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Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Original citation: Ishkanian, Armine *From consensus to dissensus: the politics of anti-austerity activism in London and its relationship to voluntary organisations.* Journal of Civil Society . ISSN 1744-8689

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Available in LSE Research Online: May 2017

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From Consensus to Dissensus: the politics of anti-austerity activism in London and its relationship to voluntary organisations

Introduction

Following the 2008 global financial and 2010 European sovereign debt crises, many European countries introduced austerity policies to rein in public spending and reduce budget deficits. In the UK, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government which took office in May 2010 introduced extensive cuts to public spending, increasing fees in higher education, and implementing wide ranging reforms to the benefits system, as austerity became the 'core policy frame' (Hancock et al., 2012). These public spending cuts, the largest since 1921-24 (Lupton et al., 2013), were initially presented as temporary deficit reducing measures but soon became the standard policy tool.

The introduction of austerity policies in a number of countries across Europe, including Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and the UK, has been met with demonstrations, strikes, and extended occupations of public spaces by protestors. In this article, drawing on interviews conducted with activists in London in 2013 with follow-up interviews with key respondents in 2014-2015, we ask: how is activism against austerity organised, articulated, and manifested in London? And, given that anti-austerity activists are addressing issues related to social welfare, how do they engage with and are there alliances between the activists and voluntary organisations (VOs) that are working in that field? In addressing these questions, we draw on and contribute to the literature on social

movements and contentious politics as well as the literature on civil society and voluntary organisations in Britain.

While social movement scholars have analysed the politics, demands, and repertoires of action adopted by movements and activists (Castells, 2012, Calhoun, 2013, Della Porta, 2015, Graeber, 2013, Glasius and Pleyers, 2013, Pleyers, 2011, Yates, 2014) they have largely tended to ignore how movement actors engage with more formal civil society organisations (CSOs), [1] including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and VOs. Meanwhile the literature on civil society and VOs in the UK has primarily focused on professionalised VOs that are committed to delivering public services and engaging in advocacy around narrow questions of policy (Powell, 2008: 50), and far has less has been written about informal grassroots groups and their relationships with formal VOs (Halfpenny and Reid, 2002, Rochester, 2013, Milbourne and Cushman, 2015). In the wider civil society literature, some scholars argue that to 'make a difference', NGOs and VOs should 'think consciously of themselves as part of a social movement' (Bebbington et al., 2008: 32) and that instead of speaking 'on behalf of others', they should confront the status quo by building alliances with grassroots groups (Pearce, 2010: 632). Banks et. al. contend that NGOs should 'return to politics in the broadest sense, and [make] a retreat from the idea that transformation is simply the aggregate of technical interventions' (Banks et al., 2015: 715). However, some contend that aligning with activists, grassroots groups, and social movements, which often employ direct action and embrace what are perceived as radical positions, can be difficult when many (by no means all) NGOs and

[1] Here, we use the terms 'NGO' and 'VO' to refer to formal civil society organisations that are registered, have some professional staff, and receive funding from a wide set of donors, including from statutory bodies, international aid agencies, foundations and the public. In the UK context, 'NGO' commonly refers to organisations that work in international development, whereas 'VO' is used to refer to organisations that work domestically.

VOs are dependent on funding from governments and international organisations that tend to perceive direct action and political positions as inappropriate and unprofessional (Eikenberry, 2009, Glasius and Ishkanian, 2015). **This article contributes to these aforementioned literatures by not only examining the politics, demands, practices, and stances of activists working in grassroots groups, but also analysing *how* those in turn shape activists' views of and relations with formal VOs.** While we acknowledge the desirability of alliances between formal VOs and activists, in this article we examine the challenges involved in creating and sustaining such alliances in practice.

After contextualising our research within the existing literatures on social movements and civil society, we discuss the regulatory context and examine how it shapes the ability of VOs to engage in advocacy and campaigning. Although the anti-austerity groups in which our respondents were involved lack legal status and as such are not directly affected by the current legislation on campaigning, they are working in a political context where the tolerance for campaigning by CSOs is decreasing. Therefore if we are to understand whether and how alliances between VOs and activists form, it is important to examine the impact of the regulatory environment.

