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REFRAMING THE DEBT CRISIS IN DEFENCE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Jessy BAILLY*

To date, a substantial number of studies have analysed the discourse of European governments on austerity (e.g., Borriello, 2017; Lebaron, 2016; Schmidt, 2014). Although austerity did not start with the 2008 crisis (Helgadóttir, 2016), the later was used to justify policies of budget reduction (Kickert et al., 2015), particularly during the 2010s, and to manage the accumulation of public debt in Europe. For instance, Borriello (2017) highlights how Spanish and Italian governments “naturalised” the austerity discourse between 2010 and 2013, presenting it as the only possible solution to the economic crisis while ignoring alternative forms of political resolution.

The austerity discourse is so strong that citizens have been convinced at times by the official justifications for cutting public budgets, as shown in the case of the United Kingdom (Stanley, 2016). With the benefit of hindsight, many researchers have demonstrated that the idea that public debt was caused by an explosion in social and public spending was wrong (Blyth, 2013; Hay, 2013; Roos, 2019; Schmidt, 2020). Lemoine’s (2016) work on the evolution of the discourse and practices of the French government in the management of public debt goes so far as to assert that this official framing, which he calls the “budgetary causality” of the debt problem, was adopted around 2005, well before the crisis. Reactivating this framing in times of debt crisis makes it possible to cover up what Lemoine calls “financial causality”, a term which pinpoints the

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responsibility of banks in the debt crisis caused by the state bailouts of failing financial institutions.

Despite the strength of these austerity narratives, fierce protests in various European countries challenged their national governments' management of the crisis and the subsequent social emergency (Della Porta, 2015). Some of the citizens occupying public spaces within these movements (Gerbaudo, 2017) met in subgroups to discuss various issues (Botella-Ordinas, 2011), including economic ones. There was indeed a desire to decompartmentalise economic issues, usually left to experts and policymakers, by extending their discussion to a wide audience of ordinary citizens.

Scholars have noted the emergence of alternative discourses on austerity within these protests (Hay, 2013). In his study, Borriello invites us to consider "the counter-discourse of austerity" (2017). This article embraces this approach, examining activist groups in France, Spain and Belgium and revealing their imaginary of the economic crisis, austerity policies, democracy, and the state. When compared to existing literature, this article makes several contributions. First, this research focuses on three countries, bringing to light commonalities and differences in the political imaginary of those activists under study based on the analysis of their discourses. This article's second contribution lies in its analysis of activist groups that mobilised at the local levels. Here, I aim to evaluate how they positioned themselves, not only in terms of the actions of their national governments but also in relation to local decision-makers. Finally, the imaginary under consideration is assumed not to be exclusive to the citizen debt audit groups.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: the literature review focuses on the research on anti-austerity movements and on protesters' conception of democracy. I then explain my contribution to this literature through a shift that consists in focusing on the political and democratic imaginary of the citizen-auditors under study. Next, I outline the object of study, case selection, and research design. The third section focuses on how French, Spanish, and Belgian activists problematised the debt crisis. The fourth section uses a comparative perspective and highlights activists' demands for the redeployment of a strong social state under the democratic oversight of citizens. The final section outlines the empirical findings and conceptual framework and proposes avenues for future research.

Literature review: anti-austerity protests, discourses on democracy and the state, political imaginary

This section positions this article within a problematized literature review highlighting the drawbacks of the existing literature and presents how these blind spots can be addressed.

Anti-austerity studies

There is no shortage of studies on anti-austerity protests. However, they suffer from several drawbacks. First, some of them analyse the organisation of anti-austerity movements and their main modes of collective action or internal organisational arrangements (Castañeda, 2012; Nez, 2012). There are also studies that solely focus on the circulation of anti-austerity movements (e.g., Romanos, 2016), or who mostly raise the question of the sociological profile of the protesters (Della Porta, 2017; Rüdig & Karyotis, 2013).

Other works focus on the identity and the general demands of the protesters (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Marquesa, 2016). They emphasise the values and major principles defended by the activists: social justice, dignity, and the implementation of “real” democracy. Using frame analysis tools (Benford & Snow, 1988), this article provides an in-depth analysis of the debt crisis framing produced by specific groups of activists who took part in anti-austerity protests. Whereas anti-austerity discourses have been often accused of adopting a highly moralised stance with a limited understanding of political economy (Charnock et al., 2011; Žižek, 2012), I highlight instead their level of sophistication and avoid reducing the analysis of anti-austerity movements to broad and elusive claims.

Furthermore, when one considers the extensive literature on anti-austerity movements it is surprising that these citizen debt audit groups, which were found in many European countries in times of austerity (France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Greece, and the UK), have not been studied. For example, in the literature on the Spanish Occupy movement (15-M), few authors mention the resonance of the citizen audit of the debt (Castañeda, 2012; Fominaya, 2017; Nez, 2012), even though it was included in the electoral programmes of several lists of 15-M activists running for the municipal elections in 2015 and has been

recognised as a legacy of the movement (Anonymised for peer review, 2022). Several analyses refer to it as an important new democratic tool but fail to examine it in more detail (Cruells & Ibarra, 2013). In the French and Belgian contexts, there have not been similar movements marked by a similar intensity. Instead, citizen debt audit groups were created following the initiative of anti-austerity campaigns and associations (in France, the committee for the abolition of illegitimate debt (CADTM) and ATTAC; in Belgium, the CADTM and the socialist trade union General Labour Federation of Belgium). These groups have not been seriously studied, perhaps because scholars have focused on more spectacular movements in the media spotlight. Similarly, Fillieule (2007) has demonstrated the strong dependence of the sociology of social movements on media sources.

Beyond the profusion of research on anti-austerity movements, this study is positioned above all in relation to those that strive to analyse the democratic vision of activists in greater depth.

