Mobilizing 'the Alternativist': Exploring the management of subjectivity in a radical political party

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abstract

Recently, a new wave of predominantly left-wing political parties has emerged across Europe. These parties seek to challenge the hegemony of dominant discourses by introducing novel procedures for active participation, democratic deliberation, and bottom-up decision-making. One particle in this wave is *The Alternative*, a newly elected party in Denmark. In keeping with the spirit of bottom-up decision-making, The Alternative's entire political program has been developed through a series of publicly accessible workshops. Initially, this highly inclusive approach provided The Alternative with important momentum, but made it equally difficult for the party to particularize its political project without simultaneously losing support. The Alternative thus needed to find ways of maintaining a universal appeal while going through a process of particularization. In this paper, I will explore how this 'problem of particularization' is resolved (or at least postponed) within The Alternative through the management of subjectivity. Drawing on both documents and interviews, I argue that the party sustains its universal appeal through the ongoing mobilization of a collective subject called 'A New We' and an individual subject called 'the Alternativist'. While the former is described as a boundless collective open to anyone, the latter is characterized as a person who is inclusive, attentive, open-minded, curious, and selfless – but also incapable of demarcating the party in terms of political representation. Ultimately, this allows The Alternative's project to grow particular without losing its universal appeal.

Introduction

> When the hope for something else and better perishes, the alternative dies with it [...]. However, belief is necessarily accompanied by doubt. Without doubt belief turns into conviction and blindness. Conversely, without belief doubts very easily

> develop into cynicism and dejection. The alternative thinker, writer, speaker and practitioner is one who is full of faith but far from faithful. (Schreven et al., 2008: 136)

With the rise of political parties like Podemos in Spain, Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, and The Alternative in Denmark, a new wave of party politics is currently sweeping across Europe. Inspired by the global uprisings of 2011-2012 (Mason, 2013), these parties seek to bridge the widening gap between 'the people' and parliament by introducing novel procedures for active participation, democratic deliberation, and bottom-up decision-making. At least four features characterize the parties in this wave. First, they all crystallized out of movement-like organizations. Secondly, they all claim to be 'transversal' – that is, they claim to transcend traditional political frontiers and seek to mobilize support from across the political spectrum. Thirdly, they all more or less explicitly position themselves in opposition to the political establishment ('La Casta') and the 'old political culture'. Finally, they all experiment with some kind of bottom-up approach to policymaking (Husted, 2017a; Iglesias, 2015; Tronconi, 2016).

Consequently, the political objectives of these parties are rarely grounded in any pre-defined set of demands but are usually much more universal and abstract. As argued by Ferrero (2014: n.p.): 'It is the social movements – the less institutionalised, more open and eclectic groups – that dictate the political orientation of the parties'. In fact, what initially united these parties was little more than a common opposition to the hegemony of dominant discourses, such as neoliberalism and patriarchy, and the worn-out practices of the political establishment (Tormey, 2015). In this sense, they could be described as radical (Newman, 2007), counter-hegemonic (Sullivan et al., 2011), or even populist (Laclau, 2005a).

However, what makes this wave of parties truly novel is not so much its counter-hegemonic 'logic of articulation' and populist propensities (Laclau, 2005b: 33). The novelty rests with the process through which these parties entered parliament. Traditionally, when political projects emerge and become popular, they undergo a process of universalization, in which a *particular* struggle is de-contextualized and turned into a *universal* struggle, capable of representing a chain of equivalent identities (Laclau, 2001). One only needs to think of the detachment of the social democratic project from the working class struggle to picture this process. However, the aforementioned parties seem to go through the exact opposite process: Instead of universalizing a particular struggle, they particularize a universal struggle by seeking to institutionalize radical politics through the parliament. This is indeed not an easy task, as the entry into parliament entails adding positive content to an otherwise negative identity. Hence, to prevent their radical identity from collapsing, and to prevent a

potential loss of support, these parties need to employ a series of organizational coping strategies that I will refer to as 'management technologies'.

In this paper, I will explore the management technology of subjectification in the case of *The Alternative*, a recently elected party in Denmark. Through an analysis of documents and interviews, I set out to examine the relationship between the party's managerial discourse, as articulated by the political leadership, and ordinary members' identification with those subject positions that are produced by this discourse. In what follows, I argue that what keeps The Alternative's radical identity from collapsing is the ongoing mobilization of a collective subject called 'A New We' and an individual subject referred to as 'the Alternativist'. While the collective subject is rhetorically framed as a boundless entity that is open to anyone, the individual subject is characterized as inclusive, attentive, open-minded, curious and selfless, which (besides being generally attractive characteristics) deprive the subject of its ability to particularize and demarcate the party in terms of political representation. Ultimately, this allows the actual policies of the party to grow particular, without The Alternative losing its universal appeal.

Radical politics and the question of identity

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'radical' holds at least two meanings. One is related to the word 'root' (from the Latin word *radix*), which signifies something fundamental or essential. Another interpretation, however, proposes that being radical means to be independent of or to depart from what is considered mainstream or traditional. In that sense, being radical is not so much about getting to the root of something but about 'rooting out' (Pugh, 2009: 2). In other words, being radical means to position oneself outside established norms and institutions. It is this latter conception that guides the present paper. Throughout the paper, the word 'radical' is thus not used in any essentialist way as denoting something truly revolutionary but as an identity marker invoked by The Alternative as a way of positioning *itself* outside established norms and institutions. One example is the party's founding document, which states that The Alternative 'has the courage to imagine a radically different future' (The Alternative, 2013b: 1). Another example is the political program, in which the need for 'radical solutions', 'radical reforms', and 'radical transitions' are repeatedly expressed (The Alternative, 2014a). But what, then, does this kind of positioning mean for a political party that aspires to enter parliament?

According to Newman (2007), radical politics today should be counter-hegemonic, in the sense of promoting universal ideals that run counter to

dominant discourses, such as neoliberalism and patriarchy. In terms of identity formation, this essentially means that radical politics must be based on negativity. As Laclau (2006: 652) notes, it is the '*negative* feature' that unites radical political projects. This, however, does not mean that there is nothing constructive or meaningful about radical politics. Instead, it implies that the defining feature of radical politics, rather than something positive, is a common opposition to the provisional hegemony of established 'positives' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 93). Accordingly, radical politics does not imply subjection to any one dominant discourse. On the contrary, the job for radical politics is to offer de-subjection from hegemonic discourses as a way of enacting and organizing collective resistance (Newman, 2007).

