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European anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests in the wake of the global financial crisis

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Abstract

European anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements form part of a global wave of protests following the global financial crisis. Despite continuity of actors and a double critique of global capitalism and democratic deficits from the previous Global Justice Movement, the centrality of the nation as target and focus of mobilization is a significant difference in this wave. The economic impact of the crisis and austerity policies is insufficient to explain variation in mobilization across countries hardest hit. In order to transform economic/material grievances into collective resistance, grievances need to be channelled against specific targets, and interpretive frameworks of meaning tied to a collective identity need to be mobilized. In Europe, anti-austerity protests were initiated by two sets of actors, Institutional Left and autonomous actors. Autonomous actors linked anti-austerity claims to interpretive system of meanings framed around

the crisis of legitimacy of representative democracy; targeted primarily national political and economic oligarchies; and mobilized newcomers through an inclusive collective identity constructed around the ‘ordinary citizen’ as political subject. Democratic regeneration emerges as a significant demand, but is uneven in its resonance. It finds its clearest and most emblematic expression in the ‘movements of the squares’. To the extent that the ‘twin’ crises (financial/democratic) are framed synergistically, they can be seen as counter-hegemonic, as they seek to rupture the consensus of the ‘post-political’. The presence or absence of a strong pro-democracy narrative that connects actors across sectorial and organizational differences could help explain variation between cases. Transnational diffusion processes have been crucial but have not (yet) led to a transnational movement. Given the significant role of the Troika in the bail-outs, debt renegotiations and austerity policies of those countries hardest hit, the low visibility of ‘Europe’ in the mobilizations is surprising.

Keywords:

Anti-austerity | democracy | Europe | financial crisis | Indignados | legitimation crisis | mobilization | Occupy

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Notes

1. Marie Sklodowska-Curie Research Project ‘Contentious Politics in an Age of Austerity: A comparative study of anti-austerity protests in Spain and Ireland’ (2013–2015). This research involved extensive participant observation, over 70 interviews and secondary data analysis.

2. See also Císař & Navrátil, 2016.

3. Marie Sklodowska-Curie Research Project, as above.

4. By which they mean grassroots activism, protest and various ‘new’ types of political phenomena not usually visible in mainstream debates.

5. This analysis is drawn from my Marie Sklodowska-Curie research.

6. The analysis in this section is drawn from my Marie Sklodowska-Curie research.

7. For more on protest camps, including many in the global movement of the squares, see Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy (2013).

8. I realize that what movements are called are often contested, the result of early media labels, etc. I nevertheless usually opt for the label I think most people will understand.

9. I was astonished to discover, during a research event I co-coordinated at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society in 2012, that some local activists had never heard of the European protests, and thought that the Occupy style movements such as OWS and Occupy Boston were unique to the US.

10. Despite the Pirate Party polling at 22%, above the Independence Party, the latter was the most voted party in the 2016 general elections, with 21 MPs. The Pirate Party neverthless jumped from 2 to 10 MPs.

11. See the manifesto here: https://www.euro-planb.eu/?page_id=96&lang=en.

12. But see Power (2015) for why this did not happen in the Irish case.

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