Activists' discourses on democracy and the state in austerity protests

Some studies on social movements in times of austerity tell the story of the economic and democratic demands of the protesters. For example, Fominaya (2007) argues that anti-austerity movements challenged the “post-democracy” theorized by Crouch (2004) to re-politicize debates on economic policies beyond austerity. However, her work has two limitations. Firstly, it focuses much more on the diagnostic framing, on what the activists criticize, than on activists’ concrete proposals. For instance, Fominaya contends that there is a decline in the legitimacy of representative democracy as expressed by activists. With the citizen audit groups, I will demonstrate that while representative democracy is criticized, activists do not call for the abolition of the representative relationship between powerholders and citizens. Rather, they wish to better control their elected representatives for them to produce fairer economic decisions. Secondly, Fominaya’s work insists on protesters’ desire to establish a “real” and radical democracy. Nonetheless, she refrains from in-depth analyses that would study how they plan to implement this democracy on the scale of an entire society without being restricted to considerations on the conceptions of democracy within the movement.

Della Porta (2015) and Gerbaudo (2017), whose studies go further, investigate how indignant citizens interwove the economic crisis, its

concrete consequences on the living conditions of the most vulnerable, and the responsibility of political institutions in managing the crisis. They also compare the 2011 wave of protests with the global justice movement, showing that anti-austerity protesters focused less on the responsibility of international financial institutions than on that of their national governments. Furthermore, these studies identify a will to reclaim representative institutions that have allegedly failed to deliver democracy and a desire to re-institute a welfare state.

On the one hand, with a broad examination of the social movements that emerged and occupied public squares between 2011 and 2016, Gerbaudo (2017) states that one of the characteristics of this wave of protests is its denunciation of the complicity between economic and political elites. The author highlights the belief in the “oligarchic distortions of existing democracies” adopted by activists (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 63). However, he does not focus on activists’ diagnosis of what constituted problematic state interventions. Instead, he references the “economic causation” of the protests (2017, p. 46) without expanding further. In addition, when analysing the protesters’ demands, he does not sufficiently analyse which forms of the state the activists wished to impose nor does he discuss the democratic reforms they planned to implement in their strategy of an “assault on the institutions” (2017, p. 207).

Della Porta (2015) analyses how activists equated the economic crisis with a crisis of political responsibility. She contends that activists judged their governments harshly regarding their management of the crisis. According to the author, activists did not denounce the passivity of the state in managing the crisis but rather its intervention in favour of financial and banking actors. More specifically, the protesters criticised the complacency of the state and the priority given to ensuring the confidence of the markets rather than guaranteeing the social protection of citizens. However, although she mentions that protesting citizens aspired to create more oversight and increase the political accountability of powerholders, Della Porta fails to detail such demands. This study must be understood as deepening Gerbaudo and Della Porta’s analyses. However, rather than using all the protests during the austerity period as the object of study, the focus is on specific groups that mobilised during the anti-austerity wave in several European countries (France, Spain, and Belgium in particular), under the self-chosen label of citizen debt audit groups. Based on the analysis of these groups and of their framing of the crisis, I examine what political imaginary activists sought to enhance and what kind of state they advocated for.

The political imaginary of activists

The concept of political imaginary is used here for two reasons. The one of “democratic conception” could have been used, but it is associated with a literature that classifies groups of individuals (or activists) according to the categories of representative, participatory, direct, or stealth democracy (e. g. Gherghina & Geissel, 2017). This literature does not consider the fact that many citizens and activists do not seek to end representative democracy but rather to democratise it. I assume on the contrary that this is the case of many anti-austerity movements, beyond citizen debt audit groups.

Secondly, political imaginary is referred to insofar as, unlike “democratic conception”, the concept is broader and offers a better analytical grasp of the perspective of anti-austerity activists. They criticise the political management of the crisis. In doing so, they are calling for specific forms of government intervention in the economic sphere. Therefore, using the concept of political imaginary allows the consideration of both the form of democracy the activists want (in terms of relations between the governors and the governed) and the type of intervention by public authorities they wish for in terms of economic policies to ensure continuous social progress.

This article aims to prove that the literature on anti-austerity movements has missed a key point. Many activists defend what I propose to call social democracy. In criticising the management of the crisis, activists advocate for a more assertive role of the state, for a social state able to be on the offensive against market forces. It will also be shown that this advocacy in favour of the social state was not conditional, insofar as the activists under study agreed with what has been analysed by Gerbaudo, namely that the protesters wanted to reassert “control over public space and state institutions” (2017, p. 209). However, this article offers an analysis that goes further than the elusive formulas of Gerbaudo and Della Porta to examine the will of the citizens to monitor representative institutions.

Case selection, material, and methodology

Case description and case selection

During the wave of anti-austerity protests that took place in several European countries, citizen debt audit groups emerged. These were informal groups of activists, without any legal status. These groups strived to make public finances more transparent and accessible to citizens at the local level and to increase the responsiveness and accountability of decision-makers to their political claims and demands. From their point of view, overcoming a political situation in which the voice of citizens is no longer heard by political institutions required the implementation of debt audits by groups of citizens. According to the proponents of this solution, citizens should be involved in financial decision-making, while powerholders must consider increases in public debt as resulting from bank bailouts rather than from excessive social spending. This should then result in decision-makers favouring spending that is socially beneficial to the population.

While citizen-auditors represented a small number of people (a few dozen activists in each local group, given that there are often several groups in each country), the analysis presented here is prompted by the fact that they emerged simultaneously in a range of European countries. There were about twenty groups in Spain, ten in Belgium, and one hundred in France. In addition to the lack of studies on these groups, there are several other reasons to consider their evolution.¹ First, they represent cases of activist groups attempting to make economic topics a subject of public debate. This is part of a broader movement by activists or citizens to re-politicise economic issues, as seen in Crespy's (2010) studies of the mobilisations against the Bolkenstein Directive on the liberalisation of services or Oleart's (2021) work on the campaigns against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Secondly, these citizen audit groups were chosen for their repertoires of action and distinctive practices. Specifically, they did not engage in prefigurative politics but rather interacted with decision-makers, produced reports critical of the use of public money, organised press conferences and held public conferences to share their demands and disseminate their framing of the debt crisis.

