


# **Crisis protests in Germany, Occupy Wall Street, and Mietshäuser Syndikat: Antinomies of current Marxist- and anarchist-inspired movements and their convergence**

Capital & Class  
2016, Vol. 40(1) 59–74  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0309816815627389  
c&c.sagepub.com  


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## **Abstract**

The theoretical and practical narrowings and possibilities of the cross-fertilisation of current Marxist- and anarchist-inspired movements are the subject of this paper. The main arguments are illustrated by an analysis of the crisis protests in Germany in 2009–2010 and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the USA. The German apartment-house syndicate ('Mietshäuser Syndikat') functions as an example showing how the different strategies of the two political strands can be combined in practice.

## **Keywords**

Anarchism, anti-austerity protests, crisis protests, Gibson-Graham, housing co-operation, Marxism, Mietshäuser Syndikat, Occupy Wall Street

## **Introduction**

Several protest movements in Western Europe and North America emerged in the aftermath of the crisis in the global financial markets at the end of 2008. A first huge wave of crisis protests in Europe – inspired by the success of the 2011 Arab Spring – reached

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mainly the Southern European countries in summer 2011, culminating in a week-long occupation of public places in Spain and Greece. Later, in the fall of 2011, with the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York City and the start of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, the protest wave came to the USA. By focusing on self-organisation, equal participation and internal deliberation, OWS was mainly engaged with forms of direct action in the tradition of (European) anarchism (Franks 2003: 16; Anarchist Studies Network 2010).<sup>1</sup> In Germany between 2009 and 2010, there was also a movement formed to protest against bank bailouts and for an alternative organisation of society. These latter crisis protests used mostly conventional forms of protest and production of meaning, mainly focused on political institutions and representative and state-centred forms of democracy (Vey 2011: 471), and can therefore be classified as standing in a Marxist tradition.<sup>2</sup> These two protests allow a simple but useful differentiation between at least two different types of crisis protests: new anarchist movements on one hand, and more conventional Marxist movements on the other, and can act as a starting point for further differentiation between similar movements in the future.<sup>3</sup> Having grown out of two different leftist traditions and thereby offering different perspectives on society, politics and capitalism, the movements' actions and strategies as well as its success are influenced by the opportunities but also by the shortcomings that follow from these different ideologies.

In this paper, I examine the crisis protests in Germany as one example of a Marxist-inspired movement, and the Occupy Wall Street movement as an anarchist-inspired one. Analysing these two movements with their different theoretical and practical traditions can give some indication of how anarchist and Marxist ideas are being realised today, and how these political currents could learn from each other. I will start with an introduction to the protests in Germany in 2009/2010 as a Marxist movement. I will present the results of a discourse analysis on the crisis interpretations and demands of the activists that I conducted in my dissertation on counter-hegemonic perspectives in Germany (Vey 2015). Based on this, it becomes possible to identify shortcomings of the crisis analyses and demands put forth by various actors. These shortcomings will be explained by referring to J. K. Gibson-Graham's concept of *capitalocentrism*. In the next section, I will give an overview of the contents and strategies of the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City in 2011 as an anarchist movement, and describe how the activists managed to overcome the shortcomings of the Marxist protests in Germany. However, I am also going to identify the shortcomings and problems that had a negative impact on the success of the movement, particularly from a long-term perspective. In the final section, I will present possibilities of a conjunction of both strands, thereby offering a way to solve the problems posed by each political approach. The example of the apartment-house syndicate in Germany is used to show what a fruitful connection of both leftist strands could look like.

## **The crisis protests in Germany 2009-2010: A Marxist-inspired movement**

Triggered by the bankruptcy of the investment bank Lehman Brothers and the resulting crisis in the global financial markets at the end of 2008, the existing anti-capitalist

protests in Germany intensified. Nationwide crisis demonstrations, congresses and councils were organised. Even though the protests in Germany were less intense than in other Western European countries, one can speak of a wave of crisis protests in Germany in 2009-2010. These protest activities were initiated and supported by different actors within the German left. Among them were several trade unions, parties, organisations and grassroots initiatives.

