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## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL POLICIES: POLITICAL CHALLENGES UNDER AUSTERITY IN THE UK

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### Abstract

The economic crisis of 2007/2008 presented a challenge to the welfare state in the UK, and, more widely, across Europe. It also presented a challenge to many citizens, who were on the receiving end of the austerity agenda, and subsequent tightening of welfare spending. If nothing else, the financial crisis demonstrated the hegemony of economic theories prominent in neoliberal capitalism. As many academics and commentators have identified, however, the current period of instability is indicative of a systemic crisis. In addition to this analysis, the crisis also exposed the intricate and opaque links between western governments and the financial sector. During and after the crisis an eruption of activity in civil society galvanised many that had been directly affected by either the crisis itself – through loss of employment – or by the subsequent austerity measures imposed. This paper aims to examine the current crisis affecting the welfare state in the UK, and social policy more broadly, and, begins to suggest how social movements are seeking to challenge the dominant discourses surrounding austerity politics. The paper will suggest some reasons as to why traditional forms of resistance and organisation – such as the mobilisations of the trade union movement – have largely been unsuccessful in challenging such narratives. The paper will conclude by considering the shift from trade unionism in the UK to post-crisis social movements, and where an anti-austerity movement more broadly might develop further in pursuit of defending the principles of social welfare, and, ultimately, the welfare state.

### Keywords

Social movements; austerity; economic crisis; protest; social policy

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This paper examines various current political and economic crises, and identifies some of the social movements that have been responding to such challenges. The paper also seeks to examine the role of the trade union movement – in relation to social movements – given the context of the current crises. The outcomes and impacts of the financial crisis, will, further, be discussed in this paper, as a point of contention for social movements and as a precursor to futures and possibilities for political mobilisation. Broadly, this paper seeks to enquire as to how post-crisis social movements have been integral in engaging with social policy questions – some of which have arisen as a result of government austerity programmes. It will also consider the present conditions – of crisis and austerity – which have given rise to a new political hegemony.

On many fronts, the nature of political discourse, engagement and mobilisation is changing. This is due, in part, to the present economic challenges that are facing both citizens and governments, and the subsequent policy responses that have been – and are being – enacted. Of greater significance are the deeper structural issues that have characterised the crisis – which began late in 2007, and further broke in 2008 – and the global response. The increasing instability of economic relations under democratic capitalism has, to a great extent, facilitated the rise in movements of contentious politics. It is on this first point that the paper will examine the basis for conflict and resistance in an age of crisis, austerity and radical change in social and public policy. This paper also seeks to understand some of the contemporary critiques of capitalism. To a great extent, such critiques – many of which have been formally outlined in academic discussions – help to understand the wider narratives that social movements construct in order to effectively challenge institutional apparatus. These critiques also help to frame the debates that drive some of the discussions around social policy issues, and the concurrent political mobilisations. Underpinning these discussions is a broader enquiry in to the changing nature of political engagement, and, the location of class struggle as a result of the decline of trade unionism. This paper will conclude by discussing how recent mobilisations have been less reliant on the trade union movement, and more on informal, unaligned, non-institutional political groupings. In particular, it will look to draw examples from recent anti-austerity mobilisations in the UK that have been instrumental in agenda-setting and organising to resist the various policy objectives that have been enforced top-down to curb government spending. Of these mobilisations that have been the most instrumental, its clear that – in the context of the UK – social movements such as UK Uncut and Occupy London have made an indelible mark on the landscape of anti-austerity resistance. In terms of scoping a definition for contemporary anti-austerity movements, the recent work of Della Porta (2015) provides some insight into the nature of such forms of resistance. In *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*, Della Porta argues that anti-austerity movements have both a distinctive economic and political character:

[Anti-austerity] protests react not only to the economic crisis (with high unemployment and high numbers of precarious workers) but also to a political situation in which institutions are (and perceived to be) particularly closed to citizens' demands, at the same time unwilling and incapable of addressing them in an inclusive way. (Della Porta, 2015: 6)

This particular passage speaks directly to the aims of this paper: identifying both the economic and political objectives of anti-austerity movements, whilst framing the debates through the lens of social policy. The paper will first seek to outline the multiple crises in the UK, and provide some definitions and examples of where these forms of resistance have either made progress, or have been unsuccessful.