1. This article is part of a broader doctoral thesis that analyses citizen audit groups in France, Spain, and Belgium. The larger project considers how they claim, in their specific political configurations, a citizen-monitor role, vis-à-vis decision-makers, with the aim of making the latter accountable and thus democratise the representative relationship between powerholders and those they govern.

Rather than focus on a single case study, this article uses a comparative lens for reasons already discussed extensively in the methodological literature: to clarify evidence and concepts by going back and forth between cases, including those within the same country (while controlling the data, as Sartori, 1991, invites us to do), to increase the theoretical scope of the data analysis (Strauss & Glaser, 1968) and to avoid over-generalising the details observed in a particular case.

A comparative framework is helpful in analysing the similarities between activists in various countries as well as their differences, especially as scholars have shown the national perspective of contentious action in the anti-austerity protests (Gerbaudo, 2017; Glasius & Pleyers, 2013). Therefore, it seemed relevant to seek out the common imaginary of these activists while hypothesising that, beyond the claim of the citizen audit as a tool to solve the economic and democratic crisis, it varied according to national and local contexts. Moreover, this finding is demonstrated by my framing analysis, which shows elements of variation.

The selection of the citizen debt audit groups in France, Belgium, and Spain is based on different reasonings. First, each group mobilised in a similar timeframe (around 2011–2017²) and had roughly the same number of activists (between ten and twenty). Moreover, they were in Western European countries that are members of the European Union (EU) and have a civil law tradition. Although comparable, these countries are relatively different. For instance, in terms of state organization: France is a unitary state, Spain a regional one, and Belgium a federal one. Another goal of this article is to analyse how activists mobilising locally challenged budget reduction policies at the level where they lived. This approach allows us to focus not only on criticisms targeting national governments but brings to light the fact that the imaginaries were partly modulated by the local power structure.

Secondly, these countries differ in their place within the European Union. They are all members of the Economic and Monetary Union, but Spain is considered to be semi-peripheral country, while France and Belgium are in the core. The size of their public debt is not the same (comparing 2014 Eurostat figures: the public debt of Belgium was 107% of its GDP, Spain 100%, and France 95%) nor is the extent of the austerity policies implemented in each country, with Spain being particularly hit (Gourgues & Houser, 2017) compared to Belgium and France.

2. Apart from the Madrid-Region group which is still active in 2021.

Data and methods

In terms of methodology, the fieldwork for this article involved several visits to each group selected in the three countries between 2018 and 2020: two in France (Nîmes and Grenoble) that focused on specific bank loans taken out by their intercommunal authorities; one in Belgium (Liège) that investigated the municipal debt of Liège; and three in Spain, including two whose focus was on regional debt (Madrid-Region for the healthcare debt and Catalonia for the overall regional debt). The last Spanish group is the Madrid-City one, which focused on the municipal debt of Madrid.

For my data collection, I carried out interviews with 59 activists. I questioned them about their social background, the reasons for their commitment to protesting the debt, their practices, their relations with the elected officials they met, and their definition of democracy. I also observed several militant actions, such as public conferences, press conferences or trials. The study also included a documentary analysis of the materials produced by these activist groups (more than 150 documents) and their communications with decision-makers. These archives included: activist leaflets, analysis notes, texts of speeches in front of elected officials, correspondence with elected officials or decision-makers, minutes of meetings and exchanges between activists and press releases.

To analyse this data, I prepared a text document for each group (six in total), coding the full set of information for each one based on common categories so that the data could be compared. Examples include the following: self-presentations, values they invoked, which public authorities they spoke to and criticised, how they argued using numbers and the law and what demands they made (more transparency, more accountability, more citizen participation, or more substantial demands for social justice). This first-hand material allowed me to reconstruct the activists' political imaginary.

To systematise the analysis of their imaginary, I used a qualitative framing analysis, which is particularly suited to the study of the interpretive devices that activists used to make sense of reality, which served as a basis for collective action (Babb, 1996). I studied how they conceived of the crisis, put forward their interpretations of it and criticised state intervention in this context. Benford and Snow (1988) define the frame analysis perspective as the analysis of the signifying work or meaning construction by participants in social movement organisations,

considered here to be signifying agents, in relation to antagonists, the media, and the state. This method provides a rigorous form of analysis since comparisons can be systematised across the categories of diagnostic framing and prognostic framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). Tables were drawn up for each of the groups under study, using these two categories and considering the public authorities they targeted.

Let us next review how these activists developed a relatively sophisticated counter-framing of the crisis, highlighting the need for the redeployment of a social state on the offensive against markets and under democratic supervision.

Activist' imaginary of state interventions in a context of debt crisis

In this section, I emphasise diagnostic framing, i.e., “the identification of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents [of a problematic situation defined by social movements]” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). Studies of anti-austerity movements have mentioned some of the diagnostic elements identified by activists but have not used the analytical tools of framing analysis. For example, Gerbaudo speaks of “a perceived democratic deficit and the rise of oligarchic power, the unholy alliance of the ‘financial dictatorship’ of bankers and a self-interested “political caste”” (2017, p. 62). Glasius and Pleyer, on the other hand, state that activists denounced “the rise of inequality and the collusion between big business and policymakers at the national level” (2013, p. 558). Finally, Della Porta (2015) stresses the protesters’ discussions of the immorality of neoliberalism.