Next, we discuss how anti-austerity activists, working through informal, grassroots groups that are part of the wider anti-austerity movement, adopt horizontal, participatory forms of organising. We demonstrate how activists not only challenge the neoliberal ideas that inform austerity, but also contest the Government's claim that there is no alternative to austerity by proposing and experimenting with alternatives approaches. We maintain that activists are engaging in a politics of what Ranciere calls 'dissensus', where those who are normally excluded emerge in the public sphere to

‘dispute what is given and about the frame within which we sense something is given’ (Ranciere, 2010: 69). Anti-austerity activism understood in this way can be seen as a ‘dissensual disordering’ (Bassett, 2014: 889) which is juxtaposed to the consensual, technocratic, and often apolitical model of advocacy embraced by professionalised, formal VOs (Alcock and Kendall, 2011, Rochester, 2013, Taylor et al., 2010).

In the final section, we examine the range of activists’ views of and relations with VOs. We discuss the instances of cooperation between activists and VOs, but also examine how activists criticise VOs of often privileging organisational objectives over wider political and transformative goals. While recognising that activist-VO relations are shaped and constrained by the regulatory context which restricts VOs’ ability to engage in advocacy, we argue that the regulatory context alone is an insufficient explanation as to why activist-VO alliances are difficult to establish and maintain. We propose that more significantly than the current regulatory context, it is VOs’ and activists’ divergent and at times irreconcilable stances, which we refer to as the **consensus and dissensus** stances respectively, which impede activist-VO alliances, beyond episodic interactions, from developing.

Methodology

This article is based on research conducted in London from April to September 2013 and follow-up research conducted between 2014 and 2015 with a number of key and a few new respondents (see Appendix 1 for respondents’ details). This was part of a larger project examining the rise of both anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements in five capital cities in Europe and its wider neighbourhood (Ishkanian and Glasius, 2013) . The focus on capital cities is because the majority of protests and occupations have been

located in large metropolitan areas. To be clear, our focus in this article is on the activists working in grassroots groups and it is not an analysis of the groups as organisations. We present the views and understandings of activists and not the groups they were involved in, since the activists made it quite clear that they only spoke for themselves.

In London, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 respondents, the majority of whom were core activists. An activist can be defined as a collective identity linked to participation in a social movement or collective action (Bobel, 2007). However, we consider core activists as those who have participated in sustained street activism (e.g. occupying a square) and/or direct action since 2010, and for whom activism was a substantial time commitment and important marker of identity, rather than occasional demonstrators. Our questions focused on demands, repertories of action, links to other civil society actors (e.g., VOs, trade unions) and understandings of democracy, social justice, dignity, and responsibility.

Following our initial contact with Occupy London activists, we selected interviewees via a snowball sample, taking care to select for the greatest possible variety in age, race, and gender to reflect the much-noted diversity in the street protests. Additionally, we used the website False Economy, which operated between 2010 and 2015, to identify anti-austerity groups (False Economy, 2014). The site collated information about local campaigns and was a useful additional resource in understanding the numbers and types of groups operating in the capital. Alongside the twenty-five interviews with individual activists, we studied the groups' published materials (e.g., manifestos, articles, blog posts) and attended several meetings, at the organisers' invitation, to observe the dynamics of participation. We recognise the limitations of our

methodological approach and limited sample size. Nonetheless we believe our study provides insights into how anti-austerity activism is structured and the challenges involved in establishing relations between activists and VOs. Our representation of the stances and tactics of VOs in this article are primarily based on a review of existing literature and also the views of some of our respondents who are employed by VOs. As our article was based on research with and emphasises the perspectives of activists, further research is required to better understand the range of VOs' views of activists.