This conception of radical politics – as politics based on negativity – has significant consequences for the identity of organizations that, like The Alternative, pride themselves on being radical. Most importantly, it means that such organizations have to resist continuously any process of particularization, as this implies a move towards positivity, meaning institutionalization (Lok and Willmott, 2014). The reason for this is best illustrated by Laclau's (1996) conceptualization of 'the universal' and 'the particular' as two distinct levels of the political that, on the one hand, are mutually constitutive and, on the other hand, fundamentally unbridgeable. While *particular* identities are characterized as being differential, in the sense that they can be clearly separated from other particular identities, *universal* identities are identities that have surrendered some of what initially made them particular in order to represent a chain of equivalent demands (Laclau, 2005a). Those demands that enter the chain are equivalent, only because none of them are prioritized over the others. Hence, the task of representing an equivalential chain can only be carried out by an identity, which itself lacks positive content (Laclau, 2001).

The universal is thus a more or less empty place occupied by a so-called 'empty signifier'. According to Laclau (1994), an empty signifier is a signifier that lacks a signified. Instead of pointing to something positive within a system of signification (a difference), the empty signifier points to the very limits of the system: A 'radical otherness'. As such, what is represented by an empty signifier is nothing but the pure negation of that which is excluded from the system itself. To emphasize this point, Laclau (1994: 170) refers to empty signifiers as 'signifiers of the pure cancellation of all difference', which means that the particularistic/differential relationship between the various elements in the equivalential chain is substituted for a universal relationship based on negativity.

Now, if we accept Laclau's (2005a) and Newman's (2007) assertion that radical politics requires the production of empty signifiers to represent a host of

equivalent demands, new light is immediately thrown on radical political parties' attempts to enter parliament. Why? Because the entry into parliament necessarily entails a particularization of the political project, which is caused by the need to respond to the logic of the established system. With every bill passed and every proposal advanced, particular meaning is assigned to an otherwise universal identity. Accordingly, there is often a certain conservatism embedded in radical political projects, such as the Occupy movement, as the move from universality towards particularity entails a collapse of the negative identity, which then implicitly strips the movement of its ability to provide radical critique of that which it claims to exclude (Laclau, 1996). The logical conclusion seems to be that radical political parties either remain outside the realm of parliamentary politics or suffer particularization at the altar of realpolitik.

Nonetheless, this problem seemed to offer little obstruction for The Alternative in its efforts to enter parliament. In the national elections in June 2015, the party earned almost 5 percent of the votes and entered the Danish parliament with nine seats. After the election, support for The Alternative in terms of memberships and opinion polls has continued to grow. This leads us to this paper's research questions: *How does the management technology of subjectification allow radical political parties, such as The Alternative, to maintain a universal appeal when going through a process of particularization? And what implications does this have for the individual members' room for manoeuvre within The Alternative as a political organization?* To answer these questions, the paper proceeds to consider the notion of subjectification in organization studies.

Subjectification in organizations

According to Foucault (1982), subjectification refers to the process by which an individual is transformed into a subject. As such, the notion of the subject should here be understood as something fundamentally different from, yet interrelated with, the individual: While the latter refers to human beings of flesh and bones, the former refers to a position within language that is contingently and provisionally occupied by the individual (Foucault, 2000). The subject is thus always a subject of language, and subjectivity should accordingly be understood as a process rather than a finalized achievement (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994).

Building on this conception, Foucault (1982: 781) argues that the notion of the subject holds two meanings: 'Subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge'. Both these meanings, Foucault argues, 'suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to'. Accordingly, subjectification is a two-way process, carried out

in concert by the individual and its other. As Butler (1995) notes, becoming a subject depends equally on mastery and submission, meaning that subjectification strongly depends on the individual continuously performing its own subjectivity. Hence, individuals are far from deprived of agency in relation to the construction of their own subjectivity, even though this tends to be a common interpretation of the Foucaultian perspective in organization studies (Newton, 1998; Reed, 2000).

Identity work and overdetermination

The majority of subjectification studies in organizational research have focused on subjectification as an indirect way of controlling individuals by encouraging specific conceptions of selfhood within the organization. For instance, Bergström and Knights (2006) explore how subjectification in recruitment processes can be a powerful tool for aligning potential employees with the culture of the organization. An important point here is, however, that subjectification in these processes depends on the candidate's acceptance of the managerial discourse, which leads the authors to conclude that subjectification is 'a complex condition and consequence of the mutually interdependent relations of agency and discourse, not a determinant of either' (Bergström and Knights, 2006: 370). Such observations about the relationship between agency and discourse have fostered a wide range of publications that investigate different enactments of 'identity work', which is often interpreted as a particular mode of resistance (Commisso, 2006; Laine and Vaara, 2007; Whitehead, 1998). In these cases, identity work 'refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Elaborating on this, Watson (2008: 130) argues:

> Individuals have to work 'with the grain' of existing and dominant discourses and subjectivities but, as they do this, they can exploit the variety of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, discourses and subjectivities in order to craft a self which is, to an extent, 'their own'. Individuals will, of course, vary in the extent to which they are relatively active or passive in these matters.

Translating these observations about identity work into Laclauian terminology, one could argue that what provides individuals with agency in terms of their own identity construction is what Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 95) call the 'impossibility of society'. With this, Laclau and Mouffe refer to the anti-essentialist idea that no single discourse is able to fully determine something's or someone's identity. All meaningful elements are always already overdetermined by numerous competing language games (Wittgenstein, 2009). For instance, what it means to be an academic cannot be fully represented by any one discourse. Instead, an

excess of meaning always (over)determines 'the academic' as a subject. As argued by Holmer-Nadesan (1996), this discursive overdetermination is then exactly what provides the individual with space of action in an organizational setting. It is precisely the discourse's inability to fully determine the identity of any given element that marks the individual's freedom. In other words, the notion of overdetermination provides the very precondition for identity work.