The majority of the actors seized the crisis as an opportunity for a powerful political intervention, since the capitalist system as a whole seemed to falter during this period. In their view, the crisis was the biggest window of opportunity since the Great Depression in 1929 for bringing leftist ideas into the neoliberal discourse. My analysis of the dominant crisis interpretations revealed that there were basically two main strands of crisis interpretations: a financial-market-centred interpretation, and a systemic one. The *financial-market-centred analysis*, which was basically shared by most parts of the labour unions, Attac Germany and other reformist organisations and groups, explained the global crisis primarily with the specific logic of the financial system in general, and the behaviour of individual greedy bankers in particular. Here, the capitalist system itself was not called into question; rather it was viewed as the indispensable, unquestioned foundation of society. Thus the demands that arose from this perspective addressed the financial and economic sectors. The crisis interpretations and demands had a strong impact on the strategies that were pursued. The main political action was concentrated on influencing financial market legislation, and therefore on representative (state) politics. Within the *systemic crisis analysis*, the critique was expanded beyond the financial system. Here, the capitalist system itself was seen as the main reason for the crisis in the financial markets and the economic sector. In part, the interpretation drew from the analysis offered by the regulation school (e.g. Boyer & Saillard 2005; Jessop & Sum 2006) calling for the abolition of capitalism and the creation of a socialist society as a long-term goal, while focusing on short-term demands such as the implementation of reduced working hours for everyone, or free public transport.

In both strands, the demands were derived from a hegemonic analysis of labour and the capitalist exploitation of it. Capitalist exploitation was the main anchor point that determined almost every societal sector and focused critical action and thought. Additionally, the main strategies pursued were mostly the same. With few exceptions, the focus of action was on organising huge public demonstrations and events. They concentrated on shaping political decision-making and shifting political power in order to render socialist or social-democratic ideas hegemonic at a policy level.<sup>4</sup> This policy was powerful and successful in a way, because it put people's needs on the political agenda of parties and organisations, and tried to create an alternate understanding of the crisis and its hegemonic roots in the public discourse. However, it implied several shortcomings, which I will discuss in the section below.

## **The limits of capitalocentrism**

Whilst focusing on capitalist dominance and historical materialism, and pursuing high-profile campaigns and actions, were effective in bringing capitalism back into the public discourse in Germany, it replicated a deterministic understanding of capitalism as a

social phenomenon that permeates every sphere of society. The feminist economic geography collective known as J. K. Gibson-Graham described this kind of discourse as *capitalocentric* (2006a; 2006b). Gibson-Graham developed the concept of capitalocentrism in an analysis of leftist academic discourses on capitalism. Gibson-Graham derived the term 'capitalocentrism' from the term 'phallogocentrism' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: x, 6), which describes the binary conception of gender and the privileging of the masculine (phallus), whereas the female identity is only conceptualised as *the other* to male identity. The specific way in which the capitalist economy is understood determines at the same time how other spheres are theorised, and dictates the ways in which we can talk about capitalism and act within it. In the end, the discursive hegemony of capitalism within the left limits the possibilities for developing and realising alternatives to capitalism: '[I]t is the way capitalism has been "thought" that has made it so difficult for people to imagine its supersession' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 4). Gibson-Graham reached the conclusion that '[T]he project of understanding the beast has itself produced a beast' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 1). They identified three main elements of the current discourse on capitalism: unity, singularity and totality (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 253–259).

(I) *Unity* implies that capitalism is seen as a structural unity. A picture of a consistent coherent capitalism covers the originally de-centred and partly contradictory aggregation of economical praxes. This can be easily found in the crisis analyses of German social democratic and Marxist movements. Particularly within analyses that went back to the ideas of the regulation school, the neoliberal transformation of society appeared as a well-planned and well-running process. In this view, crises, contradictions and the destructive character of capitalism do not have to be a danger to the system. Instead, by transforming capitalism and society, they can be necessary and productive for the survival of capitalism, through innovations such as the Green Economy as an answer to the increasing exploitation and scarcity of resources. This conceptualisation of capitalism as a well-running and uniform process made it difficult for the activists to identify promising points of resistant interventions that are not at risk of being determined and co-opted by capitalist hegemony.

(II) *Singularity* describes a conceptualisation of capitalism in which capitalism cannot exist together with other forms of economy or society. Alternative societies are relegated to a faraway future or are subordinate to the capitalist mode of production. It follows from this that capitalism can only be changed as a whole: a total system change is necessary to change social relations. The aspect of singularity can be found in the projects suggested by many activists. In discussions and the speeches, the activists fought either for a mega-project like socialism, which needs a total system change in order to be realised, and therefore has almost no connection and link to the current society, or they pursued short-term projects with no hope of or interest in a more radical social change.

