK	30-40	female	Nov 2018
3	Ana	Slovakia/ Czechia	20-30	female	Oct 2018
4	Andreas	Germany	30-40	male	Mar 2018
5	Antonio	Italy	30-40	male	Oct 2017
6	Audrey	UK	20-30	female	Nov 2018
7	Étienne	France/ Germany	30-40	male	Nov 2017
8	Eva	Italy	20-30	female	May 2019
9	Fabio	Italy/ UK	30-40	male	Nov 2018
10	George	UK/ France	30-40	male	Nov 2017
11	Habibah	Egypt/ Sweden	30-40	female	Aug 2019
12	Jan	Poland/ Germany	30-40	male	May 2019
13	Karolina	Poland	20-30	female	May 2019
14	Billy	Hungary	30-40	non-binary	May 2019
15	Laura	Italy	20-30	female	May 2019
16	Maria	Spain/ Italy	20-30	female	Oct 2017
17	Mark	UK/ Austria	30-40	male	Nov 2018
18	Mikhail	Belarus	20-30	male	Jun 2018
19	Nadia	Tunisia/ Austria	20-30	female	Jun 2018
20	Penélope	Spain	20-30	female	May 2019
21	Petra	Hungary/ UK	60-70	female	Nov 2018
22	Rosa	Germany	20-30	female	Mar 2018
23	Ruth	Brazil/ Portugal	20-30	female	May 2019
24	Saskia	Germany	30-40	female	Nov 2017
25	Šejla	Croatia/ Germany	20-30	female	Mar 2018
26	Silvia	Italy/ Spain	20-30	female	Dec 2017
27	Sophia	Greece/ UK	20-30	female	Nov 2018
28	Theo	Germany	20-30	male	Oct 2017
29	Tobias	Germany	20-30	male	Nov 2018
30	Will	The Netherlands	30-40	male	Nov 2018

¹⁹ For the purpose of protecting my interviewees' anonymity, I have decided against specifying their nationality and have instead opted for the more general category "country", indicating either where they reside and/ or their nationality and listing both where they are not identical. In some cases where interviewees might have been too easily identifiable due to the combination of characteristics, I have opted for altering certain attributes where such particularities did not matter for the answers provided, albeit without changing the overall representation of countries that were present in my sample.

Appendix D: Selection of alternative media output reviewed for this thesis

Alternative digital media	
<i>Talk Real</i>	Talk Real is a nomadic, audio-visual talk show format that is hosted on YouTube and produced by European Alternatives in partnership with local actors and other media partners. European Alternatives describes Talk Real as “an online political talk-show discussing the most urgent political, social and cultural issues for Europe with guests mixing East and West, North and South, young and old, intellectuals and activists, artists and policy-thinkers, Talk Real aims to gather a broad community and does not shy away from proposals for comprehensive political change” (European Alternatives, 2017c, p.81).
<i>Political Critique</i>	Besides working with other alternative online media platforms such as Open Democracy, European Alternatives co-founded Political Critique in co-operation with the Eastern European network Krytyka Polityczna in 2017. European Alternatives describes Political Critique as a “pan-European online magazine” that “focuses on the most important directions in today’s politics, culture and society and is run transnationally by a team of editors, translators and journalists who think across borders to galvanise a more informed and connected public sphere throughout Europe. We target a public interested in new perspectives ranging from scholars, artists, researchers, independent media producers and civil society activists” (Fieldnotes, Berlin, September 2018).
<i>Email newsletter</i>	European Alternatives sends out a bi-weekly newsletter to its membership in which it informs about ongoing campaigns, upcoming events and other news from its network, including specific news from particular local contexts or membership organisations.
<i>Transeuropa Caravans blog</i>	The campaign Transeuropa Caravans was accompanied by a website and blog that was updated throughout May 2019 to share and archive impressions, interviews and stories gathered throughout the five caravans’ journey across Europe.
<i>Social media</i>	European Alternatives regularly use their public social media channels, including on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, to promote and share updates on its campaigns and events, including Transeuropa Festival and Transeuropa Caravans.
<i>Print media</i>	At events, European Alternatives distribute a variety of print media, including flyers introducing the organisation or particular campaigns like Transeuropa Caravans. Throughout the years, the organisation also produced a series of print magazines and journals, including a journal produced specifically for Transeuropa Festival. Moreover, besides flyers, brochures and magazines, two books, written by European Alternatives staff members and produced and

	<p>distributed by established publishers, provide insight into some of the activists' key campaigns and learnings: Marsili and Milanese's <i>Citizens of Nowhere</i> (2018) and Büllesbach et al.'s <i>Shifting Baselines of Europe</i> (2017).</p>
<p><i>Urban Alternatives map</i></p>	<p>This online platform was created by a coalition of actors that includes European Alternatives as well as other civil society organisations, municipal actors like Barcelona En Comú and Universities in order to map local alternatives from across the continent. European Alternatives describes the website as “a collaboration that brings together municipalist activists, academics, local governments, think-tanks and NGOs. It is a mapping project that looks to understand and map initiatives that are emerging from the many urban social movements that are claiming the right to the city, occupying urban space, demanding social justice, democratic participation, cultural spaces and economic transformations.” New initiatives can be added directly through the website (Fieldnotes, Berlin, September 2018).</p>