## The Multiple Crises in the UK

The social and political issues that arose as a result of the economic crisis are manifold. What began as a crisis in the financial sector quickly became an issue that had huge structural ramifications. Before setting out the main arguments of this paper, it is first pertinent to address each crisis in turn. Whilst this paper directly addresses the conditions within a UK context, these arguments can be broadly applied to the political conditions across Europe. Firstly, it is clear that there has been a crisis of confidence over the welfare state apparatus: what types of provision can be made for the citizen in a period of declining acceptance of social security? Moreover, what is the role of the welfare state and how should it provide for those that require support? Secondly, a lack of direct democracy has been evident in the current political climate. The methods of traditional, institutional engagement within the political system are not satisfactory and do not meet the demands of citizens. Therefore: what types of engagement – i.e. non-institutional – can be used to hold systems to account? Thirdly, the implications of the continuing economic crisis for class politics: social movements have had mixed success in tackling wider social policy questions. Which movements should take on the questions of social justice, regulation, redistribution and the representation of working class communities?

The first crisis has its roots in the political approval of governments, mainly on the right of the political spectrum, and the centrist post-political turn of formerly 'left' parties, which have sought to decrease spending on welfare. In the UK, the coalition government of 2010 set in motion a programme of welfare reform, which aimed to decrease the amount of spending on public services in order to service a large deficit. The second follows from the first in that citizens have become increasingly disenfranchised in a political system that no longer represents popular opinion. There are concerns that the traditional methods of political engagement have not been representative, and, therefore, citizens have taken to other forms of organisation. Finally, there is a growing sense that the traditionally representative trade union movement has been slow to take up the legitimate grievances of working class communities. The result is that there is now a vacuum in which effective political representation does not exist, formally or informally. The most obvious indicator of declining trade union influence is the change in membership: the UK government's own statistics show that there were 6.5 million trade union members in 2013, compared to 1979, when trade union membership was at a peak of 13 million. This signifies a huge shift in the numbers of workers with formal representation (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2014: 5). In the absence of such representation, social movements are tasked with engaging with the socio-political challenges that arise as a result of heavy state retrenchment. This paper aims to deal with the above crises, and, discuss which movements have attempted to manoeuvre into the vacuum of effective criticism, which has, arguably, been left open by other political parties on the left of the spectrum, and the trade union movement.

## The Changing Welfare State

The welfare state in the UK is experiencing a period of crisis in two senses: one of political approval, and one of economic viability. In the first sense, the welfare state is seen as both cumbersome and flawed, in need of substantial improvement or heavy restriction. This can be attributed, to a great extent, to the (post) political project of neoliberalism (Mouffe, 2005). In the second sense, it has, broadly, lost support in the public domain in terms of spending: 50% of the population believed that government should spend more on benefits in 1995 compared to 34% in 2012 (Park et al, 2012). Further to this, the welfare state is also seen as a costly

provision, which should be supported by the capital of private companies. Indeed, the era of globalisation has arguably changed how we understand the function of the welfare state. What is clear is that the reforms are part of a wider (post) political and ideological project aimed at state retrenchment and the reduction of spending on welfare provision. Modern welfare theories have had to adapt to a changing environment that increasingly relies on: the increasing speed and exchange of information; the free movement of people and capital; the stability of large global and international institutions; and, the deregulation of trade boundaries and opening of borders. The changes have, at least for a post-industrial Western Europe, presented both threats and opportunities for welfare:

It was a threat in so far as class structures looked set to be replaced by a more individualistic and market-dominated society; yet it was an opportunity, because welfare institutions already embodied the service ethic that post-industrial ethic seems to require. (Fitzpatrick, 2011: 171).

In this rapidly evolving and fluid state of affairs, welfare as a theory and practice has required substantial reconsideration and reconfiguration to manage the volume of cross-border flows in terms of goods, services and people.

In an age where neo-liberal economics prevails many theorists have argued that capitalism, in its current form, is undermining the basis for state provision and the role of public services. Ferguson et al (2002) have argued that this period of our history represents an assault on the values of the social democratic systems that were constructed in the post-war period. Despite the challenges from academics, policy professionals, and the growing body of evidence that disputes the equal nature of global capitalism, the gulf between the richest and poorest has deepened substantially, which has resulted in structural inequalities placing immense pressures on modern welfare states. The historical function of welfare state provision in it's aims to 'check' capitalism have been undermined in the neoliberal epoch, which has recalibrated its function to serve the needs of flexibility in the contemporary labour market – which is punctuated in part by policies such as workfare, or, earning one's benefits. The following examines the current situation and challenges of contemporary global society; how the role of the state has changed; and, how social policies are being developed under the continuing and incessant pressures of free market capitalism. The current dynamic of capitalism under globalisation has challenged the role of the state as a primary provider of welfare provision. The prescriptions of neo-liberal economics work firmly for the interests of market economies as opposed to the traditional state structures that regulated industry and employment. There is a definite and observable shift from the state to the market in terms of delivering welfare – i.e. the 'tendering and contracting out' of formerly state functions delivered by the private sector. These effects have been documented and analysed by Ferguson et al (2002):