(III) *Totality* is the third element that indicates a capitalocentric discourse. It means that even non-capitalist forms of production are only theorised in relation to and as taking place within capitalism. In this picture, capitalism has no outside: everything exists only within and in relation to capitalist conditions. Other forms of economy are understood as being dependent on the capitalist system, or they are even often only theorised as the backyard of capitalism, securing capitalist economy such as, for example, household production. Consequently, it is hard to develop a political strategy and economy that is able to co-exist with and challenge capitalist hegemony. As a result, the activists

were neither able to develop an effective practical strategy, nor to discuss and develop other forms of economy in everyday life. They were not sure at all where to begin social and political transformation. Capitalism was simply too overwhelming.

To sum up, 'In a sense, Marxism has contributed to the socialist absence through the very way in which it has theorised the capitalist presence' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 252). But how to get out of this capitalocentric discourse? Gibson-Graham put it as follows: 'Rather than giving it [the capitalist beast] a platform from which to speak its dominance, as leftists including ourselves have often done, we enshroud it in a productive silence, in order that glimmers and murmurings of noncapitalism might be seen or heard' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 23).

In their view, it is indeed necessary to understand the structure and logic of the capitalist economy, such as the production of surplus value, but at the same time, analysts need to be aware that – if this is their main focus – it produces the described totalising picture of capitalism. Therefore, in some way, it seems to be necessary to partly ignore or go beyond capitalism in order to open the stage to the contradictions and blank spaces of capitalism, and the alternatives that are already realised. In fact, there are already many different kinds of economies in everyday life: household flows, gift-giving, self-employment, solidarity economy, community-supported agriculture, etc. (Gibson-Graham 2006b: xiii, 2008). Gibson-Graham suggest following the approach that feminists employed to deconstruct the unity of the female identity. They ask, provocatively: 'Why can feminists have revolution now, while Marxists have to wait?' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 251). Their answer lies in the fact that the subject of feminist transformation – what it means to be a woman – is being reproduced every day, whereas capitalism appears to be ahistorical and superior to the social structure. They conclude that the revolution can begin now and does not have to be the great, total and complete transformation theorised in traditional socialist theory. Marxists must realise that we also need to transform micro-political forms of power and envision 'local and proximate socialisms' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 264). These strategies show many similarities with anarchist ideas and practices. Thus, the following section will exemplify how this capitalocentric discourse can be partially deconstructed by referring to the Occupy Wall Street movement as one example of an anarchist inspired movement.

## **Occupy Wall Street: An anarchist-inspired movement**

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement can be located in a broader cycle of social struggles, which emerged in the year before the occupation of Wall Street in September 2011 (Graeber 2011b; Hardt & Negri 2011). It was inspired and influenced by previous protest movements all over the world, notably the ones on Cairo's Tahrir Square in spring 2011 (Kerton 2012) and the 15 May movement in Spain in the early summer of 2011 (Castañeda 2012), leading some scholars and activists to speak of an Arab Spring, a European Summer and an American Fall (Mörtenböck & Mooshammer 2012: 10). The OWS movement in turn inspired Occupy movements across the USA and around the world.<sup>5</sup> What links these protests is that they did not simply criticise present politics. Instead, they were driven by the insight that the current (representational)

democratic system is not capable of addressing social inequality and injustice. Besides decrying corporate greed and economic inequality, the movement's focus was a fundamental critique of the parliamentary system in general and not only of the ineffectiveness or corruption of a single politician or party. The activists raised the question of whether the representational political system is more generally inadequate (Hardt & Negri 2011a). Therefore, it did not seem to be an adequate strategy to continue conventional forms of protest by imposing demands on the system. Instead, the activists refused to make any demands on parliament, the government or the state in general, because this would have meant recognising the legitimacy of the very system that they were criticising and partly objecting to. Moreover, they feared that their demands could be co-opted by political parties (Pickerill & Krinsky 2012: 283). Thus, the movement seemed to refuse – to the confusion and irritation of most observers – to formulate predetermined demands and to follow one coherent meta-ideology that determined its goals and strategies (Harcourt 2011).

Some observers – such as Harcourt (2011) – spoke of a new political logic that obtained in the OWS movement. On the surface, these practices might be new within the dominant Western protest movements of the last decades, but many of these aspects can be found in prior anarchist and Marxist movements (Prichard et al. 2012). In particular, the anarchist activist and anthropologist David Graeber underlines the movement's anarchist character because of its anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian consensus-based politics, and its refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing legal and political order (Graeber 2011a). Even though not all activists themselves placed their actions directly in an anarchist tradition, and nor did they all refer to anarchism as a main point of reference, it is now clear that most were committed to non-hierarchical 'horizontalism' and prefigurative politics (Milkman et al. 2013). Graeber identifies four main characteristics of anarchism, and argues that these can also be found in the OWS movement: (1) The refusal to recognise the legitimacy of existing political institutions; (2) the refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing legal order; (3) the refusal to create an hierarchy within the movement, instead creating a form of consensus-based direct democracy; and (4) the embrace of prefigurative politics (Graeber 2011a).<sup>6</sup>