As we shall see, overdetermination plays an important role in The Alternative. This is the case, not just because it offers ordinary members the freedom to craft 'their own' sense of self, but because the party's managerial discourse implicitly embraces and accentuates the ambiguity that follows from overdetermination. By encouraging members to be highly inclusive, open-minded, attentive, curious and selfless, they turn ambiguity and indeterminacy into virtues to live by. Through 'the Alternativist', the party's political leadership thus manages to produce a subject that lacks the ability and desire to fully determine anything, let alone the party itself. This ultimately allows The Alternative to move from universality towards particularity, without abandoning its universal appeal, since the very meaning of The Alternative remains inherently ambiguous.

Research design

The case of The Alternative

On November 27, 2013, the former minister of culture in Denmark, Uffe Elbæk, and his colleague, Josephine Fock, summoned the press to announce the birth of a new social movement and political party called The Alternative. The main purpose of The Alternative, they proclaimed, was to work towards a sustainable transition and a so-called 'new political culture' in which edifying dialogue would replace tactics and spin. However, besides a manifesto and six core values, The Alternative had no political program (The Alternative, 2016). This radical emptiness allowed an incredibly wide range of people to read their own personal preferences into The Alternative. In fact, the very idea of articulating an alternative to the current state of affairs initially seemed to mobilize anyone who felt a need for radical change.[1] Consider, for instance, the following passage from the party's manifesto:

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1   A survey conducted by The Alternative in 2014 suggested that the majority of the party's members (57.3%) had not previously been members of political parties. That said, three quarters of the members previously voted for center-left parties, with the majority (28.8%) voting for the far-left party, The Red-Green Alliance.

> The Alternative is a political idea. About personal freedom, social dignity, and living, sustainable communities. A hope. A dream. A yearning. For meaning, sense and compassionate relationships. The Alternative is an answer to what is happening in the world today. All around us. With us. The Alternative is a shout out. Against cynicism, lack of generosity and the ticking off which prevails in our society [...]. The Alternative is for you. Who can tell that something has been set in motion. Who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old. Another way of looking at democracy, growth, work, responsibility and quality of life. That is The Alternative. (The Alternative 2013a)

Such universal appeals initially provided The Alternative with important momentum, but made it equally difficult for the party to particularize its political project without simultaneously losing support. However, since The Alternative was launched only 18 months before the national elections, the party urgently needed a political program. Inspired by the open-source community, The Alternative thus embarked on a series of public workshops called 'political laboratories'. Through these workshops, more than 700 people participated in a highly inclusive bottom-up process that culminated with the publication of The Alternative's first political program, which was presented at the party's first annual meeting in late spring 2014 (The Alternative, 2014a).

On June 18, 2015, The Alternative ran for parliament. Thanks to a well-crafted campaign and hundreds of devoted volunteers, the party earned almost 5 percent of the votes, which allowed it to enter the Danish parliament with nine seats. Since then, The Alternative has continued to develop the political program, while also engaging in day-to-day politics. For instance, shortly after its official entry into parliament, The Alternative helped pass a bill (sponsored by the right-wing government) that grants tax deductions to people who renovate their homes in sustainable ways. This process of particularization, in which a political movement based on universal opposition to the establishment transforms into a political party with a detailed program, is what this paper sets out to explore.

Methodological considerations

Empirically, the first two parts of the following analysis are based on a detailed reading of nearly 200 official documents written by The Alternative's political leadership during a period of 26 months from August 2013 to October 2015. This period was chosen because it covers the process in which The Alternative developed from a loosely defined movement and into a particularly well-defined political party. Chronologically, the empirical framework begins with the party's founding document and ends with a transcript of The Alternative's political

spokesperson's opening speech in parliament, which was later published by a Danish newspaper.[2]

Those documents that ended up as part of the paper's empirical framework were chosen by reading through the primary bulk of The Alternative's external communication, such as newspaper articles, blog posts, and official documents. In total, these documents amounted to well over 1,000 pages. These pages were then subjected to thorough interpretation and coding so that those documents that did not make reference to collective or individual subjectivity were excluded. However, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue, subjectivity is not always defined through direct references to the subject in question. Subjectivity might likewise be produced through descriptions of the subject's environment, its values, or its constitutive Other. Accordingly, documents that produced such accounts were likewise included.

Analytically, discourse theory is concerned with exploring how discursive elements are tied together in systems of meaningful practices and how these systems then shape the identities of subjects and objects (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Adopting that analytical ambition, I set out to explore what meaningful practices shape 'the Alternativist' and how those practices are negotiated and adopted by members of The Alternative. Inspired by Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) account of the Projective City's great man, I analyzed the documents by making a list of characteristics that The Alternative's political leadership associated with 'the Alternativist'. In doing so, I quickly realized that some practices, such as the act of building bridges (rather than walls) and listening (rather than talking), were more central than others. These characteristics were then shortlisted and later included in the first two parts of the analysis.

The third part of the analysis is based on 34 semi-structured interviews with different members of The Alternative. Among these respondents, seven were members of parliament or candidates in the 2015 national election, eight were board members or employees at the political secretariat, and 19 where ordinary members. The quotes used in the final part of the analysis all belong to members of the latter category. Most respondents were recruited for the study through the method of 'snowballing', where the researcher lets one respondent lead him/her to the next. This method allows the researcher to engage with multiple perspectives on the same problem, without necessarily trying to construct a fully representative account (Ekman, 2015). In order to probe the respondents'

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2   Documents written in Danish and all the interviews have been translated to English by the author. All translated interview quotes have been approved by the respondents.

identification with 'the Alternativist', I asked them different questions that revolved around their perception of The Alternative as an organization and themselves as members of that organization. This entailed asking them very basic questions, such as: *What characterizes an Alternativist?*, but also more complicated questions, such as: *Imagine you had to write an entry about The Alternative in a dictionary, how would it begin?* This allowed me to hone in on the different enactments of identity work that exist within The Alternative.