Civil society, Contentious Politics, and social transformation

Many scholars agree that the recent anti-austerity protests reflect growing concerns around a lack of democracy, social justice or dignity (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013, Tejerina et al., 2013, Castells, 2012). Some argue that they represent a tipping point in a 'globalization of disaffection' (Biekart and Fowler, 2013: 528) and describe them as an attempt to 'revitalise democratic politics' (Kaldor and Selchow, 2012: 7). For Della Porta, they are a reaction not only to the economic crisis but also to the 'political situation in which institutions are (and are perceived to be) particularly closed towards citizens' demands' and 'unwilling and incapable of addressing them in an inclusive way' (Della Porta, 2015: 6). Discussing the rise of Occupy, Calhoun argues that protestors were united by a sense of indignation, 'both in the sense that they were indignantly angry and in the sense that they were being treated with little of the dignity owed to citizens' (Calhoun, 2013: 28). A number of scholars (Maeckelbergh, 2011, Yates, 2014, Pleyers, 2011, Graeber, 2013) characterise recent movements as practicing a form of prefigurative politics, in which activists seek to 'implement direct democracy in local public spaces' (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013). Later we discuss how activists characterise their organising

as a form of real or direct democracy and distinguish it from the spaces and practices of participation organised by VOs and Government.

Turning to the literature on civil society and VOs in Britain, there is a long history of activism and voluntary action to which we are unable to do justice here, but from which we draw out two key issues (Kendall and Knapp, 1996, Harris, 2010, Lewis, 1999). First, campaigning and political protest by civil society has long co-existed with philanthropy, mutual aid and service delivery (Rochester, 2013, Milbourne, 2013). Historically, civil society groups, including VOs, have played an important role in challenging the status quo and embracing what were initially radical positions on a range of issues, from domestic violence to same sex rights (Feather, 2016, Lovenduski and Randall, 1993), a point worth remembering in the current policy context where campaigning and advocacy by VOs is often criticised by policy makers.

Second, successive UK governments since the 1980s have promoted greater participation of the voluntary sector in welfare provision (Billis and Glennerster, 1998, Alcock, 2010). New Labour's election in 1997 resulted in the voluntary sector playing an even larger role in the so-called mixed economy of welfare. Kendall argues that the 1998 launch of the *Compact,* the agreement between the government and the voluntary sector, represented an 'unparalleled step in the positioning of the third sector in public policy' (Kendall, 2000: 542). Subsequently, partnership became the primary form of engagement between the state and the voluntary sector as VOs began to enjoy the 'support of' and 'closer contact with government policy makers – a seat at the partnership table' (Alcock, 2010: 21). Since the late 1990s there have been concerns that the growing closeness to government and 'the new economic discipline of contracting' by VOs could potentially

threaten their independence and 'erode' the aspects that make them 'distinctive' (Lewis, 1999: 266) and be detrimental in the long run as the sector would lose its 'rationale' for 'inclusion within a mixed economy of welfare' (Harris, 2001: 219-20).

Many scholars now recognise that although partnership secured a greater role for VOs in service provision, it also generated 'new dilemmas' related to maintaining autonomy (Craig et al., 2004: 221) and their ability to address 'social change and justice' (Milbourne and Cushman, 2015: 3). According to Taylor et. al (2010), the 'key challenge to civic activism' in England in the 2010s is to 'maintain or revive an independent, distinctive and critical stance in a situation where there is a danger of incorporation and the marginalization of dissent' as VOs became 'self-disciplined in a Foucauldian sense', seeing their interests as 'very much congruent with those of the state' (Taylor et al., 2010: 159). We do not disregard VOs' agency (Acheson, 2014), but rather acknowledge that in a bid to be closer to the State, many VOs working in the field of social welfare consciously and actively have committed to the partnership model thereby embracing pragmatic and consensual positions. The tendency towards de-contestation has been noted by critical scholars who describe a process of de-politicisation in the period of late capitalism in which the hegemony of neoliberal ideas has led to a closing off of public debates as consensual approaches replace contestation and deliberation (Mouffe, 2005, Ranciere, 2010, Zizek, 1999).

