

# Shifting the baselines

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*Daphne Büllsbach*

If you know European Alternatives, you will know what is important to us is to engage and inspire people to act. Having launched just over ten years ago, our aim has been, from the start, to contribute to the writing of the next chapter of European integration. A chapter that looks significantly different to the status quo and that can only be written by all those citizens who feel trapped in the neoliberal dogma of today's European Union and whose voices too often go unheard. Our politics are based on the fact that it has become impossible to do progressive politics in only one country or only on a national basis, hence our motto of *democracy, equality and culture beyond the nation state*. We need a transnationally engaged civil society that understands itself as such and acts as such in itself and for itself. The wind is blowing ever stronger for those that do not want to give up the European project and retreat to nationalism, protectionism, walls and fences. But if we are unable to make a hegemonic shift in the direction of a progressive internationalism, we are not talking about the end of free movement, but the end of the European project itself.

We need to act now against the rise of authoritarianism in the guise of right wing populists. We need to act against the nationalism that threatens to destroy what we, the generations that have grown up with the fall of the Berlin wall, have taken for granted: freedom of movement for all people and, indeed, not only of us privileged European passport holders. And yet again, mere opposition is not enough, we cannot only engage in a politics of defense that is incapable of articulating something new, incapable of articulating the world we want to see.

For effective cooperation and transnational movement building, there is a need for better analysis and background on the context and realities in which actors operate. These are still very different across Europe and

across political fields, and often rooted in national or regional contexts. But while we also do have transnational spaces and many live transnational lives, little do we yet challenge power effectively on a transnational level (of those that do, we show examples in this book, including the anti-TTIP campaign).

Electoral democracy is in a state of disrepair. Centre-left political parties have been hollowed out, social democracy has completed the shift towards market fundamentalism, leaving a potential vacuum. The banking crisis has brought no consequences and no government has stood up against the financial corporations. Movements for a fairer society and fairer economy flourish briefly, such as Occupy, Nuit Debout or the Refugees Welcome movement, that existed in the summer of 2015 across Europe. They shoot to international attention and capture people's imagination, yet little seems left of them a few months after<sup>1</sup>. There is an increasing realisation that we need to shelve the pure horizontality of the movements of the squares as it fails to effectively challenge the centres of power.

It is often the city, the space of social and cultural condensation, that provides the breeding ground for new ideas and formations, where many of these movements have started from. In Spain we have seen major cities being taken over by platforms emerging from the square occupations. Putting the citizen back into politics was the recipe to their success: what answers to the crisis of representation can we take from there? After just two years in power the civic platform government of Madrid has interesting perspectives to give on the question of whether their victory and the seizure of the institution has led to a politicisation of public life and whether they are able to go beyond the symbolism of that victory. This debate opens up the old question of whether the left should seize power or whether an institutionalised left is only busy negotiating the notorious contradictions between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of government.

As the proclamation of the 'post-factual era' has made us aware again, the power of emotions and the need for inspiration are key to counteracting the rise of nationalism and the narrative of austerity and neoliberalism.

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**1** | Meanwhile it is arguable that without Occupy, we might not have had Bernie Sanders or without the Refugees Welcome movement, we might not have had Merkel's welcome policy.

This book contributes to offering a vision and feeling of how alternatives could look like by creating visibility for such initiatives and narratives: from the municipal level to the level of transnational media, to how we work with technology and counter-surveillance, to a concrete proposal to revive the European refugee policy and the fundamental change of making society provided by the commons movement. Our motivation is to give people the desire to engage politically for an open, equal and democratic society.

The book is divided into three chapters that are each introduced in more depth separately. The following two texts are part of the introduction of this book as they set the tone, allowing us to understand the urgency in which we find ourselves in: a contribution by Etienne Balibar from 2011 and an answer today by Ulrike Guérot. They tackle the fundamental crisis underlying the European integration process, the missed opportunity to become a Union of Citizens by giving up on national sovereignty. Guérot suggests the path shown by Hannah Arendt's concept of integrated federalism could save the Union from disappearing into petty nationalisms. The mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, put it differently recently when she evoked the shifting baselines we are talking about here: "People call me a radical, but what is radical? We are living in strange times when defending democracy and human rights has become radical." It is up to us to not let this be the narrative of our time and define ourselves what is radical today.