The commitment to competitive taxation policies necessitates a cut in the social wage and reduced public expenditure, with the result that privatisation and the increasing role of the market in the delivery of public services is left as the only viable alternative for reluctant welfare dismantlers. (Ferguson et al, 2002: 140)

In the face of a new political realism it is taken-for-granted that state involvement in the delivery of welfare is an out-dated method that acts against the principles of neo-classical market economies. Returning to the role of business, there is a clear and definite relationship between

the expansion of market power and the increase of private and business interest in social policy:

The role played by international business organisations has been to try to influence policy debates at the international, national and regional levels [...] International business has also campaigned heavily against regional and international agreements on minimum social standards. (Farnsworth, 2004: 81)

From this perspective it is indisputable that the cultural, political and economic shifts occurring through the processes of globalisation and neoliberalism are impacting on state involvement in welfare, and the status of the individual, which has shifted from productive actor to passive consumer. For social movements, this is a fundamental and underlying question for their activities.

### ***Political Engagement and the Democratic Deficit***

The failure of large-scale movements, political parties and trade unions to directly challenge issues that affect working class communities is resulting in a crisis of confidence. The economic crisis had many direct consequences, with the political agenda of austerity being the most controversial. At the macro level, protests quickly spread across Europe after 2008, attacking the unjust policy prescriptions of national and international governmental organisations. Broadly, these movements were born out of bottom-up, civil society struggles that aimed to challenge policies that, in essence, penalised those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As the subsequent attempts by governments to resist the tide of activism were successful, the movements condemning such policy manoeuvres became disillusioned:

Anti-austerity protestors seem instead to have lost hope for political reforms, as they see more and more of an overlapping of economic and political power, especially with aggressive (and effective) lobbying from business and industry groups at EU level. The search for profit and economic growth, cited to justify cuts to public services, salaries and pensions, is stigmatised by anti-austerity campaigners as an institutional denial of the political nature of public decision-making. (Della Porta, 2014b)

This was especially true of young people in the UK, who, at the time, were particularly economically vulnerable – though it is their biographical availability (i.e. the time that they could commit to such struggles) that made them the obvious candidates for political engagement. Activism has seen a resurgence among older, middle class citizens that previously have enjoyed greater economic independence and stability. Lapavistas and Politaki (2014: n.p.) explain that, nonetheless, the precarious nature of economic life for younger citizens has contributed to a crisis in confidence:

The double whammy [interruption of education and unemployment] appears to have sapped the rebellious energy of the young, forcing them to seek greater financial help from parents for housing and daily life. This trend lies at the root of the current paradox of youth in Europe. There is little extreme poverty, and the young are relatively protected and well trained, but their labour is not valued, their dreams of education are denied and their independence is restricted. As a consequence, frustration has grown. Yet, it cannot find an outlet in mainstream parties, including the left, which strikes many young people

as far too timid. Even in Greece, where the official opposition of Syriza – the party of the left – is preparing for government, young people are looking askance at a party that seems unwilling to take radical action.

This speaks to both the narrative of insurmountable political challenges – particularly those in the liberal democratic capitalist state – and the fact that there are few institutional movements that are able to adequately capture the discontent amongst working class communities in the UK. What this particular moment in popular struggle illustrates is that there are also very few political parties that will rise to the challenge of representing the interests of the socially, economically and politically disenfranchised.

### ***A Crisis on the Left***

In times of crisis, the presence of trade unions has been essential in demonstrating the power of an organised working class against the exclusive interests of the wealthy, domineering elite. The resistance of the trade union movement in the UK has lacked power and dynamism in the post-crisis period. Whilst organisations such as The People’s Assembly – funded largely by the union movement – have been active in local communities by organising meetings, it is the lack of a sustained campaign of direct action – fronted by the trade union movement – that has raised questions. This has been punctuated by the absence of a class analysis, which might have been deployed in previous years to challenge government policy – particularly in the UK. Many of the features of the current political narrative that defines austerity has a relationship with class-based injustice, but, as Cooper and Hardy state, ‘the language of class resistance [has not been] as prominent as would have been expected in earlier decades’ (Cooper and Hardy, 2012: 31):

...The March for the Alternative demonstration led by the TUC in spring 2011 had an overt-class dynamic – it was joined by huge contingents of low paid public sector workers being hurt by austerity – but its “pitch”, its dominant narrative from the top echelons of the platform, speakers recalled the great marches for democratic rights and social justice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than the language of working class resistance. (Ibid)