I will focus on how activists defined the problem and assigned responsibility. A comparison between cases makes it possible to consider which segments of the public authorities and financial actors were denounced. Precisely identifying those responsible helps activists produce a targeted criticism and helps us better understand their imaginary. I will highlight the fact that activists denounced the lack of combativeness of public authorities in relation to private financial actors. Their criticism tells us that they legitimise state intervention to defend the social interests of the population.

The diagnosis analysis is expanded here, refining how the militants problematised the situation and the attribution of responsibility. To

analyse how activists attributed responsibility, I rely on Gusfield's (1981) concepts of causal and political responsibilities. The first is defined as a "matter of belief or cognition, an assertion about the sequence that factually accounts for the existence of the problem" (Gusfield, 1981, p. 13). The second refers to "a matter of policy [asserting] that somebody or some office is obligated to do something about the problem, to eradicate or alleviate the harmful situation" (Gusfield, 1981, pp. 13–14). Let us first look at how activists framed the debt crisis in a broader perspective:

The government and the mainstream media tell us the debt is due to excessive spending. But this is false: the debt crisis was induced by the financial crisis and the bank bailouts [...]. (Nîmes citizen debt audit group, leaflet, 2012)³

We must challenge the idea that Belgian citizens have lived beyond their means [...]. Instead, a range of political choices led Belgium into further debt. (Liège citizen debt audit group, press article, 2014)

Between 2009 and 2013 [...], we went into debt to pay off debts that were not caused by an explosion of social spending. (Catalan group, report, 2014)

By categorising this dominant framing of the debt crisis as erroneous and out of touch with reality, activists wished above all to denounce it and impose another framing of the debt crisis. They thus developed a counter-frame (Benford & Hunt, 1994). From their perspective, the debt was not caused by excessive public and social spending but by tax shelters, high interest rates for public actors financed by the market, and massive injections of public money to save banks threatened by bankruptcy. They then sought to impose an alternative to the official discourse promoted by governments by showing that public debt was instead the result of financial causality and banking activities. The disqualification of the official debt crisis frame allows us to consider what political imaginary the militants supported. They placed blame on the risky behaviour of private financial actors who had engaged in unbridled speculative practices in the pre-crisis era. European states then rescued these actors through bailouts, which is the main explanation for the explosion of public debt. The volume of debt steadily increased due

3. All texts were translated from the original (French, Spanish or Catalan) by the author.

to what activists saw as illegitimate transfers of public money to private economic and financial actors:

The banks have imposed dishonest interest rates and repayment plans on the city. (Liège citizen debt group, report, 2014)

The state has come to the rescue of the banks, which are guilty of having made local authorities take out toxic loans; finance wants to impose its law. (Grenoble citizen debt audit group, leaflets, 2013)

Here I consider how citizen audit groups, acting in local configurations, denounced the problematic situation of local finances. However, a distinction must be made between the Belgian and Spanish groups on the one hand and the French groups on the other. The former focused on the high level of local debt where they lived and where they mobilised. This position led to different forms of criticism. For example, the Liège group claimed the excess of public debt was due to the banks profiting from the city's indebtedness through the snowball effect of interest rates. In the Catalan case, the activists condemned the powerlessness of the region to determine its economic policy in the face of the demands of the Spanish state and of two private creditors (banks), as expressed in the quote above. Another example comes from the Madrid-Region group, whose members referred to a "transfer of public money" from the public health department of the Madrid region to private companies when the public administration "financed the already powerful private entrepreneurial sector of Madrid's health sector through private concessions, public-private collaborations, management of public services" (2019 report).

In France, activists opposed specific loans (known as "toxic" loans) taken out by the executives of their intercommunal areas. They considered them to be speculative because the interest rates were indexed to a euro-Swiss franc parity. As local authorities tried to exit these loans, they had to pay an exit fee to break the contract. The French auditors argued that the banks, not local authorities, should have to pay this exit fee. Indeed, if the public authorities were to pay this fee, it would constitute a transfer of public money to the private sector. French activists thought drawing the payment from the public purse and citizens' taxes was particularly unfair and urged the banks involved to pay it directly.

Thus, one can see that the causal attribution of responsibility is not the same for the different activist groups, as the following comparative table illustrates:

Table 1: Activists' attribution
of causal responsibilities

Group	Object of the citizen debt audit	Attribution of causal responsibility
Nîmes	Toxic loans	One bank in particular
Grenoble	Toxic loans	One bank in particular
Liège	Municipal debt	Banks
Catalonia	Regional debt	Public and private creditors of Catalonia
Madrid Region	Public procurement of regional health services	Health companies and lobbies
Madrid Town	Municipal debt	Contractual partners of the municipality and the former municipal team (for excessive spending on non-socially beneficial projects)

While activists argued that causal responsibility lay mainly with banks, creditors, or companies, they criticised the attitude of public authorities for being complacent with private actors in managing the crisis rather than defending the interests of citizens. The Spanish groups placed equal blame on the Spanish state, which is said to have bailed out banks, as on their local authorities (the region for the Madrid-Region and Catalonia groups, the municipality for the Madrid-City group):

[...] the state financed the bankruptcy of the banks. This meant the banks were strengthened, and the public service took on the debt of the banks and the private sector. (Interview with a Catalan activist, 18 September 2018)

The government of the Madrid region, largely conditioned by its creditors and officials excessively predisposed to [creditors'] influence, does not serve the general interest. (Madrid-Region group, report, 2018)

Because of the over-indebtedness and the wastefulness of the former municipal government of Madrid (2004–2011) [...], since 2013, the Madrid City Council has been forced to implement massive cuts in public spending to meet its debt repayments. (Madrid-City group, report, 2016)

In the case of Liège, political blame was directed at the federal state and the Walloon region, but not at the municipal level:

Considering the debt of Liège, a large part of the responsibility lies with the federal state, which, since the post-war period, has left the city with no other option than to be enslaved by the banking system and the snowball effect of interest [...]. Liège [which is under the financial supervision of the region because it has financial problems] is audited by the region. When the latter examines the budget and accounts, it ignores all social consideration, salary, or statutory improvements. Only the return to equilibrium matters. (Liège group, report, 2014)