In the context of social policy shaping, some put great stock in partnership and argue for more collaboration with government, arguing that while 'cosy relationships with central or local government are not necessarily in anyone's long-term interest, … neither is destructive conflict' (Kendall and Knapp, 1996: 249-250). Meanwhile, others,

maintain that contention and conflict can be 'a productive force within which new ideas are developed and new social relations are articulated' (Seckinelgin, 2015: 1) and that formal CSOs should not shy away from being political (Banks et al., 2015). As we demonstrate, activists are not interested in maintaining the status quo. On the contrary, they confront and contest the Government's framing of issues, its proposed solutions, and its claims that there is no alternative to austerity. Given activists' **dissensual** stance, how do they view and engage with VOs which, as we discussed above, tend to avoid contentious approaches and embrace pragmatic, **consensual,** and technocratic stances? Before addressing this question, we situate our discussion in the current regulatory context.

The Regulatory Context

The decades-old process of restructuring the state-VO relationship into one of partnership, as explored above, has created a bifurcation in civil society where activism and campaigning are increasingly separated from service provision. Today, despite the long history of civil society campaigning in England, its probity is being questioned. The policies of the recent Coalition (2010-2015) and Conservative (2015-present) Governments, both in regards to tightening the conditions around statutory funding at the same time as legislating an agenda of greater austerity, have opened this divide even wider: it would appear that there has never been a greater need for activism around social welfare provision and access to services, and yet, it has never been more problematic for VOs to engage in campaigning.

When the Conservatives were in opposition, they argued that the voluntary sector had been undervalued and over-regulated by the Labour government, promising that if

elected, they would revitalise the sector by giving it a greater role through enhancing the opportunities for CSOs (Conservative Party, 2008). Before the May 2010 General Election, David Cameron spoke at length about the Big Society that would place 'huge emphasis on civil society' (Little, 2008). The Conservative-led Coalition Government launched the Big Society agenda early on in their term, also renaming the Office of Third Sector the Office of Civil Society. In the Coalition Government's instrumental approach, CSOs (including registered charities, social enterprises and VOs) were encouraged to 'modernise' and increase their efficiency by improving 'their business skills' and becoming 'more entrepreneurial' (OCS, 2010: 6). Moreover, they were urged to play a greater role 'in running public services' (Hurd and Maude, 2010), all whilst providing 'better value' for money (House of Commons, 2011: 20).

One of the ways that CSOs have traditionally engaged with social policy is through campaigning against policies that they fundamentally disagree with. However, there is much debate around whether and how the government should regulate this activity (38 Degrees, 2013, Last, 2013). Conservative MPs and Ministers have criticised VOs for 'playing politics' when addressing the impact of austerity policies (Rees-Mogg, 2013, Grayling, 2013). In a survey of 157 MPs, 78% of Conservative MPs surveyed stated that it was a 'negative trait' for VOs to be political, as compared to 23% of Labour MPs and 38% of Liberal Democrat MPs who shared this view (nfpSynergy, 2014: 4). In his first major speech since taking office in July 2014, the then Minister for Civil Society, Brooks Newmark, accused VOs who campaign of 'stray[ing] out of their remit' of helping people, adding that they should 'stick to their knitting' and keep out of politics (Mason, 2014).

Despite growing opposition in Westminster, the Charity Commission considers campaigning a 'legitimate' practice (Charity Commission, 2014). A VO may campaign or carry out 'political activity' in the context of supporting its charitable purposes, including campaigning for 'a change in the law, policy or decisions' and 'to ensure that existing laws are observed' (Charity Commission, 2008: 3), as long as they maintain their independence and their trustees ensure that political activity is not their VO's sole activity. The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill was widely opposed by VOs and campaigning groups across the political spectrum, who labeled it 'the gagging law' (38 Degrees, 2013), claiming that it would have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and negatively affect the ability of CSOs to campaign (Last, 2013). The bill became law in September 2014, but its long-term impact remains to be seen.

In February 2016 the Government proposed introducing a clause to be inserted into all new and renewed grant agreements which stated that 'taxpayer funds are [to be] spent on improving people's lives and good causes, rather than lobbying for new regulation or using taxpayers' money to lobby for more government funding' (Cabinet Office, 2016). The clause was widely criticised by umbrella bodies including NCVO and BOND[2]. In a letter to the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the Department for International Development, BOND challenged the clause stating it was 'unclear' how advocacy was being defined. They write, 'We support the principle that taxpayers' money must be well spent…[but] are concerned the clause is drawn very widely, could have a far broader impact than originally intended and raises questions about the

[2] BOND is the umbrella body for organisations working in international development. NCVO is the National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

legitimate role of civil society in informing government policy' (BOND, 2016). In December 2016 the Government replaced the clause with a new grant making standard which is less stringent in that it permits VOs that receive statutory funding to give evidence to select committees.