What this meant, specifically, was that political interventions did not only or even mainly include protest marches, general assemblies and campaigns. These forms were perceived as ineffective and reproductive of the same hierarchical and exclusive organisation, precisely because they required its existence in order for it to hear and realise their demands. For that reason, the movement pursued policies in which the means were congruent with the ends, like the (self-)organisation of a microcosm of horizontal and participatory decision-making structures in the protest camp (Hardt & Negri 2011). During the two-month occupation of Zuccotti Park, the activists managed to build a fully developed infrastructure at the plaza.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they ignored and refused to follow the law, and responded to state repression in a very creative way. For example, when the city of New York prohibited gas generators for producing electricity, the occupiers generated electricity with bicycles. The movement not only *imagined* socio-political and economic alternatives, they *implemented* them in the present (Lorey 2012: 43). In contrast to the hegemonic logic and procedure of contemporary representative democracy, they refused to designate representatives for the media and politics, refusing to conform to

standard modes of protest and representation. Instead, they emphasised the constitutive element of democracy – democracy as always fluent, open and in the process of being constituted (Lorey 2012: 15). The focus was on deliberating and not primarily on convincing each other or making decisions.

This focus on prefigurative politics is what distinguished the practices of the OWS movement from those of the Marxist crisis protests in Germany and from Marxism in general. In contrast to Marxist thought and action, anarchists argue that the new society can start in the old one – without taking political power (Graeber 2012: 29). The focus of anarchism is thus to increase the scope of human freedom (Chomsky 1995: 17; Schmidt & van der Walt 2009: 33); and for this reason, anarchism is also called *socialism from below* (Schmidt & van der Walt 2009: 33) or *libertarian socialism* (e.g. Prichard et al. 2012). This perspective is based on the idea that one cannot achieve freedom through capturing a centralised and hierarchical state, or equality through forming hierarchical organisations like political parties, or peace through (class) war (Graeber 2011a). Hence, in anarchist thinking, political actions have to prefigure the ends, and as a consequence, the means have to be in accordance with the ends (Franks 2003: 16; Yates 2014).<sup>8</sup> This prioritises process over outcome.

By focusing on direct action and prefigurative politics, OWS managed to escape the Marxist capitalocentrism observed within the first wave of crisis protests in Germany. Capitalism and the state were not framed as following a coherent and *uniform logic (I)* that makes resistance hopeless. Instead of conducting a detailed analysis of the crisis, the capitalist economy and the power relations within the state, the activists favoured direct action. As a consequence, the activists resisted reproducing the picture of a uniform capitalism and being pulled into the potentially destructive logic that protest is being co-opted by this uniform capitalism anyway. This released many people from their paralysis and initiated creative political action. OWS demonstrated a plurality of possible economies and forms of social organisation and living together, and hence deconstructed the picture of a *singular capitalism (II)*.

By creating a self-organised community, OWS showed in an amazingly short period of time that there is great potential in non-capitalist organisation of the economy and community, and that capitalism is not an exclusive economy. Without arguing much about the question of whether another system can co-exist with capitalism (and about what this alternative system should look like), the activists started the new world in the shell of the old one (Graeber 2011a). Due to this establishment of a non-capitalist space within the heart of capitalism, the hegemonic representation of a *total capitalism (III)* was not the exclusive focus and main anchor point of critique. Instead, the occupiers of Zuccotti Park 'enshroud[ed] it in a productive silence in order that glimmers and murmurings of noncapitalism might be seen or heard' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 23). Although addressing and criticising social inequality, they did not let capitalism determine their strategies and practices. In contrast, the different practices stood by themselves and were not developed only in a direct distinction from capitalist economy. Through their independent organisation of everyday life, they demonstrated that capitalism never works in a totalising way.