In France, the onus of responsibility was put on the French state for forcing local authorities to negotiate with the banks that took out toxic loans, requiring them to pay the exit fee:

In France, in 2014, the government passed a law to shield the banks from justice and make the people bear the full cost of their speculation. (Public lecture by an activist from Nîmes, 2016)

Subsequently, the French groups also criticised their intercommunal authorities for having agreed to pay the exit compensation for toxic loans: [...] signing a transactional protocol is, in fact, tantamount to validating a real “scam” operated by the banks. (Note by the Grenoble group, 2016)

The table below summarises the attribution of political responsibilities by the different groups:

Table 2: Activists’ attribution of political responsibilities

Group	State	Region	Intercommunal authority	Municipality
Madrid-City	+++	/	/	+++
Madrid-Region	+++	+++	/	/
Catalonia	++	+++	/	/
Liège	++	+++	/	+
Nîmes	+++	/	++	/
Grenoble	+++	/	++	/

Legend: “+” refers to moderate attribution; “+++” to strong attribution.
The sign “/” is used when the scale is not relevant from the activists’ point of view.

Thus, all activist groups opposed their national or federal state’s approach. This is less surprising in the case of France or Spain which

are seen as strong states compared to Belgium, where the state is seen as weak (Tilly, 2007). In Spain and Belgium, some activists also denounced the attitude of their regional governments. This is not surprising as these regions have legislative power and, therefore, strong political prerogatives. Nothing similar happened in France.

Beyond the authorities they targeted, activists agreed that public authorities more broadly did not respond appropriately to the crisis: states bailed out banks and then imposed austerity policies on local authorities. In all cases, activists argued that the authorities (and the state in the broadest sense) failed to protect citizens. However, they conveyed the immoral character of the interventions of public authorities (Della Porta, 2015) in different terms, as in the following excerpt from the Madrid-City group:

Debt served as a pretext to explain the policies to cut the social budget and was used as an instrument to force the population to submit to the diktats of the capital. (Madrid-city group, report, 2014)

The activists saw the promotion of austerity and the curtailment of the social incursions of the state as morally reprehensible. The Liège activists, as one last example, referred to “social degradation”:

This social degradation will continue because the logic of the public authorities is clear: to apply austerity policies that make citizens pay for the crisis when they are not responsible for. (Liège group, report, 2014)

For these activists, austerity was therefore an inappropriate solution, as it did not address the causes of the debt crisis. It was also unproductive and contradictory with the social mission of public authorities.

Activists also criticised authorities for not listening enough to citizens’ demands and for being only loosely accountable. In their quest for public information, citizen-auditors often pointed to the difficulty they had in accessing and understanding public accounts:

Documents relating to public finances are difficult to read. For example, the city’s budgets and accounts consist of about 500 pages of tables and figures [...]. There is a lack of active publicity to make this content intelligible to citizens. (Liège group, report, 2017)

[...] from [...] the Generalitat of Catalonia, access to information has been made difficult, manipulated, or denied maintaining the vagueness of the institutional discourse around the crisis [...]. (Catalan group, report, 2013)

Believing that public authorities did not react in the right way during the crisis, the activists also denounced the opacity and the lack of account given by local authorities in the management of public funds. This points to an imaginary in which the public authorities must be accountable and responsive to their constituents.

Having pointed out the common elements in the framings of activists and taken stock of the existing variations, I now turn to the differences in their discourse. The Spanish groups all used a vocabulary that is not found in the cases of Liège or France. The first element common to the Spanish citizen-auditors is the use of the term “corruption”, which, according to several interviewees, is “rooted in the Spanish political system”. Without essentialising corruption in Spanish political culture, one can nevertheless insist on the contemporary recurrence of politico-financial scandals in Spain, whether at the state level (the Gürtel affair since 2009; the Barcénas affair, 2013; Operation Púnica, 2014; the Rodrigo Rato affair, 2015) or in Madrid more specifically. The pervasiveness of such scandals in the imagination of activists makes them consider citizen audits as imperative for the monitoring of governments (especially regarding the Popular Party, the main party involved in the corruption cases in question):

An audit, this appeared to be a relevant way to [...] see if corruption, which is rooted in this country, in the capitalist system and in our public health system, could have an impact on the debt increase. (Interview with a citizen-auditor from the Madrid-Region, 10 October 2018)

The possibility of managing public affairs arbitrarily, without social control, is the main cause of the vast majority of corruption cases that have occurred in our country. (Madrid-City group, report, 2015)

Although there may have been scandals in France and in Belgium, they seemed to be less relevant to the activists, who did not mention them. The second common element specific to the Spanish groups is their regret over the loss of citizen “sovereignty” revealed by the crisis, an expression that is not found in the groups from France or Liège groups. For instance, the Madrid-City group often associated in its discourse

“citizenship rights”, “people” and “sovereignty”. In its strategy of self-presentation, the group promoted the “citizen audit” as a way of “[...] recovering the sovereignty of the people”. In Catalonia, activists expressed themselves on sovereignty in this way:

One can hardly speak of sovereignty [...] if the decisions of the government are imposed directly or indirectly by a small group of creditors. (Catalan group, report, 2014)

We believe that citizen audits will allow control over public authorities and ensure sovereignty so that the dignity of the people is always respected. (Catalan group, press note, 2013)

These statements refer to the belief that citizens have been deprived of their true capacity for political decision-making, which they must therefore reclaim through the citizen audit. I explain this reference to the people’s sovereignty by Spanish activists and not those in France and Belgium by referring to a longitudinal study on the “democratic satisfaction” of Spanish citizens (Cristmann & Torcal, 2017). It highlights the perception of a pronounced political crisis in Spain, with fewer and fewer citizens trusting their representative institutions in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. This can be explained by a combination of low output legitimacy, a context of repeated political scandals, and institution’s lack of responsiveness to social demands (Cristmann & Torcal, 2017). Therefore, the demand for “sovereignty” by Spanish citizen-auditors must be understood as the exercise of popular sovereignty by citizens to further integrate the people into the heart of the decision-making process.