Like the documents, the interviews were coded and analyzed by first compiling all explicit references to 'the Alternativists' in one single document. Next, I added more implicit references as well as more general descriptions of The Alternative's organizational culture. From these coding exercises, several interesting themes quickly emerged. For instance, the notion of open-mindedness figured in almost all interviews: Being an 'Alternativist' is a matter of being open-minded. Similarly, the theme of inclusivity was more or less omnipresent: Anyone can be an Alternativist, as long as they believe in the need for radical change. These themes were then shortlisted and turned into a coherent argument. Other themes were excluded from the analysis. One example is that of the party's six core values (empathy, generosity, humility, transparency, courage, and humor). The main reason for excluding this theme is that it would extent the argument beyond the scope of this paper (see Husted, 2018). Even though statements regarding the values do not figure explicitly in the forthcoming analysis, they nonetheless helped shape the argument that is conveyed throughout the rest of the paper.

Analysis: Managing subjectivity in The Alternative

The paper's findings are divided into three sections. While the first section delineates The Alternatives' attempts to mobilize support by defining a collective subject called 'A New We', the second section explores the party's attempts to subjectify members through the (often implicit) articulation of an individual subject called 'the Alternativist'. The third section delves into the members' own identification with both the collective and the individual subject positions.

Constituting 'A New We'

Uzma Ahmed, one of The Alternative's candidates, initially coined the term 'A New We' as a way of describing her own stance on integration policy. Later, this stance was adopted by The Alternative, and 'A New We' is now used in the title of the party's official policy document on integration (The Alternative, 2015b). Even though the notion of 'A New We' primarily belongs to the areas of integration and immigration, the meaning associated with this collective subject has

significant implications for the rest of The Alternative's activities. This is the case because the Alternative is founded on the idea of prefigurative politics, which means that the party seeks to reflect, at an organizational level, those changes that it is advocating at a societal level (Maeckelbergh, 2011). As stated in the party's founding document:

> The Alternative must be an example of the societal changes that we wish to see happening. Hence, it is important that The Alternative becomes a laboratory for the development of new organizational forms, managerial styles, decision-making processes, and transparent communication. (The Alternative, 2013b: 5)

Another example of prefiguration within the Alternative is the party's six 'debate principles', which are guidelines meant to aid party members when discussing politics. These principles include six almost Habermasian statements, such as 'we will listen more than we speak' and 'we will emphasize the core set of values that guide our arguments' (The Alternative, 2013c). However, besides being helpful guidelines in a political debate, these principles likewise prefigure the society that The Alternative is advocating, as they reflect the vision of a 'new political culture' in which spin and tactics are replaced by more productive and open-minded dialogue.

Just like the debate principles, the notion of 'A New We' is not only the name of a political vision for future integration policies but could also be interpreted as an internal guideline for the construction of The Alternative as a collective subject. The main idea behind 'A New We' is to construct a new social identity that is defined in terms of 'dialogue rather than power' and that epitomizes everyone irrespective of race and beliefs (The Alternative, 2014b). It is an outcry against the dominant discourse on integration, where being Danish is something that is defined in terms of exclusion rather than inclusion. As argued by Uzma Ahmed in an article in which she for the first time introduces the notion of 'A New We':

> 'We', as in the Danes, are defined on the basis of a desire to exclude those who are not Danish enough. And those who are not part of the 'we' must prove that they work hard to show that they are good enough. (The Alternative, 2014c)

Like many other initiatives within The Alternative, the notion of 'A New We' is based on negativity and opposition. Again, this does not mean that it lacks a positive sound or that it is inherently reactionary, but that the meaning of 'A New We' is intimately tied to its constitutive outside (Laclau, 1994). The discourse of 'A New We' is, first and foremost, a reaction to the hegemonic discourse on integration and the exclusionary dynamics that follow from it. This oppositional stance is further emphasized towards the end of the above-mentioned article, where Ahmed reacts to a series of events in Denmark that she interprets as manifestations of the dominant discourse of exclusion:

> This summer's strikes against our common 'we' has made it clear to me that the only way to move on is to define a new 'we'. This is a new we that provides us with the freedom and space to be curious and to picture ourselves in a new way. But let us start by accepting that what has been is no longer viable. I look forward to uniting heart-to-heart in the Alternative. (The Alternative, 2014c).

Throughout this article, the new 'we' is never defined in any positive terms. Instead, the dominant discourse of exclusion is continuously invoked as the constitutive outside of 'A New We'. This is a crucial point to keep in mind throughout the analysis. The construction of The Alternative's collective subject as the negative image of the discourse of *ex*clusion inevitably positions the notion of 'A New We' within a discourse of *in*clusion. At least, it means that no one can be excluded from the collective *a priori*. Other leading members, such as the party's founder, Uffe Elbæk, frequently articulates this point. For instance, in a New Year's speech, recorded and broadcast by a Danish newspaper, Elbæk stresses the importance of abandoning the practices of exclusion, which allegedly has made people incapable of listening to one another:

> We need to listen to each other; we need to see each other; we need to talk about what is important right now, and we need to make sure that there is room for everyone in the future that starts tomorrow […]. I hope that we wake up from the idea that security means building walls. No, instead of building walls, we need to need to build bridges. We need to build bridges between each other, also in relation to politics. (The Alternative, 2015c)

The argument about building bridges, not walls, is likewise interesting. This is the case because the metaphor of 'the bridge' seems to recur in much of The Alternative's external communication (e.g. The Alternative, 2014d). In many ways, the guiding idea behind the metaphor is the same that drives the notion of 'A New We': Instead of basing communities on a discourse of exclusion, as represented by the metaphor of walls, we need to redirect our thinking towards a discourse of inclusion. This is further explicated by the party's desire to move away from the traditional political rhetoric of 'us and them' and towards a more embracing rhetoric of 'us and us'.

The notion of 'A New We', which could be interpreted as an organizational ideal for The Alternative, can thus be described as a fully inclusive community that cannot be demarcated *a priori*. Through 'A New We', The Alternative is implicitly described as an organization that has no immediate boundaries, and there seems to be no obvious frontier that decides who is allowed to join the party and who is not. As stated in the party's manifesto, quoted above, The Alternative is for anyone who feels that something is about to change. Being part of The Alternative is thus not so much a question of political conviction as it is a question of wanting to achieve social change (The Alternative, 2014b). As

explained by two leading candidates in a somewhat polemic piece entitled 'Who votes for the Alternative?':

> When someone mentions The Alternative, most people think of Uffe Elbæk – and then of dyscalculic vegetarians in Jesus sandals who sit in circles and sing songs about wind energy and incense sticks. But we are a complete palette of Danes [...]. Impossible to pigeonhole on a political red/blue spectrum – that is us.