However, the Occupy movement was not without its own shortcomings. First, by focusing mainly on direct action, predominantly on the organisation of camp life, a

critical analysis of economical power dynamics and the capitalist economy was neglected. Even though the movement related to capitalism in a critical way and developed practical ways out of this economic system, the *analysis* of capitalist (re)production often remained on the surface, and was not the main field of action. Instead, the main critique referred to the lack of *political* representation of the majority of the population, and to unequal political processes in general. While trying to 'reinvent daily life as a whole' (Graeber 2002: 11) by focusing on the present and on everyday practices, the movement lacked an understanding of how to change the structural basis of society in a lasting way, and how to prevent political and economic power relations from jeopardising these experiments. That broader understanding and perspective of social change – which would have been necessary in order to create a lasting movement that does not end after the eviction of the occupied spaces – took a back seat. Organising camp infrastructure, the negotiation processes in the everyday life of the camp, dealing with (inter-)personal problems and resulting arguments and daily routines in the camp often took up much of the available energy, time and space, rather than the goals of such actions (Pickerill & Krinsky 2012: 283). In many instances, capitalist power relations and economic structures, and the question of how they influence social life at a meso and micro level, disappeared from view. Hence, one fundamental anarchist element was missing in the movement and in Graeber's assessment of the movement: the understanding and rejection of market capitalism and market economy (Franks 2003: 22).

This correlates with a *second* shortcoming, which points to a general problem of anarchism and not only of the OWS movement. Graeber describes anarchism as being 'less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it' (Graeber 2002: 9). This is exactly what OWS did, and was one of the movement's problems. By focusing on direct action and the rejection of the legitimacy of and the will to participate in parliamentary democracy, OWS neglected the real power the state has. The capitalist state can be understood as a 'key organizational safeguard of the capitalist system' (Blackledge 2010). As a consequence, 'once social movements are strong enough to point towards a real alternative to the status quo, states will intervene with the aim of suppressing them' (Blackledge 2010). For that reason, Marxists focus on the way capitalist states help to sustain the capitalist system and align their strategy accordingly by seizing or influencing the state power (Blackledge 2010: 5). Thus, in order to build a promising counter-hegemony, it is important not only and mainly to improve social conditions, but also, and above all, to change and determine the rules of the game and thus to abolish capitalist society and its reproduction in general (Brand 2006: 42). Hence, Blackledge concludes that 'it is for this reason that any movement from below which becomes powerful enough to challenge capitalism will be forced to confront the state' (2010). To change the system – no matter whether one intends to seize or destroy state power in the end – does not necessarily imply the need to be represented in the parliamentary system or to organise in political parties, but at least to form organisational structures that make it possible to have an impact on political processes and institutions, and hence to ensure the existence of one's counter-hegemonic practices and spaces.<sup>9</sup>

This brings us to the *third* shortcoming of OWS: the failure to build organisational structures in order to ensure the persistence of the movement after the eviction. Sidney



Tarrow defines the OWS movement as a 'we are here' movement, a category whose main characteristic is that they flare up rapidly and fade away just as quickly, or disintegrate into rivulets of particular claims and interests, while some of them, such as the women's movement, eventually coalesce into a few organised sectors such as feminist parties or organisations (2011). However, OWS did not manage to ensure a long-term future for its protests and ideas. As Franks argues in reference to Trevor Smith, direct action tends to be mostly micro-political engagement (Franks 2003: 28). Although the movement had a worldwide impact, these small-scale experiments in democratic organising seemed stillborn to Hardt and Negri (2011).

In summary, the particular shortcomings of the two movements result in large part from the ideologies which shape them. How these shortcomings might be overcome is set out in the following section.

## **The Mietshäuser Syndikat: An example of convergence**

A political project that employs the double strategy of direct action *and* engagement in a political arena on the communal and federal level, and which hence can be read as an example of a convergence of Marxist and anarchist ideas, is the German apartment-house syndicate ('Mietshäuser Syndikat'). The apartment-house syndicate is a network of currently 96 self-organised apartment houses throughout Germany and another 22 initiatives that are in the process of finding, building or buying a house.<sup>10</sup> The idea of founding an apartment-house syndicate was developed in Germany in the 1980s. The tenants range from anarchist squatters, who bought the house they had squatted years before, to 'conventional' tenants who just wanted to prevent the pending sale for profit of the house in which they were currently living (Mietshäuser Syndikat 2015). All meet each other with the same goal: to ensure affordable rents in the long-term, to prevent property speculation, to form a solidarity-based house and network, to secure affordable rents, and to run the houses via self-organisation (Mietshäuser Syndikat 2015). On account of the different needs and ideas of the tenants, some projects are organised as conventional apartment houses with separate apartments with families, couples, singles or flat-sharing; other projects form communes in which the tenants share most of the space and everyday life, use a solidarity household economy and carry out political, cultural and social projects together. Most houses have shared spaces like public open rooms for meetings and events, or a shared garden. Both anarchist and Marxist ideas are present in the fundamental structure of the syndicate, just as in the everyday organisation and practices of the houses.