The third and final common element among Spanish activists is the over-investment of empowerment. Spanish activists, more than the groups in France or Liège, insisted on the need for citizens to develop their “power to act”, i.e., political awareness, as well as their political and civic skills:

The citizen audit is a process of empowerment, of social learning, with the objective of identifying the mechanisms of indebtedness that would affect the public sector and citizens. (Interview with an activist from the Madrid-City group, 13 October 2018)

In addition to elements leaning towards social justice, there is also an important moral function for us because if a society feels that it can win a victory against titans, the empowerment factor

comes into play. (Interview with an activist from the Catalan group, 6 March 2019)

The term empowerment, like sovereignty, was widely used to encourage citizens to emancipate themselves individually and collectively and to broaden the prerogatives attached to political citizenship. These should no longer be limited to elections and handing oneself over to rulers. Although an empowerment and sovereigntist lexicon is not part of the discourse of French and Belgian activists, French groups demanded that public authorities make decisions in accordance with “the general interest and the public interest”. The Belgians spoke of the imperative to conform to “the social development of citizens”.

Despite a somewhat different vocabulary and representations in their imaginary all the audit groups demanded what could be called “public sovereignty” in the face of private actors. Public sovereignty, an expression that is not used by activists, refers to a political imaginary in which the public authorities must be structured to serve the social needs of citizens at a time when social protection was being reduced due to the development of the free market (Della Porta, 2015). As will be seen below, this reactivation of an imaginary of the social state also presupposed efforts of democratic monitoring by citizens. This belief called on a renewed form of the social state (compared to the theorisations on the welfare state by Rosanvallon, 1992).

Reclaiming social democracy

Since activists were not only anti-establishment but demanded a “new politics” (Gerbaudo, 2017), one must study their prognostic framing, defined as “the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). I will first explore why activist groups called for a return of the social state in the context of the crisis. I will then show how those activists did not only demand the return of the welfare state. They wanted to involve citizens in monitoring the social vocation of public authorities, which gave rise to an imaginary that could be called “social democracy”. I will be mindful to detail and analyse the commonalities and the differences between the various groups of activists.

The most common demands of citizen debt audit groups from the three countries under study involved the reform of the public financial

architecture. Several groups (Catalonia, Nîmes, Grenoble) asked for the establishment of a public bank: from the already nationalised banks, in which the states had non-negligible shares (such as Dexia in France, Belfius in Belgium, or Bankia in Spain), or which should be “nationalised” (Catalan citizen debt audit group, report, 2014). The French groups talked about the necessary construction of a “public financing tool, such as the establishment of a public financial pool” (Nîmes group, report, 2016) or of a “socialisation of the banking system to create a true public banking service” (Grenoble group, report, 2014). While all three countries experienced governmental bank bailouts, Liège activists were less likely to mention the need for a public bank.

Thus, activists rejected the idea that public authorities are economic actors like any others. Moreover, they urged public authorities to impose conditions on the markets, as in the case of the Grenoble group, which asked for a ceiling on interest rates for loans granted to local authorities. Activists wanted the state and local public actors to be considered privileged debtors since they hold missions of general interest. Furthermore, activists shared an imaginary where public and private actors collide. In the Belgian case, this translated as the implementation by the municipal government of a partial debt cancellation vis-à-vis private creditors. They asked the government to cancel the “illegitimate” part of the debt, defined as any debt characterised by “the absence of benefit for the population” (report, 2017).

At the same time, all the activists advocated for a fairer redistribution of wealth, as can be seen from their fiscal demands. They shared the view that the resources available to public institutions were too limited to satisfy the needs of the population. All the groups wanted more attention to be paid to the fight against fraud. Other demands consisted in calling for a more progressive tax system: the Grenoble citizen-auditors recommended the “implementation of a real progressivity of taxes on all incomes” (leaflet, 2012), while the Catalan activists wanted a more substantial tax on assets and inheritance, an environmental tax, and a tax on nuclear energy (2014 report). As for the Madrid-Region group, during a press conference in January 2021, one of its prominent representatives pleaded for:

[...] an increase in the share of the budget and resources managed by the public, through fiscal progressiveness, to control fraud and tax evasion in order to ensure the full development of the public service with equity. (Madrid-Region group, press conference, 2021).

The Liège group condensed all the above-mentioned fiscal demands, calling for a “fairer tax reform”, necessary since “the people responsible for the crisis and not its victims should pay the cost of the crisis” (report, 2014). From then on, the activists legitimised the idea of redistributing wealth from the most financially endowed actors to the most vulnerable, centring it as a legitimate principle of a democratic political economy. Condemning the austerity measures, Liège activists repeatedly exhorted decision-makers to break away from fiscal consolidation:

[...] our objective is to ask the government to give up austerity policies and international treaties or draft treaties that aggravate the debt and deepen the crisis and gender inequalities (European Fiscal Compact, Transatlantic Partnership [...]). (Liège group, report, 2014)

[...] we must show the population and the public authorities that credible solutions exist to radically reduce the debt burden and break with austerity policies. (Liège group, report, 2017)

The French groups similarly called for rejecting the European Fiscal Compact, while Spanish activists criticised the 2011 constitutional amendment that enshrined the budgetary golden rule in the Spanish constitution. As can be seen in the following table, the Spanish groups most often referred to the need to disobey austerity (that is European treaties and the Spanish constitution and laws), as Spain agreed to a much higher level of budgetary constraint than France or Belgium.