Figure 1: The Alternative's local office in downtown Copenhagen. On the left, a city limit sign saying #ANewWe

And they continue:

> We don't care who you previously voted for. Just feel and think whether you also want to participate in making Denmark and the world a slightly more fantastic place – for more people. You are welcome. (The Alternative, 2015d)

This conception of The Alternative as a party that is impossible to pigeonhole and thus capable of representing almost any oppositional identity is likewise reflected by the individual members. Across the 34 interviews conducted for this study, the vast majority of respondents answered that 'everyone' is welcome to join the party as long as they are open-minded and as long as they believe that the established system is broken and needs fixing. As one respondent put it:

> We don't need to agree on everything. As long as you realize that the current system doesn't work, and as long as you are willing to do something about it, then I guess that you're an Alternativist. (Respondent #1).

This statement, which quite clearly reflects the most commonly held view amongst members of The Alternative, leads us to the second part of this paper's analysis. Having established the basic conception of the party, the analysis now turns to the construction of 'the Alternativist' as an individual subject. As we shall see, the notion of 'the Alternativist' is closely related to the collective subject of 'A New We': While the party itself is portrayed as a boundless entity, the notion of 'the Alternativist' is similarly constructed as a subject that embraces the logic of inclusion and refrains from marginalizing particular identities within the party.

Mobilizing 'the Alternativist'

In a recently published newspaper article, Uffe Elbæk describes the pressing need for a so-called 'friendly revolution', which is as much a revolution of the mind as it is a societal revolution. The article could be read as a call-to-action for supporters of The Alternative, and it is structured around 25 propositions that are meant to pave the way for the revolution. Each proposition corresponds to a letter in the Danish alphabet. Proposition 24, which corresponds to the Danish letter Ø, is entitled 'Øer' (islands, in English) and it states:

> Islands and bridges are connected. That's how it is in Denmark. But this is also the case in relation to people. Luckily, we are pretty good at building bridges in this country. However, in the world, but also at home, people are increasingly becoming preoccupied with building walls. Exercise your capacity for building bridges. This is what the future needs, now more than ever. (The Alternative, 2015e)

This proposition is interesting because it seeks to forge a connection between the previous discussion of 'A New We' and the idea of 'the Alternativist' as an individual subject. First, an argument is made about the necessity of building bridges between people of different origins and convictions. Second, an appeal is made to the reader about exercising his or her own capacity for building bridges. This is important because the idea of prioritizing bridge-building over wall-building is central to the characteristics of 'the Alternativist'. Throughout the party's external communication, this political subject is sought mobilized by appealing to its central characteristics and by implicitly linking these characteristics to the conception of The Alternative as an organization. The simultaneous mobilization of the collective and the individual subject is thus performed by framing the latter as a product of the former, in the sense that the one cannot be separated from the other. In that way, the political leadership avoids creating unwanted tensions and inconsistencies between the two subject positions, which seems to be an otherwise frequent consequence of the

simultaneous mobilization of individual and collective subjectivities (e.g. Knights and McCabe, 2003).

That being said, one particular tension remains: While 'the Alternativist' is framed as anyone who thinks the system is broken and believes in the need for change, 'A New We' likewise includes people who do not necessarily think so. This tension is resolved partly through the method of 'decoupling', which will be examined in the paper's discussion, and partly by attributing certain characteristics, such as open-mindedness and inclusivity, to 'the Alternativist'. One example of the latter is the following quote, which is taken from another newspaper article written by Uffe Elbæk:

> What we are experiencing right now is an omen of a cultural and value-based paradigm shift across generations, cultures and social status. We have started to notice each other. We have started to develop a new kind of connectedness in relation to our common problems and in relation to our desire for the colorful and multifarious life. (The Alternative, 2014e)

The article that contains this quote is provocatively entitled: 'Dear Dane, have the courage to exit the hamster wheel'. Here, the metaphor of 'the hamster wheel' is invoked to describe the ongoing pursuit of material growth within the neoliberal economy, which once again illustrates how the counter-hegemonic identity of The Alternative is embedded in the construction of 'the Alternativist' as a political subject. It is, furthermore, important to notice how this and other articles, such as the one containing the 25 propositions, is addressing the reader directly, here in the shape of 'the Dane'. This rhetorical move plays an important role in the mobilization of the 'the Alternativist', as the strategy of addressing people directly has proven incredibly effective in processes of subjectification. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note, identity regulation through the direct reference to specific individuals is effective because it explicitly details the expectations towards people who occupy that particular social space.

Similar approaches to the mobilization of 'the Alternativist' can be detected throughout most parts of The Alternative's communication. For instance, in correspondence with the ongoing focus on cooperation and bridge-building (rather than competition and wall-building), much of The Alternative's communication is concerned with describing how the practice of listening rather than talking is a defining feature of 'the Alternativist'. This becomes clear through the previously mentioned debate principles. As the party notes in an introduction to the principles, an 'open and *attentive* debate constitutes the nerve of democracy' (The Alternative, 2013c, italics added). These principles are, however, not just fine words on paper. Rather, they are frequently referred to during political laboratories, speeches, TV debates and other kinds of public

communication. For instance, during political laboratories, the facilitators will often make reference to the principles as a way of getting people to listen to one another instead of just trying to win an argument. The debate principles are likewise mentioned in the party program, where it is stated that:

> The Alternative's politicians will debate according to The Alternative's debate principles. We don't believe that politicians are all-knowing oracles who cannot admit that there is something they don't know, or that politicians can't recognize a good argument even though it's coming from a political opponent. (The Alternative, 2014a: 9)

The six debate principles are not only concerned with the act of listening. For instance, the fifth principle holds that being curious towards political opponents is a virtue in political debates. Once again, it becomes clear how The Alternative's debate principles fit well with the party's vision of a new political culture, which is reflected in the organizational ideal of 'A New We'. Being curious towards political opponents resonates well with the desire for inclusive communities. Interestingly, through the party's external communication, this desire to be inclusive is often translated into a need to repress personal egos: One should be more concerned with 'we' than with 'me'. As the political leader, Uffe Elbæk, puts it in yet another newspaper article:

> If the goal is to develop a new and far more dynamic and transparent political culture, then we as politicians and citizens need to unlearn [...] a lot of things, which we today take for granted. For instance, we need to unlearn undesirable patterns of conflict and status. We also need to learn how to dare to keep the decision-making process open as long as possible. We need to unlearn our desire to fulfill our own egos [...] while we learn how to think about the common good – together with our political opponents. (The Alternative, 2014f)

It thus seems fair to conclude that 'the Alternativist' is a person who could be described as incapable of demarcating The Alternative in terms of political representation, as such an act would run counter to the characterization of 'the Alternativist'. Instead, 'the Alternativist' holds on to the belief that 'there is always an alternative', to borrow a phrase from the party's manifesto (The Alternative, 2013a). By encouraging a conception of self that builds on inclusivity, attentiveness, open-mindedness, curiosity and selflessness, the political leadership renders The Alternative's members more or less incapable of excluding anyone from the collective and, thus, incapable of particularizing the party by defining it in positive terms. Returning to the notion of overdetermination, one could argue that The Alternative's leadership wholeheartedly embraces the ambiguity that follows from 'the impossibility of society' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 93) by forging a subject that completely abandons the pursuit of determination. Accordingly, 'the Alternativist' implicitly

accepts that The Alternative as a political organization is cloaked in ambiguity and that the identity of the party should remain unfixed, and hence, universal.

The implications of such subjectification will be discussed in the paper's discussion, but before getting to that, we must attend to the members' own perceptions of self in order to explore how these members seek to craft a self which is – to some extent – their own (see also Watson, 2008).

Negotiating 'the Alternativist'

For most of the members that were interviewed for this study, The Alternative seemed to constitute a peculiar, but nonetheless quite compelling, phenomenon. When asked about what initially attracted them to The Alternative, several respondents found it hard to articulate what political demands or ideological agendas exactly appealed to them when they first heard of the party. Some stated that 'it just felt right' (Respondent #11), while others claimed that The Alternative seemed to represent all that they are and always have been (Respondent #7). Some members were, however, also quite conscious about their shortage of words when describing why The Alternative attracted them. One respondent, who ultimately decided to write a letter to The Alternative when she first heard of the party, put it like this:

> I wrote that I could not explain what it was, but that I was willing to do anything to participate. I wrote that I had never done any political work before, but that I wanted to be part of this in any way possible. (Respondent #3)

Another respondent described the same sense of hard-to-explain identification with The Alternative's political project like this:

> I have been involved with The Alternative ever since the day Uffe launched the party at a press conference. I immediately wrote them an e-mail saying that I wanted to join. This was just something that I had been waiting for... or, it felt like I had been waiting for it, without actually knowing that it was coming. (Respondent #9)

This feeling of attraction could be interpreted as a sign of the affective investment that follows from this kind of political identification (Laclau, 2005a: 110); an investment that is fueled by the individual's desire to transgress the unbridgeable distance between itself and that which represents it discursively (Laclau and Zac, 1994). Most of the respondents described The Alternative as a party that somehow managed to represent them as persons in a way that they had never experienced before. Even though several respondents had previously been politically inactive, they suddenly felt an urge to join The Alternative, as the party

seemed capable of signifying all that they ever wanted politics to be. In fact, a handful of respondents (e.g. Respondent #4, #15 and #30) even explained that they, independently of each other, were considering starting their own political party when suddenly The Alternative arrived and 'stole' their idea:

> I think a lot of people, like me, have considered starting their own party... and I actually spent quite some time pondering what this party might look like. But what happened was that I didn't have to create that party, because it was suddenly created for me. (Respondent #4)

Quite a bit of this immediate and unconditional identification with The Alternative might be explained not through the particular policies of the party, as the party had no political program at the time when most respondents decided to enrol, but through the sheer emptiness of The Alternative as a signifier. By basing the party on a series of universal ideals, such as the ambition of working towards a 'new political culture', a 'sustainable transition' and 'A New We', The Alternative allows an incredibly wide range of individuals to read their own personal preferences into the collective. This goes back to the notion of radical politics as a specific logic of articulation, in which an equivalential chain of demands are united through the representation of a sufficiently empty signifier (Laclau, 2005a).

Interestingly, this reluctance to politically delimit the party is furthermore reflected in the descriptions that most respondents provided for this study. As respondent #1 explained in the quote displayed in the first part of the analysis: If one realizes that the established system is broken, and if one is willing to do something about it, then one could be considered an 'Alternativist'. Ultimately, this means that defining the party in terms of political representation becomes incredibly hard for the common member of The Alternative, and those who do try to define it frequently end up with definitions such as the one below:

> I know that The Alternative is a political party, but for me it's much more than that... it's much more like a movement. In fact, to me, it's a lifestyle, or a way of being in the world that so many people have been longing for. (Respondent #17)

Or as another respondent put it when asked to describe how a dictionary entry about The Alternative would begin:

> That, I really don't know... After the beginning, I would write that we were an answer to people's desire for all kinds of other things. [...] You could also write something harsher: There was an admission of failure; politics had reached the end of meaningfulness. In these conditions, we tried to create something new without having the answer. (Respondent #22)

As Torfing (1999) explains, such descriptions testify to the ambivalence that comes with trying to define, in positive terms, signifiers that lack a signified. To illustrate this, Torfing suggests the word 'democracy', which has always been notoriously hard for political scientists to define. This, he argues, is due to the fact that democracy 'only exists as an objectified void created and maintained by the name which names it' (Torfing, 1999: 50). Likewise, this seems to apply to The Alternative as a signifier, since the identity of the party can only be described by defining *what it is not*. This means that all positive definitions of the party appear as political constructions, which is why most attempts at defining The Alternative are framed negatively. An example of this is the party's manifesto, in which The Alternative is defined as outcry *against* cynicism and as a *countermeasure* to what is currently happening in the world (The Alternative, 2013a).