Of course, not all VOs receive or depend on statutory funding, but in the fields of social welfare, many do. The message from Government is clear: the role of VOs is to efficiently and cost-effectively deliver services. Those who campaign run the risk of being blamed for wasting taxpayers' money and playing politics. There is evidence now that the regulatory measures are leading to increased self-censorship (Deakin, 2014, Ishkanian, 2014).

To be clear, the anti-austerity groups in which our respondents were involved lack legal status and are not registered with the Charity Commission. As such, they are not directly affected by the current legislation on campaigning. However, they are working in a political context where the tolerance for civil society campaigning is diminishing which in turn affects how VOs engage with activists and movements.

The Structure and Organisational Dynamics of Anti-Austerity Activism in London

Given the diversity of current austerity policies, which include cuts to public sector spending and pay; the proposed and actual privatisation of public services (including the National Health Service [NHS]); the introduction of user fees and others, we found that anti-austerity groups in London are organised in one of three ways: 1) established in a specific ***locality*** (e.g., Islington Hands Off Our Public Services, Haringey Alliance for Public Services); 2) created in opposition to a specific ***policy*** (e.g., Boycott

Workfare, Keep our NHS Public); or 3) generated around ***identity*** and how the cuts are affecting a particular group of people (e.g., Black Activists Rising Against Cuts, Disabled People Against Cuts). What links all these groups is their opposition to austerity, whether it be cuts, fee hikes or privatisation.

We interviewed activists from all three types of group and activists from Occupy London. We discovered that while some respondents were new to activism, others had been involved in Climate Camp (2006-2011), the 2003 anti-Iraq war demonstrations and in local resident associations or Friends groups. The activists who organise in these grassroots groups employ a number of strategies including protests, marches, occupations of public spaces, online petitions and campaigns to raise awareness of the issues. Additionally, in the case of locality based groups, activists were involved in activities that serve the community as a whole, such as organising support and citizens' advice groups that counsel citizens on how to deal with reduced service provision. In keeping with current global protest culture, activists rely on social media, particularly Twitter and YouTube, and consider them vital campaigning and information sharing tools.

Many activists discussed how these groups have become spaces for a different kind of organising and engagement on social issues that significantly differs from how most policy makers and VOs conceptualise participation (Newman et al., 2004). For instance, Oscar,[3] described his activism as a form of 'direct democracy', which he defined as 'people having control over the things that affect their lives and [being] personally invested in those things to have more power.' Lucy, described her engagement as a kind of 'real democracy' which she characterised as follows:

[3] We use pseudonyms to refer to respondents. See appendix for further details about the respondents.

> …real freedom and not someone representing you…. I want to have my own say and allow other people to have their say. It's about being able to be an individual within the collective, not in a neoliberal alienating and isolating way, but to be organised in a better way.

Activists considered the horizontal, consensus-based agenda setting and decision making practices as important features of their organising. Several respondents characterised the current socio-political context as defined by hierarchal power structures and undemocratic policy imposition, arguing that they wanted to do things differently. For example, Sophie, who criticised existing models of state-civil society engagement as being 'top-down' and 'patronising', said: 'We are the Big Society but not in the way they think they want it. We are NOT about delivering public services.' She argued instead that it was about having a voice in local matters. Meanwhile Charlie, said:

> The idea of the Big Society, and all of us being in it together are essentially not bad things… [but] the Westminster elite's sense of participation is very narrow, which is a ratified and pre-determined sense of engagement. We say that that's not what we want, as that limits the space. We want to set up parallel spaces for people to have their own say. We want to set a frame through days of action, where people bring their own ideas and opinions and then feel like they can take decisions by themselves.

Harry explained that his group did not want to replicate existing patterns of engagement, but to build an inclusive and empowering space where people could exercise agency and voice. He said: 'We are trying to be different than what we are opposing'.