As a result, the nature of resistance has changed in the absence of a focus on the impact on working class communities. This is combined with a crisis of confidence in trade unionism, which has left their power significantly diminished, and, as a result, has reduced their ability to organise. This is especially true of unions in the UK, where their capacity to organise has been eroded, in part, due to regressive legislation designed to curb their influence. The number of days lost to union action is at a historic low: in the 1980s and 1990s, as many as 106 days were lost per quarter for every 1,000 employees. In the December 2014 quarter, 1.6 days per 1,000 employees were lost to strike action (Jericho, 2015). The inability of the trade union movement to be innovative, or to reform, has resulted in stagnation. Whilst regressive legislation can explain some of the issues with effective union mobilisation, the nature of contemporary organisation – often ineffectual and limited to one-day strikes – can explain how the trade union movement has lost its militancy. The leadership of the trade union movement in the UK has been scrutinised for its bureaucratic, top-down approach to organisation. In particular, the direction and efficacy of contemporary working class organisation – in the absence of militancy – is the subject of debate: ‘What is in question... is how the working class can advance its struggle beyond actions that are sanctioned by their leaderships and that, more frequently than not, fail’ (O’Brien, 2014).

In the UK particularly, there are a number of challenges facing left-wing politics and political movements. Academics and commentators have been quick to outline some of the issues that have been instrumental in the malaise of an organised labour movement. Gindin (2014) has illustrated some of the reasons for such a decline in worker organisation.

In criticising the labour movement for its failure to change, it is vital to understand this as being as much a failure of the left itself; the crisis of labour and that of the left go hand in hand. There's a strong case to be made that we will not see a renewal of the labour movement unless there's also simultaneously a renewal of the left. It seems clear enough that in spite of some positive developments, the leadership of the trade union movement has neither the inclination nor capacity to radically transform their organisations while the membership is too fragmented and too overwhelmed to sustain anything but the occasional sporadic rebellion.

The reasons for this particular stagnation – as alluded to in Gindin's piece on trade unionism – are manifold. In many of the contemporary social movements that came to ascendancy post-crisis, there was a deep sense that the old hierarchies – some of which punctuate the trade union movement – were restricting the capacity for spontaneously organising around a particular grievance. The prevailing conditions were such that people felt compelled to self-organise in order to draw attention to the iniquitous nature of government policy adjustments – most of which favoured further leniency on the capitalist class. The sense that there are no longer organised movements that focus solely on issues that directly affect the working class is palpable. Trade unions and the labour movement are not the only responsible parties in the decline of organised political struggle. Political parties that commonly represented the interests of working class communities have deserted their core electorate – as is evidenced by the Labour Party in the UK in its unabashed post-political centrism. The conditions for a crisis on the left are evident, therefore, as the traditionally representative organisations lose members and the confidence of the electorate. In this period of terminal decline on the popular left, alternative modes of organisation, and radical politics, of social movements become more attractive to the disenfranchised.

### ***Capitalist Realism and Critique***

Many of the social movements in the UK that exploded after the crisis vowed to challenge, broadly, the inequalities that had resulted from unfettered markets and an unregulated financial sector. To an extent this occurred with consciousness-raising debates on inequality – i.e. the 99% and the 1% via the Occupy movement – filling the public domain. Political activists in such movements attempted to bring such discussions to the attention of the public through a number of mediums, but most commonly via social networks on the Internet. Offers of analysis as to why such discussions should be shut down are varied, but one common theme that emerges is that governments – in the UK and Europe – are keen to promote the idea that there are no alternatives to austerity politics. The continuation of capitalist society by any means is a feature of what is commonly referred to as capitalist realism. Before setting out the arguments for understanding the role of capitalism, it should be made clear that, in and of itself, capitalist economics should not be regarded as monolithic. Rather, the constantly changing state of capitalism, in its various adaptations and variations, is key to understanding why it is so difficult for social movements to

effectively criticise and attack the politics of austerity. The inventiveness of capitalism, at least in its current neoliberal form, has rendered efforts to challenge its ubiquitous structures ultimately futile (also known as TINA – ‘there is no alternative’). The possibility of overcoming (or even imagining overcoming) the challenges of capitalism is one that cannot be reasonably described. Fisher (2009) covers this in *Capitalist Realism*:

...We are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by ‘capitalist realism’: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it. (Fisher, 2009: 2)

This analysis captures more broadly a sense that, in spite of all the challenges from social and political movements, the fundamental structure of capitalism remains dominant. This is, perhaps, one of the fundamental issues for social movements to contend with and address directly. The notion that solutions cannot be found and the links between government and capital cannot be overcome is a common thread in recent work on how the crisis has unfolded. A wider issue connected with Fisher’s thesis is the idea that neoliberalism as project – or negative capitalism, as Taylor (2013) puts it – is something that permeates through all social life, ‘abstracting social relations into financial ones’ (Taylor, 2013: 49). This is what can be explained as the financialisation of culture and social life, and the subordination of all such relations under neoliberalism:

The privatisation of public utilities, welfare and social housing, nature, informational and intellectual property rights – affecting all aspects of social life and mounting to a mass dispossession as economies became transformed towards the pure production of financial wealth. (Taylor, 2013: 50)

What we arrive at, according to this thesis, is a reality whereby neoliberal capitalism has a totalising effect on everyday life. This has specific ramifications for movements in civil society that seek to challenge the established economic order and imagine alternatives. This particular analysis of social and political life under capitalism suggests that any popular struggle will encounter some form of hindrance in attempting any meaningful critique of capitalism. Whilst this does not seem immediately problematic for social movements in the short term, it does raise longer-term questions as to how popular struggles cope with the continuation of widespread inequalities – which, as most analyses have shown, come to characterise any economic crisis. In particular, it raises questions as to how far and deep inequalities have to reach before there are significant political and policy changes.

Analysing the role of capitalist realism also requires us to consider the influence of neoliberalism. Some recent accounts of the economic crisis – particularly Mirowski (2013) – present the idea of a type of pragmatism at work in neoliberal political doctrine. The only viable option that could be considered in the wake of the crisis is the reinvention of an idea that has already dominated and organised all social and economic life. Neoliberalism is a doctrine with clear political objectives, and one able to reinvent itself if the conditions are such that the markets demand its continued prevalence:

The most likely reason the doctrine that precipitated the crisis has evaded responsibility and the renunciation indefinitely postponed is that neoliberalism as worldview has sunk



its roots deep into everyday life, almost to the point of passing as the “ideology of no ideology.” (Mirowski, 2013: 56)

The lack of a recognisable criticism of capitalism, in its current form, goes some way to explaining why the efforts of radical, critical politics have not been able to overcome the adaptive nature of its structure. The majority of political mobilisations, at least those that sought to deal with the fallout of the financial crisis, have rested, largely, on short-termism. Critical voices, however, are present in discussions on economic alternatives, and there are undercurrents of objection to the incumbent political structures that uphold particular narratives – i.e. those that support the politics of austerity. The question as to how this can be acted on though remains, as Blokker (2014) – in a paper discussing critiques of capitalism and alternative futures in Europe – notes:

Despite a ubiquitous civic voice, an important question remains, however, in particular in the face of a lack of responsiveness by governments and the European Union to demands by society. That is, to what extent does contemporary social protest and critique indicate a revival of critical capacity and consequential forms of critique...? (Blokker, 2014: 2)

Realising that critique is important in discussing alternative futures is thus an important consideration when assessing the potential impacts of political mobilisations by social movements.

The combination of a lack of any meaningful critique of capitalism, combined with an absence of a broader critical response to the crisis, has led to a stagnation of ideas as to how civil society and social movements can respond to, and overcome, the challenges of financial capitalism in its current form. Some critiques have been considered within the current parameters of institutional politics:

The new political context compels us to rethink many of the strategies for the democratic development of EU institutions, and emphasizes the need to elaborate a strategy of multi-level struggle if we wish to have influence at an institutional level that has proven increasingly impervious to forms of pressure attempted in the past. (Della Porta, 2014a)

Whilst there is some merit in Della Porta’s particular notion of developing democratic institutions, there are many other valuable criticisms that advance a non-institutional reconceptualization of political engagement, and of political organisation. In line with a critical perspective on the structural issues that arise from a capitalist economy, opponents seek to demonstrate that effective mobilisation can occur outside of the current parameters of democratic politics. To take just one example of this, social movements – such as Occupy – have sought to construct a critique outside of the aforementioned limitations of institutional politics:

At the heart of Occupy’s attempt at radical inclusivity was the use of consensus method for collective decision-making. This method was an attempt to forge structures that were non-hierarchical and allowed a large number of people to take part in the decision-making process. Emblematic of such structures were Occupy’s “working groups,” which were open to anyone, its avowed leaderlessness, and its nightly “General Assemblies” that used consensus method. These practices have been described as “anarchist” practices by those commenting on the movement. (Maharawal, 2013: 178)

The non-institutional practices of Occupy, as described by Maharawal, indicate an ingenuity and inventiveness that is, arguably, absent from the prescriptive and bureaucratic measures of institutional political engagements. This represents a shift from the prescriptive formulations and politics that are often found in political parties on the left, and trade union movements. In response to the lack of such a critique, social movements have been well positioned to, at the very least, engage with the challenges presented by the resurgence of a neoliberal policy agenda. The multiple examples of non-institutional resistance – as demonstrated by social movements – to austerity politics demonstrate the most coherent response to the current political and economic crisis.