Beyond the call for the restoration of public sovereignty and the social mission of public authorities, the activists insisted on the need to strengthen citizens’ prerogatives. My analysis of the framing of the citizen-auditors allows me to link several demands identified in the analysis of the anti-austerity movements: demands for social justice and the will to regenerate democracy. This is precisely the activists’ imaginary that I wish to highlight in this article.

From the activists’ point of view, elected officials no longer meet citizen expectations on their own. Citizens should be more widely involved through citizen debt audits. Therefore, they argue for greater public transparency and propose to broaden the political prerogatives of citizens. Beyond being merely voters, they encourage citizens to monitor the practices of powerholders to ensure a fairer social redistribution of wealth:

We want a tool that allows the population to be active in defining a public health system that favours universality (Madrid-Region group, press note, 2016)

We would like to have a permanent citizen audit commission, financed by the city, which would bring together people from social movements, in particular [the Liège citizen audit group], civil servants and ordinary citizens (Interview with a Belgian activist, 13 December 2018)

The common point of the citizen-auditors is to advocate for the implementation of citizen audits. In concrete terms, this consists of forming groups of citizens whose task is, by interacting with elected representatives and civil servants, to investigate and to monitor the allocation of public money. They do so by compiling a set of administrative documents (e.g., budgets, loan contracts) and evaluating if public spending complies with the legal framework and their social standards. It is as much about identifying the possible misappropriation of funds and corrupt practices as it is about verifying that public money is spent legitimately and “democratically” (in accordance with the population’s social needs).

Beyond this common demand, not all groups advocated for the same form of citizen audit or the same relationship to public authorities. The French groups and the Madrid-Region group wanted to see citizen groups empowered to investigate various activities (reminiscent of John Dewey’s publics; Dewey, 1927), questioning decision-makers based on documented surveys. The Madrid-City, Catalonia and Liège groups advocated setting up, within institutions, citizen debt audit commissions made up of ordinary citizens, representatives of social movements, and elected representatives.

As explained in the quotes above, the Liège activists advocated for a “permanent citizen audit commission”, half of which would be made up of citizens chosen by lot, a quarter of representatives of public interest associations and a quarter of municipal officials. This commission would be responsible for “controlling the city’s finances” (report, 2017) although the group did not specify the decision-making or advisory scope of this control. Such control would be quite unprecedented in the scope of the group’s prerogatives insofar as it would apply to all the city’s financial decisions. Moreover, the group wished to mix deliberative democracy, understood in its classic sense (by sortition), and associative democracy (inviting certain associations to participate in the citizen audit).

Table 3: Proposed solutions in economic policies

Group	Establishment of a public bank	Formulation of public/private collision	Tax reforms	Budgetary reforms
Nîmes	“Escompte public” system	Renegotiating structured loan contracts / Requiring banks to pay the exit fee for toxic loans	Control of tax evasion	No
Grenoble	“Escompte public” system	Renegotiating structured loan contracts / Requiring banks to pay the exit fee for toxic loans	More progressive taxes + control of tax evasion + taxation of financial and speculative transactions	Derogation from European Fiscal Compact
Catalonia	Nationalisation of private banks	“Reducing dependence on financial markets” and creditors (including the Spanish state)	Wealth tax, inheritance tax + environmental taxation and a nuclear energy tax + control of tax evasion	Derogation from Article 135 of the Spanish Constitution and several national austerity laws
Madrid-Region	No	“De-privatising public resources and services”	More progressive taxes + control of tax evasion	Derogation from Article 135 of the Spanish Constitution and several national austerity laws
Madrid-City	No	“Freeing ourselves from the bondage of debt and austerity”	No	Derogation from Article 135 of the Spanish Constitution and several national austerity laws
Liège	Nationalisation of private banks	“Imposing new political and financial choices on creditors” / “putting the banks in their place”	Wealth tax + “Fairer tax reform”	Derogation from European Fiscal Compact and Transatlantic Partnership

The Madrid-City and Catalonia groups proposed another process. For them, the whole citizen debt audit process, if supported by the political-administrative authorities, consisted of organising a set of discussions, led by a technical team of experts (municipal/regional civil servants, academics, and representatives of social movement organisations), to define, together with the citizens voluntarily participating in the process, the criteria for identifying illegitimate debt. In the imagination of the militants this type of debt should be considered harmful as it does not meet the interest imperatives of the social majority of the population. Subsequently, according to the guidelines of an executive committee—made up of municipal/regional representatives, the technical team and those representing the spaces of territorial participation—the technical team would produce a set of intermediate reports, to which the citizens, through regional outposts, would react, contest, ask for clarifications and raise points not addressed in these reports.

Based on the exchanges and interactions between citizens and the technical team, the latter would draw up a final report, resulting in a set of recommendations for restructuring and requesting the cancellation of the part of the public debt considered to be illegitimate. However, there was a difference between the two Spanish groups. In Madrid-City, the activists demanded that the citizen audit, conceived as a procedure of participatory democracy, be followed by a direct democracy mechanism (the referendum), which was not envisioned in Catalonia.

Table 4: Proposed solutions for citizen control

Group	Informal oversight	Institutionalised & binding oversight	Types of democratic interactions inside institutional debt audit	Referenda
Nîmes	X			
Grenoble	X			
Catalonia		X	Participative & associative democracies	
Madrid-Region	X			
Madrid-City		X	Participative; associative & direct democracies	X
Liège		X	Deliberative & associative democracies	

Thus, some activists were more autonomous towards institutions, while others were more confident in bringing citizen audits into institutions to make citizen monitoring processes that are more or less legally binding.

Regardless of their reasoning (e.g., autonomous groups of citizens working informally with elected officials who are morally committed to public discussions or binding and institutionalised mechanisms of interactive policymaking), citizen debt audit groups contribute to shed light on a specific political imaginary. Their goal was to create forms of interaction with elected officials at the local level rather than focusing on the national or federal level. They thus considered these territorial scales of power as countering national political elites, who were more often assimilated with the oligarchy.