Another commonly shared feature among anti-austerity groups in London is their lack of leaders. Jake argued that he and fellow activists were 'against the cult of leadership' and William said,

> People place so much faith in new leaders, hoping to transform the world. It's not the way the world is going to change…One of the things which Occupy did, and which sustained my interest in Occupy, was that it's trying to do something very difficult. It's trying to reach decisions by consensus.

Lucy explained how the decision to not have leaders in her group was a conscious choice. She said,

> In [group], we don't have or want a leader. I have gone and represented [group] as an individual, but recently we try to do talks as a threesome. You know, it stops one person getting glory or becoming the "face" of it…We are very sure that it's a collective project. In terms of the wider [anti-austerity] movement, some people who aren't involved or who don't understand the grassroots part of the movement would talk about Owen Jones or Laurie Penny as leaders, but rather they are prominent figures on the Left who are in the media spotlight…The people I am friends with and organise with are totally against the concept [of leaders] and that's not how we want to work.

Similar to Lucy, Charlie explained that being anti-hierarchical and inclusive was a deliberate choice, saying:

> There wasn't a top down leadership imposing things…That's been a conscious approach…As much as it's been about getting our message into the public domain, it's also been about making sure that civil disobedience and direct action are seen as legitimate tools that are available to lots more people than we previously thought of. There was a sense that direct action was perceived from the outside as something for "activists" not for everyday people.

While horizontal organising aims to be maximally inclusive, it can also be very time consuming and inefficient. Elsewhere one of the authors also discusses how the aims of being inclusive are not always realised in practice and that race, class, gender, and experience do shape and can limit participation (Ishkanian and Glasius, 2016). Fred was one of the few respondents who criticised the inefficiencies of horizontal organising. He argued, '… [it] can lead to very long discussions and can be frustrating and can hinder the process of decision-making.' Harry, who was in favour of horizontal organising, however recognised the potential value of having leaders. He explained:

> It's a double-edged sword because we do need recognizable figures… [and] people who are able to contextualize the argument and to propose the solutions

> that are practicable and workable for everybody. But we also want to demystify so people can believe they can be the next leader.

In this section we discussed how activism against austerity is organised around informal, grassroots groups. These groups are horizontally structured and leaderless, where great emphasis is placed on participation, inclusion, and consensus based decision making. We discussed how respondents represent their activism as a form of real or direct democracy. By organising in ways that are distinct from the hierarchical models they criticise, activists are engaging in prefigurative politics as they seek to be the change they wish to achieve. In the next section, we examine the demands, critiques, and alternative practices.

Dissensual Disordering: Activists Challenging Austerity and Promoting Alternatives

In Britain today it would appear that neoliberalism has become 'the default option, the grand narrative that need not speak its name' whereas alternatives, including the Scandinavian model of welfare, or socialism, have become 'pick and mix petit narratives' (Scambler et al., 2014: 214). Some argue that austerity policies continue the neoliberal assault on the welfare state that began under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s (Levitas, 2012, Rodger, 2012). Drawing on Foucault, Brown describes neoliberalism as 'an order of normative reason' and a 'governing rationality', which devalues common ends and public goods, opposes progressive taxation and instead advocates a radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections as well as the scrapping of wealth redistribution as a social and economic policy approach (Brown, 2015: 28 - 30). As noted by social policy scholars, in this 'age of austerity', retaining the 'neoliberal hegemony'

depends on focusing on the 'irrationality' of redistribution (Farnsworth and Irving, 2012: 133-134) and portraying welfare spending as an 'impediment to economic efficiency and global competitiveness' (Dean, 2012: 111).