### **The Politics of Austerity and Resistance to Austerity Politics**

In the wake of the financial crisis, debates on the introduction, application and impacts of austerity have dominated social and political discourses. There is little doubt that austerity is a contentious idea, with very specific implications for the state and for citizens. Some commentators have sought to highlight the socio-political ramifications, whilst others – such as Worth (2013) – have considered the ideological implications. ‘Austerity is deemed as both necessary and a way of redirecting the cause of the crisis so that reckless fiscal spending is seen as the root cause [...] The necessity of austerity is backed by the belief that too much state spending has preceded it’ (Worth, 2013: 116, 117). This particular framing of the crisis – as being due to reckless state fiscal policy – is one that has dominated arguments that favour austerity programmes. Governments were quick to identify spending as the main issue, and, backed by analysis of large financial institutions, austerity became the only logical response to a crisis that had begun in the financial sector. Austerity is more than an attempt to manage government debt, as many commentators have sought to argue. It has been argued that the ideas behind austerity are linked to, and, to an extent, an extension of, the broader political and economic aims of neoliberalism. Blyth (2013) argues in *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* that it has as much to do with democratic transformation as it does with the implementation of certain economic policies:

Democracy is... not an end in itself, since it is little more than an inflation-causing pathology from which only rules, not discretion, can save us. Replacing a government or two in the Eurozone is simply, then, what needs to be done. The question of the legitimacy of such policies or of how the presumed preference for low inflation over all other goals becomes the preference of all society, especially when those enforcing that preference as policy don't want to ask the voters, remains conspicuous by its absence. (Blyth, 2013: 370)

Decisions on the implementation of austerity are thus made in a manner that precludes the possibility of meaningful discussion or consultation. The implications of this notion are that the potential mobilisations of citizens, and of social movements, are not simply a response to the economic conditions imposed by austerity – which accelerate certain inequalities – but that they are also a comment on, and a reaction to, a fundamental change in the relationship between the citizen and the state. This is the essence of what is termed the politics of austerity: a hegemonic socio-political upheaval that protects the interests of capital whilst ostensibly ignoring democratic processes, or, at the very least, rendering them tokenistic. This vacuum of political engagement therefore leaves space for social movements to organise and mobilise on issues created by the politics of austerity.

The resistance of ideas based upon neoliberal ideology have proven to be the most problematic in terms of activist groups seeking alternatives. The economic crisis provided an opportunity for actors and organisations in civil society to present narratives with regards to the direction of social and political arrangements. Instead, these narratives have largely been ignored, or failed to capture the imagination of the public. This issue is addressed in Owen Worth's (2013) work on the numerous resistance groups that appeared during and after the crisis:

The crisis should have allowed them to intensify their challenge to the common sense that neoliberalism relies upon. What has happened instead is that the weaknesses inherent within these challenges have been such that neoliberalism has sought to reinvent itself. By seeking to cut debt through reducing fiscal targets, states and governments, encouraged by business elites, are hoping that the market will re-stimulate growth. (Worth, 2013: 113)

The challenge to neoliberalism, then, has largely been stunted by the efforts of governments – particularly in the UK and Europe – to reinvent financial capitalism, but also by extending significant bailouts to the global banking sector. The austerity agenda, by extension, is deemed as necessary in order to re-balance the financial sector, and stabilise national, international and global economic structures – it is part of the cycle of such systems. In the midst of this perpetual cycle of crisis and reform, social movements have taken on the established ideas of western economic theory and sought to carve out a new narrative, based on a different set of tenets.

Historically, labour movements have relied mostly on the power of trade unions to organise and protest. With the advent of economic globalisation, the power of the trade union has diminished due to the ferocity and speed of growth seen in the global market economy. New forms of collective action, therefore, have had to replace the traditional structures that underpinned protests against economic globalisation. The role of social movements in challenging state operations, and the economic conditions imposed by neoliberalism has become exceptionally pivotal in some cases. In recent times, a number of social movements in the UK have been leading the debate on issues of redistribution, regulation and social justice, influencing social and political discourses. The most prominent of these movements – Occupy London and UK Uncut – have been especially vocal in terms of their mobilisations on the streets, and their online activism. During and after the crisis, such movements in the UK sought to challenge the existing structures that facilitated and maintained the flow of global capital, and its resultant inequalities. There are strong debates currently as to whether these challenges have been able to disrupt or change existing structures. Following from the previous discussion, it is clear that the task of influencing such discourses has proved difficult for social movements.