However, the question that this paper revolves around is how the party maintains this emptiness while going through a process of particularization. The argument so far has been that 'the Alternativist', as a political subject, is discursively framed by The Alternative's leadership as a person who is open-minded, embraces the idea of fully inclusive communities and, thus, refrains from demarcating the party in terms of political representation. As explained in the theory section, however, such attempts at subjectification rest firmly on the members actually embracing those subject positions that they are offered. While important moments of resistance were indeed detectable (I will return to these later), most respondents clearly embraced the subject position of 'the Alternativist'. For instance, when asked to describe the characteristics of 'the Alternativist', one respondent put it like this:

> I think that an Alternativist is someone who meets the world with an open mind. It's someone who easily laughs, but is clear in his opinion and is ready to act on it. It's someone who is ready to do something for others and happily sits down and listens to them. It is also a person who is not steadfast, and who doesn't know 100% what he wants and what the truth is. (Respondent #15)

In this quote, many of the themes from the first two sections of this analysis recur. For instance, the idea about listening to others seems almost lifted out of the party's debate principles (The Alternative, 2013c), while the notion of not being steadfast corresponds well with the 'undesirable patterns of conflict' that, according to Uffe Elbæk, need to be unlearned (The Alternative, 2014f). Likewise, another respondent emphasized this idea of not being too firm about one's own convictions while describing The Alternative as a group:

> Well, we are a bunch of fundamentally tolerant people who have this open-minded approach to other people. This is also reflected in our political ideas... It is pretty

damn hard to be narrow-minded, while being part of The Alternative. That, you quickly become tired of. (Respondent #1)

As these quotes illustrate, 'the Alternativist' is largely embraced by members of The Alternative. However, the last quote is particularly interesting in relation to this paper, as it suggests an almost normative dimension to the characteristics of 'the Alternativist'. As a member of The Alternative, the respondent explains, you quickly grow tired of being narrow-minded. Besides the descriptive nature of this statement, it could likewise be interpreted as a way of expressing the normative ideal that, when joining the party, one *should* not be narrow-minded. This is particularly interesting because it frames the kind of normative control (Kunda, 1992) that underpins the subjectification of 'the Alternativist'. By identifying with this subject, it could be argued that the common member of The Alternative deprives him or herself of the ability to particularize and demarcate the party.

However, the lack of ability to define and demarcate the party is not only constraining. In fact, it enables 'the Alternativist' to exercise his or her own political preferences within the boundaries of The Alternative as a political organization. These liberating effects are perhaps most visible in the way internal divisions are able to co-exist without causing conflict or marginalization. One example, which seems to recur in several interviews, is the internal division between the 'hippies' who, in the eyes of many members of The Alternative, are overly preoccupied with sustainability and ecological living and the other members. As one respondent explained:

> Well, I'm not one of those eco-hippies. There are quite a few eco-hippies in The Alternative, and that is totally fine by me. I think that the thing about only eating 100 grams of meat a day is... well, it's fine by me. I like vegetables and all that, so I don't really provide any resistance towards it. But it's one of those cases where I can't follow the logic. (Respondent #12)

Similar accounts were provided by other members such as respondent #19, who emphasized that those people within The Alternative that spend most of their time eating organic cakes and talking about feelings are on the fringe of what she considers 'alternative' (Respondent #19). In a similar vein, respondent #11 argued that the biggest challenge for The Alternative might be that the eco-hippies end up taking over the party (Respondent #11). These accounts are, however, always supplemented with a shared understanding that everyone is welcome in the party and that no one should be excluded.

The example of the 'eco-hippies' is illustrative of the way in which The Alternative's universal appeal is preserved. Even though several respondents distance themselves from the 'eco-hippies' as a way of negotiating what it means to be an 'Alternativist', such enactments of identity work never result in a

stratification of identities. As already explained, this is because 'Alternativists' generally lack the ability (and probably also the desire) to install a hierarchical relationship between themselves and others. As a respondent noted: To say, 'I am alternative, you are not', is the antithesis of what it means to be alternative within The Alternative (Respondent #30). Thus, the fear of the 'eco-hippies' taking over should not be interpreted as a fear that is predicated on that particular identity ('I like vegetables and all that'), but as a fear of stratification as such (especially since nothing indicates that the eco-hippies are, in fact, 'taking over'). This is the case because the prioritization of some identities and demands over others would result in the immediate collapse of The Alternative's universal appeal. Hence, within The Alternative, all identities are considered equal and anyone who feels that 'something new is about to replace something old' is considered alternative (The Alternative, 2013a). When asked about how one recognizes an 'Alternativist', one respondent put it like this:

> Who's an Alternativist? Well, at the most fundamental level, I would say that we all are. Then, of course, there will always be some hardcore business dude with grey hair that needs a bit more persuading. But then, in the end, I bet he too once had dreams and visions. (Respondent #17)

As shown in this third part of the analysis, most respondents embrace the notion of 'the Alternativist' as it is articulated by The Alternative's political leadership. Even though several respondents engaged in individual identity work by, for instance, distancing themselves from other members of the party, such as the so-called 'eco-hippies', they generally mirrored the official description of 'Alternativists' as people who are inclusive, attentive, open-minded, curious and selfless. These characteristics were similarly reflected in the respondents' individual perceptions of The Alternative as an organization capable of representing almost anyone politically – at least anyone with dreams and visions.

Discussion: Towards decoupling

This paper's epigraph is borrowed from an *ephemera* editorial that ponders the virtues of alternative thinking and acting. Here, the closing argument is that the pursuit of alternatives always entails a productive curiosity towards 'the other' and, by implication, 'another'. This is what leads Schreven et al. (2008: 136) to conclude that the alternative thinker, writer, speaker and practitioner is full of faith but never faithful. In a sense, this could also have been this paper's conclusion. By encouraging a conception of self that builds on inclusivity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, curiosity and selflessness, The Alternative's political leadership produces a subject who is highly concerned with 'the other' but also incapable of determining the party itself, as this implies marginalizing 'another'.