One of the key tenets of neoliberal logic is the emphasis on individual responsibility, i.e. individuals being responsible for their own wellbeing and life outcomes (Barry et al., 1996, Harvey, 2007). Activists argued that without a change in ideas, little will change at the level of policy design. For example, Olivia, noted '…every single one of us is fighting neoliberalism. And it's going to be a long and bloody battle'. Several respondents (Harry, Lucy, Mia, Oliver, Oscar, Thomas) argued that despite the government's claims that 'we are all in this together', society's poor and disadvantaged unfairly bore the responsibility for coping with austerity. For instance, Harry argued:

> If we are going to talk about responsibility...Fact is most people who are receiving benefits…are already in work. It's not about dependency, it's about subsidising multinational corporations [MNCs]…and topping up low wages with state support when in fact the MNCs should provide people with a living wage…which actually lifts them rather than traps them [in poverty]…you have to look much further back the chain to where that responsibility has been shirked and not focus on the individual.

Lucy, also did not locate responsibility solely on the individual, arguing that similar to the burden of austerity, responsibility was not equally shared. She said:

> …there is the discourse of the individual getting control of themselves and getting themselves a job. I think it's a nasty discourse! We pointed out once that when A4E[4] were not doing their task well of getting people into work, the government was like, well, the economic climate. But when it's about individuals [not finding work], then it's their fault…That's a double standard. I don't like that term [responsibility] at all because it's right wing neoliberal dogma that you are hit with all the time that it's your own fault that you are where you are.

[4] A4E is the former name of PeoplePlus, which is a UK based for-profit welfare-to-work company.

Mia, cited structural inequalities and also described how race affects people's opportunities and experiences:

> We have got individual responsibility, which is why people want dignity and want to earn enough to live off. Nobody actually wants to claim benefits…People are already struggling to keep a roof over their head and to keep a job going. There are more black people working in temporary or casual jobs, so they don't have a steady income.

Apart from criticising austerity, activists also discussed, campaigned for, and experimented with alternative approaches. They argued for redistributive policies, such as tackling tax avoidance and progressive taxation, as alternative responses to solving the budget deficit, which would shift the burden from the poor to the rich. Several activists challenged the government's claim that 'there is no alternative' to austerity for tackling the deficit. For example, Charlie said:

> [We] promote a sense of the alternatives, to oppose the government's lie that we are all in this together, [we say] there is an alternative, that the poorest shouldn't pay for a crisis created by the banks and that we can pay for and afford our welfare state, and to stop tax avoidance.

Similarly, Jake argued against austerity policies of 'cuts and fees', proposing progressive taxation as an alternative. He said:

> …[its] about trying to fight the tide of neoliberalism because that is the real battle that we are facing here....it is about social democratic ideas that public services should be accessible and should be free...actually it isn't a terribly radical demand in a historical sense, but it contains a more radical political sentiment against the established order of things and about the present arrangement of society.

Jake's point about the 'radical demand' of defending the welfare state is not, as he points out, radical in the sense that it is a 'terribly' unconventional demand. On the contrary, the demand is only 'radical' in the context of the present 'governing rationality' (Brown 2015: 28) where retaining the 'neoliberal hegemony' depends on focusing on the

‘irrationality’ of redistribution (Farnsworth and Irving, 2012: 133-134). For other activists, tax justice was not ‘radical’ enough. For instance Lucy, argued that the objective was not only to achieve ‘a more equal society’, but a ‘radically different one’ and Leo, described his group’s work as a ‘revolutionary process’. He said,

> I believe rather than cutting or privatising public services, they should be massively expanded to cover the whole of society and everything that is private should be turned into a public service…I see the anti-cuts struggles as defending public services. I see it as a revolutionary process that we asserting and empowering ourselves in local areas for a society where all the services and all the resources are for the public.

Oscar discussed the efforts he and fellow activists were putting into developing a model of ‘energy democracy’ or ‘energy commons’ which he described as the intention to ‘buy back the grid from private hands and return it to local control’ (Oscar). For other activists, including Fred, William, Oliver, Olivia, and Thomas, the commons movement or the practice of commoning[5] were seen as alternatives. Thomas said,

> My biggest and strongest allegiance is the Commons Movement. It is a bold and positive movement and has enormous credibility both intellectually and on the ground… It's about trying to identify the benefit for all and doing so through sensitive coordination, not like the predatory nature of capitalism. It is all done through a reasonable discussion, all these things are possible. Not easily of course.