The very basic idea is that the houses are always owned by those who currently live in them (rather than by a private or commercial landlord, governmental institutions or cooperatives ['*Genossenschaften*']). A specific legal structure prevents the reselling of the house in the real estate market (Rost 2014). The residents of the house project do not directly hold title to the property; rather this belongs to a limited liability company (LLC, in German '*GmbH*') founded specifically for this purpose (Horlitz 2012). This LLC is owned half by the individual project (in the form of a tenant association) and half by the whole syndicate network (in the form of another LLC representing the overall

tenement trust). This structure secures the house from reselling and at the same time gives complete autonomy to the individual houses in all aspects other than selling the house. The projects are autonomous from each other and can therefore decide for themselves how they wish to organise their houses and everyday life (Schweitzer 2003). As a consequence, the structures of the houses and the tenants are very heterogeneous.

The syndicat is organised and run along clearly anarchist lines; that is, consensus-based direct democracy and prefigurative politics. There is a highly decentralised organisational structure, with autonomous local projects averting the danger of power centralisation (Mietshäuser Syndikat 2014b). While all decisions are made by consensus and through direct democracy, it is not the 'vote' itself that is the important act, but the process of deliberation that takes place before the final decision-making. In contrast to representative democracy, this process is not about winning majorities, but about understanding each other's arguments, motivations and needs in order to find a solution that is suitable for everyone. For that reason, the network and the houses do not want and do not need representatives. In order to develop appropriate solutions, to exchange information and to provide mutual advice and support, the syndicate has thematically and regionally organised groups. In fact, there are some paid members who do the minimum administration for the network and tasks delegated to them, but they do not function as speakers or representatives, and therefore they cannot make decisions on behalf of the syndicate. By creating a self-organised tenants' house based on a solidary infrastructure, the activists focus on direct action and prefigurative politics. The methods applied in the syndicate already form the end: a house in self-organisation that is (almost) independent from the economical situation of the individual tenants. One goal of the syndicate is that tenants who are on welfare can also afford to live in the house. In the vast majority of houses, this is realised.

The syndicate manages to overcome the three identified capitalocentric shortcomings of the Marxist-inspired crisis protests in Germany in several ways. First, the syndicate breaks with the hegemonic picture of a *uniform capitalism*. It shows that capitalism can also be considered as a heterogeneous aggregation of praxes which does not only have to function in the (originally intended) way in the form of a reproduction of the capitalist system. As for example in the case of the LLC, the syndicate uses the existing legal order and the shell of the legal structure originally created for capitalist companies in order to build non-profit, self-organised apartment houses as collective rather than private property (Sauer 2013: 21; Hebsaker & Dom 2014: 71). The same also applies to the practice of the direct loan system through which the construction or purchase of the houses is (partly) financed. The creditors lend the projects money because they want to support the political idea and not to make money out of it. They themselves can decide on the interest rate (from 0.5% to a maximum 2.5%), duration and notice period of the loan. The formal praxes are initially based on capitalist regularities; however, the meaning and content of the praxes follow an alternative logic, namely that of mutual support and solidarity. The syndicate thus manages to use the ambiguity of and the gaps and the blank spaces in the capitalist structures for its own counter-hegemonic purposes.

Secondly, the activists contradict the hegemonic discourse that capitalism cannot co-exist with other forms of economy and that it is thus characterised by *singularity*. They

make the varieties of existing and possible economies visible and fortify them: 'the very idea of a noncapitalist economy does not take the shape of an unlikelihood or even an impossibility' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 3); rather, it becomes real, and as a consequence, the ideological and physical hegemony of capitalist economy is shaken. The activists show that within the capitalist system a variety of economies can co-exist with the capitalist one. For example, many are solidarity household economies, and practice gift economies, with so-called 'free-boxes' where members leave things that are no longer needed and people can pick them up for free. Likewise, there are share economies like bicycle repair spots. Third, by creating this world of economic difference, the syndicate shows that capitalism never works in a *totalising way*. As members of the syndicate put it:

Actually, we should not exist, because we violate the law of the market in its basic approach: profit motive, value realisation and individual ownership are regarded as an indispensable foundation for all business enterprises. However, we do exist – the syndicate and the projects – and we are among them: We play in the thicket of the city among construction giants and real estate sharks, among private house constructors and property owners, among housing associations and capital investors. We compete with them for this or that property and play Monopoly on the scale of 1:1. We are enthusiastically working on the corporate association of the apartment-house syndicate. (Miethäuser Syndikat 2013, cited in Sauer 2013: 20, author's own translation)

The syndicate resists the totalising discourse on capitalism in which even counter-hegemonic action seems to be permeated by the capitalist logic. Capitalism appears to be unable to totally determine the syndicate structure and praxes. Indeed, in contrast to the Marxist-inspired crisis protests, the members of the syndicate act 'as if one is already free' (Graeber 2011a). Thus, they realise the idea of local and proximate socialisms.