But this imaginary is shared more broadly. The slogans in the Spanish Occupy or 15-M movement, such as “No nos representan” or “A real democracy now”, did not refer to the end of representative democracy but rather to the democratisation of representative institutions. Why else would Gerbaudo (2017), in his in-depth study, speak of a “reassertion of control over the institutions of the state” and Della Porta (2015) discuss forms of citizen control over political institutions?

In sum, all citizen audit groups advocated for forms of citizen monitoring over political decisions, both their form (are they sufficiently justified and are public documents accessible to study the justifications for the decisions taken) and their substance (do they conform to the state’s mission of social protection of the citizenry). Thus, citizen audit activists, like some anti-austerity activists more broadly, demanded the return of the social state, conditional on democratic oversight.

Discussion and conclusions

This article provided an in-depth analysis of how anti-austerity activists problematised the debt crisis and the reactions of public authorities in Spain, Belgium, and France. The aim was to reveal the commonalities and differences in their political imaginary. This was conceptualized as the defence of a social state under citizen monitoring, or social democracy.

Despite this shared imaginary, I have noted variations between the citizen audit groups, first in the diagnostic framing. French activists were mostly critical of the state for its responsibility in the crisis, as

local authorities were powerless and complicit in implementing austerity measures. For Spanish and Belgian activists, the regions were responsible for the problematic local financial situation.

All activist groups pleaded for more interventionism on the part of public authorities. If citizen-auditors were so inclined to criticise government interventions, it is because they were particularly attached to such actions and demanded that state and local authorities intervene in specific ways. Spanish activists critiqued the endemic corruption of political institutions and the low level of popular sovereignty, while French and Belgian activists spoke more about the inability of public authorities to ensure the general or social interest of the population.

Moreover, in terms of proposals, activists were very committed to social and fiscal justice which they believed must be fostered by public authorities. Depending on the local and national context, the demands differ: waving austerity measures, creating a public bank, or fiscal reforms.

As I have shown, activists call for the return of the social state, but under citizen control. It is on the topic of which form of control that I have observed the greatest variations between activist groups. I can refer to the subtypes that I have analysed within the imaginary highlighted in this article. In the French groups and in the Madrid-Region one, activists pleaded informal citizen control, putting pressure on the elected representatives, but without a formally binding framework. Social pressure from citizens would force decision-makers to be responsive. For the other three groups, citizen control must be institutionalised, and the responsiveness of decision-makers made binding.

This article could be criticised for its focus on specific groups rather than being based on a survey with a large sample. Future analyses, whether they be qualitative or quantitative, will perhaps make it possible to measure the representativeness of the imaginary of the state and of democracy that has been highlighted here. Moreover, several elements of this imaginary can be found in the dynamics of the movements that have followed citizen audits. For instance, analyses of the Yellow Vests movement in France highlight that the protesters combined criticisms of social injustice, strong demands for government intervention, and the need to control the actions of elected officials by “renewing representation” (Bedock et al., 2020).

Thus, it appears as though the combination of citizens’ demands for a more social state and the call for a greater involvement of citizens in the

steering of the social mission of the state is not limited to anti-austerity movements. In the current context, in which budgetary constraints have been temporarily loosened, public authorities will have to take this into consideration if they aim to produce acceptable decisions.

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Abstract

This article contributes to the analysis of counter-discourses on austerity concerning the European debt crisis of the 2010s. Though numerous studies have considered anti-austerity movements, this original article is based upon a frame analysis of citizen debt audit groups in France, Spain, and Belgium, which were part of the anti-austerity mobilisations but have mostly been ignored in the relevant scholarship. I explore the political imaginary of activists, firstly showing how they define the problematic situation of the debt crisis, signaling the responsibility of public authorities, especially local actors. Secondly, I highlight their imaginary of the role to be followed by the state in such crisis management. They advocate for the redeployment of the social state in the context of the economic crisis. However, this demand for a social state is not unconditional but underpinned by a sincere desire to grant citizens oversight of the social mission of public authorities. Therefore, I refer to the concept of social democracy. As my contribution is comparative, exploring this political imaginary of the democratic state's role varies according to national and local political contexts.

Résumé : Réinterpréter la crise de la dette publique : le projet d'un retour conditionné de l'Etat social

L'objectif de cet article est de contribuer à l'analyse des contre-discours sur l'austérité, dans le contexte de la crise de la dette européenne, au tournant des années 2010. Certes, la littérature sur les mouvements anti-austéritaires est bien fournie. Toutefois, on apporte ici une contribution originale, en partant d'une méthode qualitative d'analyse des cadres des collectifs d'audit citoyen de la dette en France, en Espagne et en Belgique, qui ont fait partie des mobilisations anti-austérité, mais qui ont été peu étudiés. Je pars de ces cas très spécifiques pour gagner en profondeur analytique. Je souhaite explorer l'imaginaire politique des militants, en montrant d'abord comment ils définissent la situation problématique de la crise de la dette, en pointant la responsabilité des pouvoirs publics, notamment depuis le point de vue local. Ensuite, je mets en valeur le fait qu'ils revendiquent un imaginaire particulier de la crise et du rôle que doit jouer l'État dans la gestion de la crise. S'ils légitiment le redéploiement de l'État social, cette demande d'État social ne s'opère pas de manière inconditionnelle, puisqu'il s'agit d'associer les citoyens à la surveillance de cette mission sociale des pouvoirs publics. En cela, ils défendent une forme de démocratie sociale. De plus, ma contribution est comparative, permettant de voir en quoi cet imaginaire du rôle l'État en démocratie peut être modulé en fonction des contextes politiques nationaux et locaux.