To give one example, UK Uncut has had some success in raising the issue of tax avoidance as a mainstream issue: '[the group] instigated widespread direct action against Vodafone, closing down more than 30 shops, in protest against its tax avoidance, and initiated Big Society Bail-ins' (Brown et al., 2013: 71). Similarly, Boycott Workfare – a campaign group set up to challenge a government scheme of working for benefits – has fought a continuous and effective battle, leading to the withdrawal of dozens of organisations, commercial and charitable. What these challenges amount to in practice, however, is entirely open to question, and, further, could be deemed as piecemeal rather than substantive. What has occurred, in absence of such a challenge, is that the issues raised by critical voices have either been drowned out, or have been repackaged. The responses of these movements in the UK are, in many ways, the reactions of citizens that have been disenfranchised by undemocratic state structures, and hegemonic financial institutions. It is clear, therefore, that policy analysts need to respond to the issues raised by

these social movements. These forces may be, as Yeates argues, ‘as instrumental in shaping the political management of globalisation as the formal social policies and discourses of international institutions’ (Yeates, 1999: 389). In researching the role of these social movements, there is an imperative to analyse and interpret their demands as serious policy objectives.

### **From Trade Unions to Social Movements**

In terms of understanding the shift from trade unions to social movements, we need to examine some of the historical perspectives that explain the conditions for such a shift from formalised engagement to informal and flexible arrangements. In particular, this section is interested in questioning: (1) why these movements have become important, (2) whom they are trying to represent, and, (3) are these movements a response to globalisation and neoliberalism? The nature of direct and protest action, in terms of representation in working class politics, is shifting away from the centrality of the labour movement towards unaligned movements, which have taken on many of the grievances.

### ***Institutionalised and Non-Institutionalised Engagement***

The contemporary period has seen a shift in the routes for political engagement, especially when we consider the organisation and representation of the working class. The shift has resulted in two very different modes of engagement: (1) the traditional institutionalised methods, as operationalized through political parties and trade union movement (organised labour), for example, and (2) non-institutionalised methods, which are characterised by unaligned, informal groupings of people, often non-hierarchical in structure, that mobilise in protest. As has been discussed, there has been a steady decline in the active participation of citizens in the trade union movement, and in political parties. The shift in engagement from formalised and institutional politics to non-institutional group action, whilst not historically unique, does suggest a change in how citizens choose to engage with political demands – and especially those that have characterised austerity. Though both forms of political mobilisation have relevance independent of each other, it is the relationship between the two methods of engagement with which the following discussion takes interest.

As has been illustrated, the decline of mass industrial organisation has had an impact on the situation of working class politics and particularly on the nature of work – for example, a drive in the labour market towards precarious and flexible work, which cements individualisation. In the UK, the power of the trade union has diminished since the peak of political organisation in the 1970s, where an industrial economy necessitated the organisation of labour. The institutional arrangements of the trade unions were synonymous with working class power. In the 1980s, the relationship between the unions, the state and citizens changed dramatically, and the labour movement generally became less organised, and less powerful, as successive governments sought to reduce the power of the strike. The direct assault on the trade union movement – as previously discussed, through the methods of regressive legislation – signified a dramatic reorganisation of the economy in favour of smaller workplaces, in which organisation became difficult. In addition, ‘continuing changes in the structure of labour markets and employment itself have... contributed to the fragmentation of unionised labour, and generated growing divisions between unionised and non-unionised workers’ (Richards, 2001: 25). Coupled with the ascent of the post-industrial economy (i.e. one that is focused on services rather than manufacturing), the established trade

union movement has found itself to be increasingly irrelevant. The criticisms of the labour movement are not limited to organisation, but extend to understanding how a working class movement can be restored. Fanelli and Brogan (2014) explain how the political visions of the trade union movement need to adapt in order to, once again, become relevant:

A revived emphasis on working class politics must seek to transcend what are often insulated labour and activist subcultures. Considering the weak state of anti-capitalist/progressive forces and organized labour in North America and Europe and their inability to translate support for their political positions into broader political influence, new political organizations and sustained mobilizations that challenge the rule of capital are gravely needed. If unions are to reappear as a movement and not simply hang on as a relic of the past, they will need to move beyond the limited defence of their own members' interests and fight for the interests of the working class as a whole. (Fanelli and Brogan, 2014: 116)

Taking the point of working class interests, it is clear that there is a vacuum of radical trade union organisation. In the conspicuous absence of such forms of organisation, it is possible to chart a steady rise in non-institutional political mobilisations. These are, as discussed, often non-hierarchical, involving unaligned activists, and spontaneous in organisation. As such, there are many contemporary examples of social movements that have been directly involved in struggles that, previously, would have involved the active participation of trade unions, political parties with working class sympathies, and organised labour.