At the same time, the syndicate enacts self-evidently Marxist ideas. The houses are neither possessed by individual persons nor by concrete groups. Instead, those who live in the houses always own them; the houses can never be profitably resold on the real estate market. The house and the plot are financed by many small direct loans given by a multitude of individuals to the LLC and – if necessary – by a bank loan. Thus, the financing of the purchase of the house is independent of the financial situation of the tenants; there is no need to have and to invest equity capital in the house in order to rent a room or an apartment. Each house pays a solidarity contribution, depending on the size of the house, to the syndicate in order to help other projects to set up new houses.

By questioning and deconstructing the fundamental narrative of the imperative of private property, the activists attack the capitalist system at its roots. Instead of only fighting the capitalist system, they managed to build a legal structure of collectively owned property by using the legal structure of the capitalist state. Taking a closer look at the more Marxist-inspired practices of the syndicate can illustrate ways of dealing with the three diagnosed shortcomings of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. First, like the OWS movement, the syndicate is preoccupied with trying to reinvent daily life as whole; however, the syndicate has managed to elaborate an understanding and practice of how

to change daily life in a lasting way, of how political and economic power relations can affect these experiments, and of how to protect itself against them. By not only being based and dependent on the exceptional situation of an occupation, the syndicates developed permanent organisational structures for combining critical everyday practices with a fundamental analysis, understanding and critique of capitalist power dynamics which is a clear difference from anarchist practices. Due to this structure, the members of the individual projects are not only occupied with dealing with inter-personal negotiation processes at the local house level: they are also engaged with and in the meso and macro level of politics. They place the focus not (only) on their everyday life and actions, but also on their political engagement in the political and public sphere of protesting, campaigning and negotiating. The syndicate intervenes in and engages with communal and federal legislation and politics. Its members fight for a cap on rents, the re-communalisation of privatised apartment houses, and public housing at a local and federal level. One recent example of its pragmatic engagement in parliamentary politics was the 2014 campaign concerning a law protecting small investors ('Kleinanlegerschutzgesetz'). This law could jeopardise the existence of the syndicate by obliging it to provide costly information material that has to be updated and audited by the bank regulatory authorities every year (Mietshäuser Syndikat 2014a; Fiedlers & Pohlers 2014; Waltz 2014).<sup>11</sup> In order to influence the proposed law to their liking, the syndicate and the collective houses pragmatically lobbied using their networks in order to make their perspective and demands visible in political and public discourses. This did not challenge the hegemonic idea of capitalism, but in fact the protest was effective in the way it had intended to be: the federal cabinet took the criticism on board, and is currently discussing exemptions from this requirement for social and political projects (Kreutzfeldt 2014): the existence of the syndicate and other projects was no longer in jeopardy.

Second, by engaging with the state, the syndicate does not neglect the real power the state has. In contrast to the many squatted houses and plots in Berlin and throughout Germany, by developing a legal structure, the founders of the syndicate made it much more difficult for the capitalist state to attack or destroy this counter-hegemonic project. The houses cannot simply be evicted by force by the police in order to destroy alternative structures and places. They obtain a legal status which cannot be easily undone. Hence, the syndicate recognises the power the state has, but has found ways to deal with it, to defend itself, and to partly undermine and use this power (of, for example, the legislative assurance of private property) for its own purposes.

Third and finally, in contrast to protest movements like the OWS movement, the legal and organisational structure and the implementation of the project in the everyday lives of the tenants ensure the continued existence of the syndicate even if tenants change. Having grown out of the squatter scene in Germany of the 1970s and '80s, some of the pioneering activists eventually managed to coalesce into an organised sector with a legal structure. This establishment of an organisational structure ensured the persistence of the political struggles and projects after evictions. There is no real distinction between protest and everyday life: the political practice is incorporated in the activist's bodies, their lives, and the entire practices of the tenants.

