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Thesis Spotlights – European Austerity Programmes under Transnational Contestation

Issue 43: Sociology Beyond Europe Tue 2 Feb 2021

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Time: March 2017 to March 2020

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Funding: Co-financing agreement between Radboud University & Roskilde University

Since 2011, leftist activism against austerity-based crisis management in Europe has simultaneously become diversified along national and political lines, while also establishing a range of new transnational coalitions. The thesis investigates this ambiguous development by providing a Historical Materialist analysis of the transnational cooperation among activists. Applying Gramscian theoretical concepts to the study of social movements, the thesis combines two major components: an analysis of the politico-economic causes of the national diversification of activism, and an investigation into the counter hegemonic strategies of transnational activist coalitions.

The first part compares the contexts, actors and dynamics of anti-austerity movements in Spain, Greece and Germany, using qualitative documentary analyses of crisis management legislation and activist publications. The comparison shows that the movements' defining characteristics have been decisively influenced by the social, economic, and institutional effects of austerity measures in their respective countries. The diversification of activism therefore reflects the uneven and fragmented nature of European crisis management. Concretely, the mass mobilisations and political shifts in Spain and Greece are direct responses to the harsh austerity measures and authoritarianisation in both countries, although differences in the institutional settings and the role of traditional left organisations led Spanish and Greek activists to develop unique strategies and alliances. Conversely, due to the relative socio-economic stability in Germany, anti-austerity activists remained politically marginalised and developed a stronger transnational focus in response.

The second part uses a Social Network Analysis to map out the range and composition of transnational coalitions, and it draws on the activists' publications, interviews, and participant observation at events to characterise a diverse selection of these coalitions in depth. Findings reveal that transnational activism coalesces around three 'Modes of Cooperation', which correspond to distinct counter hegemonic strategies and spatial dimensions: Cooperation for 'Systemic Reform' aims towards institutional changes at the European level and tends to be

anchored in Brussels. Coalitions engaging in ‘Disruptive Intervention’ try to shift public consciousness via protest actions, often by mobilising around symbolic locations. Finally, cooperation based on ‘Collective Empowerment’ prioritises mutual support and the diffusion of emancipatory alternatives, taking many cues from grassroots solidarity initiatives in Southern Europe.

In combination, the two halves of the thesis demonstrate a chain of underlying causal connections between a) the uneven crisis management across Europe, b) the regional diversification of activism, and c) the consolidation of distinct strategies for transnational cooperation. The thesis ultimately shows that the ambiguous development of anti-austerity activism is the result of an uneven transnationalisation of counter hegemonic struggles. The conclusion discusses the implications of this strategic diversity for future transnational cooperation, and reflects on possible opportunities for complementarity or even convergence.

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