The most recent examples of such movements in the UK discussed in this paper – Occupy and UK Uncut – have drawn participants away from the traditional, institutional sphere and in to non-institutional political mobilisations. Such movements have provided the focus for demonstrations on issues ranging from education, to housing, and to financial regulation. The character and nature of these protests has been well documented in recent years, as researchers and academics alike begin to take a greater interest in the activities of social movements. Of particular interest is the changing nature of political engagements of citizens in relation to the state. It can be argued that in favourable circumstances, social movements are able to manoeuvre in to a position whereby their complaints are, at the very least, considered or addressed to some extent. In less favourable circumstances (i.e. when the state acts to repress the actions of social movements), their mobilisations are less effective: 'the right to demonstrate and protest – the most basic of fundamental freedoms – has been severely constrained amidst hardening disciplinary and repressive state apparatus' (Fanelli and Brogan, 2014: 113). It is the repression of dissent – particularly in the era of austerity – that has precipitated the use of diverse and more direct tactics. The increasing frequency and militancy of such mobilisations – in response to government pursuit of austerity policies – is a reaction to the hardening of state responses.

Non-institutional engagement has seen resurgence since the dual impact of the financial crisis, and the introduction of austerity. What is clear about the latest wave of protest movements is that they are rooted in a desire not only to challenge the current conditions, but also to reimagine and radically overhaul the institutions of political and economic governance that have led to the current crisis. As the full extent of government complicity with the financial sector has become clear, non-institutional engagements have, increasingly, concerned themselves with the democratisation of economic relations, as well as arguing against inequalities:

[The] various occupy social movements, with their protests, demonstrations, and

occupations of public space should be seen as diverse instantiations of an international cycle of contention fighting against social and economic inequality. Their primary goals, if not visions, include a transformation of the economic system to provide greater opportunities, greater equality, and greater personal fulfilment. Moreover, these movements also seek to democratise power in more participatory ways that empower the masses bearing the brunt of economic strains. (Tejerina et al, 2013: 381)

Non-institutional methods of engagement, it can be argued, have been central in creating the conditions for the democratisation of power. The anti-austerity movements that mobilised citizens in the UK were, to an extent, important in discussions on the distribution of power – from the state to the citizen. Whilst the use of participatory forms of democracy through protest movements are not unique to the post-crisis era, there is a distinctive nature to the pattern of organisation, and the frequency of mobilisations, which can be attributed changes in political conditions, but also with advances in technology (i.e. the use of social media). In spite of the contemporary relevance of non-institutional engagements, the increasing frequency of such mobilisations has stirred debate as to whether there are unintended consequences to the rise of anti-austerity protest movements. Kriesi (2014), for instance, argues that: “Professionalization and institutionalisation are changing the social movement into an instrument of conventional politics and social movement organisations become rather like interest groups” (Kriesi, 2014: 371). The use of social movement platforms to campaign for party leaders – as with the current Labour leadership contest – is a recent example of this particular shift in the UK. UK Uncut, for instance, have used social media and online petitioning to promote the campaign for Jeremy Corbyn – an anti-austerity candidate in the leadership contest (see Bush, 2015). From this perspective, the contemporary social movement, rather than becoming an agent of change, is absorbed in to the everyday repertoire of institutional politics. Mobilisations, by this account, become less effective and lose the potential for affecting any meaningful change. Social movements that attain a level of power and significance can transform from non-institutional, direct action organisations, to political parties and institutional groupings. Looking upwards towards the macro level, radical left politics in Europe, and particularly in Greece (with the rise of Syriza) and in Spain (with Podemos), are illustrative of such coalitions where separate political factions and social movements become alliances in opposition to the politics of austerity. The concerns here return to those that were outlined earlier in the discussion on the possibilities of critiquing capitalism.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that alternative, radical and non-institutional forms of political engagement are becoming increasingly relevant with the on-going economic crisis. Political mobilisations of this nature are a response to the conditions of combined social and economic antagonisms, and it is to be expected that these movements will increase in number, and in spontaneity. As Shannon (2014) notes:

The economic crisis is only one crisis, which could serve as a catalyst for the continued mobilisation of people, amidst mobilisations that have already begun. Living in an age of multiple crises creates multiple possibilities for the widening of antagonisms between privilege and power, on the one hand, and the dispossessed, on the other. (Shannon, 2014: 13)

In examining the multiple crises that presently affect democratic capitalism, it is clear that there is now a greater role for social movements and non-institutionalised mobilisations. And whilst the trade union movement remains active in campaigning, there are signs that the traditional and institutional forms of engagement are becoming less popular, and less effective. The potential routes for attempting any challenge, however, remain framed by the resistance and hegemony of particular economic realities – critiques, as discussed, are limited by the adaptive nature of neoliberal capitalism. The challenges to the current economic and political conditions will continue to come from social movements, which have been, in the main, consistent and determined in the struggle against austerity and the effects of financial capitalism. Moving forward, the question for social policy is where social movements fit in to the frame of criticism and analysis of the economic crisis, and, if there are any valuable contributions that can be made to the discipline from outside the sphere of institutional political mobilisations.

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