To sum up, the syndicate manages to connect the anarchist ideas of direct action, prefigurative politics, and consensual and direct democracy in the micro sphere with

influencing political structures, acting in the institutionalised political level on a macro level and building permanent organisational yet non-hierarchical structures.<sup>12</sup> The structure of the apartment-house syndicate can be seen as one model of the conjunction of anarchist and Marxist ideas. It is this specific structure as a *federal* network of many individual *local* projects – which are being engaged in *everyday politics* – that makes it possible to connect everyday resistance with a broader frame of social change.

## Conclusion

As a brief summary, it can be stated that the crisis protests in Germany in 2009–2010 were constrained by their focus on capitalism, whereas the Occupy Wall Street movement, as a stronger counter-hegemonic answer to the crisis, managed to overcome this deficiency by focusing on prefigurative politics, but lacked a profound analysis of capitalist society. The strategies, knowledge and practices of these two contemporary movements can therefore complement each other in a very productive way. This includes the need within political action for a much stronger focus on self-organising, but without disregarding fundamental political power relations and the logic of capitalism which form the – albeit uneven, ambivalent and patchy – basis of the current societies. Besides the apartment-house syndicate presented here as a possible conjunction of Marxism and anarchism, these practices can also be found in many other self-organised, participatory social phenomena or movements of recent years, all of which pursue more or less similar ideas: to gain agency, to bring politics back into everyday life, to develop micro forms of resistance, and to develop structures that challenge hegemonic power relations (e.g. Crawshaw & Jackson 2010; Habermann 2009; Haenfler et al. 2012; Yates 2014). The connection of social movement activities and a critical lifestyle is one of the foundations of social change, as for example expressed by the anti-consumerist movement or lifestyle politics, whose central philosophy is the idea that reclaiming public space is itself a political act (Worth & Kuhling 2004). All these movements and approaches show some of the possibilities in which another world is possible, and can begin in the here and now.

## Endnotes

1. For an ethnological analysis of direct action, see Graeber 2009.
2. The described dichotomy between Marxism and anarchism only functions as a (limited) heuristic device in order to illustrate the argument presented in the paper. In theory and practice, Marxism(s) and anarchism(s) and their boundaries include much more variety, overlap and heterogeneity (Kinna & Prichard 2012: 6–7). For an analysis of the interrelationships between Marxisms and anarchisms and the mutual borrowings in history, theory and practice, see Prichard et al. 2012.
3. At the end of 2011, an Occupy Movement was also formed in Germany. However, its strategies and frames were closer to previous protests than to OWS (Infogruppe Bankrott 2012). For an analysis of OWS Germany, see also Brinkmann et al. 2013; Décieux & Nachtwey 2014.
4. Of course, a considerable heterogeneity within the protests could be observed, and the described strands are simplified. In fact, there were some groups focusing on other strategies, such as the direct transformation of immediate social relationships. As we will see, the character of these latter strategies is very close to the anarchist ideas followed by the Occupy Wall Street movements and the apartment-house syndicate.

5. In the period 5–15 October 2011 alone, there were calls and reports of 1,065 Occupy actions worldwide (Mortenböck & Mooshammer 2012: 20).
6. For a more detailed definition of anarchism, see e.g. Schmidt and van der Walt 2009. Most definitions imply the same aspects, though with different foci. However, in contrast to other anarchist thinkers, Graeber did not include the existence of an anti-capitalist attitude in this suggested definition. We will see later in the paper that the aspect of anti-capitalism plays an important role concerning the shortcomings of the movement.
7. The occupiers established temporary tent cities with accommodations, a food supply, health care, self-produced electricity, educational spaces and a library. Moreover, they provided essential goods and organised the cleaning of the plaza.
8. Here again, the distinction between Marxism and anarchism is heuristic. In theory and practice, there exist strands with strong similarities between the two ideologies, e.g. (anarcho-) syndicalist movements and thinkers (e.g. Llorente 2012; Schmidt & van der Walt 2009), or Marxist thinkers with a strong libertarian bent, such as Rosa Luxemburg (1983).
9. What this balance between self-organisation and state-orientation, and what this impact might look like, will be discussed in the section on the apartment-house syndicate.
10. In fact, while this article was written and edited, the number of projects already in the process of realisation had to be updated twice, from more than 60 to 96 projects in 2015. For recent figures, see <[www.syndikat.org/en](http://www.syndikat.org/en)>.
11. For that campaign, see <<http://www.syndikat.org/de/wirsendnichtprokon>>.
12. Of course, as in other social groups, the individual projects of the syndicate have to deal with informal hierarchies, often resulting from knowledge gaps between the tenants, different competencies in particular concerning the ability to articulate own needs and differing time capacities to participate in the project. However, these informal inequalities are subject to discussions and reflections within the projects.

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