The immediate effects of this kind of subjectification were displayed on The Alternative's Facebook page, where a member posted the following comment in response to a policy proposal supported by The Alternative in parliament:

> I don't need to agree with the party's policy in that many areas to believe in the project. The most important thing for me is that it's a product of pure democratic debate without dogmatism. To me, it's a strength that we maintain a curious disagreement all the way through the party, and that we don't lock ourselves into political programs. (Facebook, 2015)

The members' almost unconditional identification with 'the Alternativist' offers some interesting insights into how radical political parties work. At a theoretical level, the attempt to move from a position of universality towards a position of particularity invariably entails a narrowing of political representation. This poses a problem, as it makes it difficult for The Alternative to particularize its political project without simultaneously losing support. At a practical level, however, this problem is resolved through the construction of a subject position that, in the end, deprives members of their capacity to demarcate the party in terms of political representation. In doing so, The Alternative avoids marginalizing an array of political identities, as the dividing lines between different factions within the party never turn into actual demarcations. Even though the 'eco-hippies' might be somewhat secluded within the Alternative, they are never actually excluded from the collective, as no true 'Alternativist' is in a position to do so. This is the case because the very act of marginalization runs counter to the characterization of 'the Alternativist' as a person who builds bridges rather than walls and who employs the rhetoric of 'us and us'. Hence, while the party continues to grow more particular by each proposal advanced in parliament, The Alternative maintains its universal appeal and radical identity.

The Alternative's success in maintaining a universal appeal despite particularization could easily be interpreted as a successful attempt at bridging the otherwise unbridgeable distance between 'the universal' and 'the particular'. However, as argued by Laclau (2001), this is theoretically not possible, as the collapse of the chasm between universality and particularity would coincide with the end of democracy. This indicates that The Alternative has somehow found a way to appear universal and particular at the same time, without actually realizing this conflation in practice. Given the above, the most plausible explanation is that The Alternative has managed to implement an informal and untold decoupling between its universal body (the movement) and its particular body (the party). While the party, represented by the political leadership, engages in all kinds of particularistic activities (such as, for instance, the tax deduction bill), the movement sustains its equivalential chain of popular demands by not prioritizing any particular demand over others (see Husted and Plesner, 2017).

Strategies of decoupling or 'loose coupling' (Weick, 1976) have traditionally been used in a variety of organizations as a means of responding to reforms. For instance, as Hernes (2005) notes, public sector organizations affected by the New Public Management regime have used such strategies to respond to the combined demands of accountability and efficiency without prioritizing one over the other. By loosening the structural coupling between its various parts, the organization is able to appear as if speaking with two tongues, thus provisionally avoiding fundamental change. As such, the loosening of couplings may be seen as an effective way of deparadoxing an otherwise paradoxical situation – as a way of avoiding paralysis (Czarniawska, 2006). By partially decoupling the movement from the party, The Alternative manages to respond to the particularistic logic of parliament while preserving the universalist spirit of radical politics. In this way, the party avoids marginalizing supporters who disagree with the activities of the political leadership and the policies they advance in parliament, as the quote above implies.

The challenge for radical political movements wanting to engage with party politics is thus a matter of maintaining some kind of distance between movement and party, since collapsing into one organizational form would most likely cancel the movement's radical/universal identity (Husted and Hansen, 2017). However, as Hernes (2005) notes, decoupling or loose coupling is rarely a permanent solution. Over time, loose couplings tend to tighten, which inevitably leads to adaptation and reform. After the elections in 2015, support for The Alternative continued to grow for another year, peaking at 7.1 percent in spring 2016. Today, however, the opinion polls have once again fallen below 5 percent, which may be an indication that the party's universal appeal has diminished as a consequence of entering parliament. This suggests that radical political parties, such as The Alternative, need to find ways of maintaining a more permanent decoupling between movement and party, and further research is needed to investigate ways of doing this as well as the political and organizational repercussions of such a strategy.[3]

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3   In representative democracies, decoupling may seem like an inherently problematic solution to the problem of particularlization, but it aligns well with the notion of 'revolutionary realpolitik', devised by Roxa Luxemburg as a strategy for democratic socialism. Here, the idea is that the parliamentary group pursues incremental changes that gradually pave the way for more radical changes instantiated by the movement.

Conclusion

The paper contributes to the literature on subjectification by showing how ambiguity can be used strategically in a political organization. As Eisenberg (1984: 231) argues, 'strategic ambiguity' can be an effective tool for generating 'unified diversity' because it supports the synchronous 'existence of multiple viewpoints in organizations' without this causing conflict or paralysis. While plenty of studies have provided empirical backing for this claim (e.g. Denis et al., 2011; Giroux, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009), few have transported these observations to a political context. Through the case of The Alternative, we learn that ambiguity can be produced by inviting members to recognize themselves as inclusive, selfless, and curious people who lack the ability and desire to demarcate the party in terms of political representation. We also learn that this type of ambiguity can be used to advance specific political causes, because it allows The Alternative to pursue particularistic objectives without losing its universal appeal.

The paper likewise contributes to the literature on identity work in organizations by providing a fresh perspective on the way individuals relate to managerial discourse. By showing how affirmative identification rather than dis-identification or counter-identification can have liberating effects for the individuals involved. This is, of course, not an entirely novel observation (e.g. Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Knights and McCabe, 2003), but again, one that is rarely made in relation to studies of political organization. In particular, the case of The Alternative shows how the affective investment that follows from political identification (Laclau, 2005a) can be maintained despite increased particularization by partially decoupling the party from the movement.

Furthermore, these findings have a series of implications for the study of radical political parties within organization studies and beyond. First of all, they imply that such parties should not be treated as one single entity but as two somewhat autonomous organizations, operating according to two very different logics. Secondly, they demand an empirical sensitivity towards those technologies that make such a decoupling possible by, for instance, clouding its very existence. Finally, they require a willingness to conduct fieldwork at multiple sites, as valuable insights might be lost by engaging with merely one research site, such as the parliament.

However, important questions for further research arise from such conclusions. For instance, how is decoupling performed in practice? What managerial practices are employed to maintain a (loose) coupling between the movement part and the parliamentary part of radical political parties? If a decoupling

between those two parts is needed in order to maintain a universal appeal, how then is the organization kept from fracturing? Last, but certainly not least, how much particularization can radical political parties cope with before they implode? Will the decision to enter a coalition government, for instance, signal the end of universality? Such questions undoubtedly need answering if we are to fully comprehend the new wave of political parties that currently seems to be leaving a lasting mark on contemporary European politics.

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