

Allied Against Austerity Transnational Cooperation in European Anti-Austerity Movement

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The last decade has seen an unprecedented level of grassroots organising against austerity-driven crisis management that characterised the post-2008 financial crisis in Europe and beyond. While there have been considerable studies of the different movements, and there have even been some comparisons between movements across countries (see, for example, Bailey et al., 2018), this is the first transnational analysis that combines both specific country case studies (Greece, Spain and Germany) with an analysis of austerity crisis-management and transnational coalitions at the EU level. Specifically, the thesis is driven by two research questions – first, “how we can explain the movement’s diverse manifestation between countries, particularly Spain, Greece and Germany,” and “to what extent [is] this diversity informed the development of transnational cooperation across the movement” (Bonfert, 2020: 371). These two questions already point at the dual nature of the thesis, moving across different scales of analysis.

In “Allied Against Austerity: Transnational Cooperation in the European

Anti-Austerity Movement,” Bernd Bonfert provides a fascinating account of social movements in Europe over the last decade. A key strength of the thesis is the thorough theorisation provided by Bonfert. By engaging in a critique of existing comparative approaches to social movements’ studies, Bonfert offers a Historical Materialist framework that is deeply interwoven with an analysis of hegemony, crises and the state. The theoretical depth of the thesis cannot be underestimated. Bonfert’s research design investigates the following three aspects of transnational cooperation:

- 1 “the politico-economic context of European anti-austerity movement in the form of European and national crisis management;
- 2 the domestic manifestations of the anti-austerity movement in Spain, Greece and Germany; and
- 3 the transnational dimension of the anti-austerity movement in the form of practical cross-country collaboration and transnational coalitions between activists” (Bonfert, 2020: 55).

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The thesis raises important questions both in relation to how we approach the study of social movements and how movements themselves strategise scale. If anything, European anti-austerity movements have forced social movement scholars to place issues to do with material demands and concerns back at the forefront. For example, in 2015, Donatella Della Porta called for the incorporation of Capitalism into social movement analysis. A return, or rather, a rediscovery of critical political economy has bridged the gap between analyses of protest and resistance with our understanding of changes in the political economy. In Bonfert's own words

a critical analysis of the European anti-austerity movement should focus on the practical agency of that movement, while also analysing it in relation to the crisis management context it was struggling against (Bonfert, 2020: 18).

Precisely, a key strength of the thesis is the ability to combine a robust contextual analysis of the (critical) political economy of neoliberal austerity at both the EU level and domestic levels, as well as provide such an in-depth study of protest cases and social movement organising.

Importantly, the thesis provides us with a framework to analyse transnational coalitions. Bonfert offers three ideal types of transnational coalitions: the first type, 'Reform Coalitions' are characterised by focusing their efforts at the EU institutional level attempting to achieve concrete policy reforms. The nature of their organising efforts translates into a professionalisation of resistance, to a certain extent. Lobby-

ing in Brussels requires a certain 'know-how' which often challenges their capacity "when trying to translate their claims into something the general public can respond to" (Bonfert, 2020: 51). The second type, 'Disruption Coalitions' are more radical in their demands and protest styles and methods. For example, rather than lobbying in Brussels, they may go and demonstrate outside the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. However, they are generally short-lived and organised around particular moments. Their genealogy, according to Bonfert, can be traced back to the Global Justice Movement. Finally, Bonfert's third type, 'Solidarity Coalitions' are focused on horizontal grassroots organising at the local level, while enacting loose transnational networks among themselves. Their stance tends to avoid vertical institutionalisation, yet they provide solid local foundations in their grassroots organising. While these three types are not mutually exclusive, and there may be some cross-pollination of the three strategies across the three types of coalitions, the capacity to combine the three types is ultimately very difficult to achieve according to Bonfert.

The last typology 'Solidarity Coalitions' is worthy of some further consideration. At a time when far-right and neo-fascist groups are gaining ground all over the globe, and with the constant threat of misinformation being spread by powerful groups, Bonfert's typology offers some hope. It would be important to further consider the role of solidarity coalitions in reducing the possibility of right-wing threats, misinformation, and the development of exclusionary spaces. For example, much of the

grassroots provision of basic needs in Spain, such as housing or food banks, during the worst years of austerity was done by social movements that could be considered part of Bonfert's 'Solidarity Coalitions'. Yet, Greece and Italy had some examples of far-right groups practicing exclusionary provisions of basic needs, such as Golden Dawn's organisation of food banks for Greeks only.

I would also like to highlight the discussion Bonfert offers in relation to research ethics when analysing social movements. Often, in our quest to produce solid research, we forget to think how our research may be used by authoritarian security apparatuses, especially when movements may present a challenge to the authority and power of states and capital. Bonfert's choice of using data from publicly available sources, rather than reveal what social movements may prefer to conceal or keep private (for example, certain strategic debates), is an important issue to raise. Research is always produced for someone and for some purpose. Methodologically, the thesis is also very strong and demonstrates a sophisticated command of mixed research methods; from documentary analysis, ethnographic methods of data collection, interviews to statistical social network analysis.

The thesis findings provide some fascinating conclusions, which expand our understanding of anti-austerity movements and the challenges and opportunities for transnational organising or collaboration. In relation to the first research question, which relates to how we can understand different social movement configurations and protest dynamics across the three

cases considered, Bonfert concludes that

the scale and composition of domestic mobilisations directly reflected the socio-economic impact of austerity and neoliberal restructuring on national class constituencies and the degree to which this impact led to an erosion of hegemonic consent (Bonfert, 2020: 277).

Significantly, if activists were effective in the erosion of hegemonic consent at the domestic level, they would be less focused on transnational action.

Turning to the second research question, which considers how domestic variation within movements and their domestic contexts may affect their transnational activity and motivation, Bonfert – using the three-type typology discussed earlier – develops an understanding of transnational cooperation and organisation

defined by the uneven material, political and praxeological characteristics of domestic struggles, while also pursuing distinct political strategies in relative autonomy (Bonfert, 2020: 279).

This demonstrates the complexity of the thesis and the importance of considering transnational action and domestic organising as two sides of the same coin, while incorporating the deep contextual analysis that Bonfert's thesis is able to provide.

In summary, I thoroughly recommend Bernd Bonfert's thesis, and I look forward to seeing more publications emanating from the research produced for the thesis. This is impres-

sive work, with a sophisticated theoretical discussion, the ability to move across levels of analysis and an extensive analysis of crisis-management and protest at the EU level as well as in Spain, Greece and Germany. The depth and breadth of the analysis is not only extraordinary, but it also represents an outstanding example of a PhD thesis. It is rare to find a PhD thesis that makes a contribution on so many different levels, theoretically, methodologically and empirically. Bonfert is well placed to become a leading scholar in social movement research within the discipline of critical political economy.

References

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