While Thomas’ group had not put commoning into practice, Oliver explained how he and his group were involved in another model of distributing goods called ‘freecyling’[6]. He said, ‘One of the first things we did in [borough] was to freecycle…and then spent the whole year travelling around the borough to create free shops.’ Oliver described the ‘main idea’ of freecycling was to ‘stir and provide a platform to share’.

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[5] The commons or commoning are the belief that “some forms of wealth belong to all of us, and that these community resources must be actively protected and managed for the good of all” See more at http://www.onthecommons.org/about-commons

[6] Freecycling is when a person passes an unwanted item at no cost to another person.

In this section, we examined activists' critiques of austerity policies and their dissensual stances. As we demonstrated, activists are not interested in maintaining the status quo, but are instead challenging austerity policies and the underlying neoliberal assumptions which inform them. In turn, they are proposing and experimenting with alternative models and approaches.

Dissensus vs. Consensus: Relations between Activists and Voluntary Organisations

We found that there was a range of interactions between activists and VOs in London, as indeed in our other field sites (Glasius and Ishkanian, 2015). Some activists spoke positively about their interactions with VOs, describing how they relied on VOs for meeting space, printing services, and research expertise. For example, Oscar described how a 'friendly NGO' had provided him with a desk at their office and invited members of his anti-austerity group to a 'big civil society coalition'. He said,

> We're not formally signed up [as members of the coalition]… We don't want to be signed up to that and they [the VOs] don't want us to be signed up to that, but actually they probably quite like us to be there at meetings because we probably get the media attention more than they do.

When first interviewed in 2013, Alice also spoke of how her group had a positive experience of working with VOs. She said, '…there are those [VOs] that we work very closely with… they have accumulated knowledge, they can support us with things that we don't have the time to dedicate to … We can't afford to have people doing research'. However, it is important to note that both Alice and Oscar, as well as our other respondents who had working relations with VOs, including Charlie, Emily, Harry, Lucy, Mark, Matthew, and Sophie indicated that these interactions tended to

remain below the radar and to be episodic and transactional in nature. We found that maintaining alliances for the longer period has been difficult. For instance, in a follow-up discussion with Alice in December 2014, she described how a collaboration with a high-profile VO in London, which had begun six months' earlier as 'a partnership of equals' was becoming difficult to sustain. She explained that after the VO hired a fulltime campaign manager, the relationship with activists began to sour in that activists were increasingly being excluded from the strategic discussions related to the campaign and were instead 'being treated like we are the VO's volunteers'. Alice, argued that while the VO was happy to take the activists' ideas, use their banners, and to benefit from the publicity which activists generated, it was 'less willing to share information and to include us in the decision-making discussions'. She planned to withdraw from future cooperation with the VO as she did not feel her contribution was sufficiently valued.

Other activists were far more critical, often accusing VOs of being more interested in pursuing their narrow organisational goals than in challenging austerity policies and in advancing a more progressive agenda that would seek to transform the structures that perpetuate poverty and inequality. For example, Thomas said:

> I can't say how exasperated I am with them [VOs]. The fact that we had all these people [at St Paul's] who are homeless and were drug addicts and alcoholics coming and disrupting a political protest and none of the homeless VOs came to deal with that. None of them showed any constructive help whatsoever. And they should've done, it was a divine opportunity for them to develop relationships with those people and to get them off the streets and off the drugs…I think that was an extraordinary failure for the VOs.

When we asked Thomas why he thought VOs did not come to the camp at St Paul's, he suggested that VOs might be fearful of publically associating with Occupy, saying: 'The

Occupy critique is so extreme that there is no language in the mainstream political arena that allows such a position to exist'. Like Thomas, Olivia, accused VOs of prioritising a cosy relationship with local government over representation. She said: 'The official voluntary organisation in this area is called Community Action X [CA-X], but it is never about action. All they ever do is to support the Council. Whatever the Council needs doing they tell them and CA-X will do it.' Emily, similarly critical, argued that VOs have 'lost touch with their constituents and members', describing them as 'privatised, corporatised and dead-headed.' Meanwhile, Harry, who acknowledged the challenges facing VOs, attributed his group's creation to VOs' lack of engagement and concern for wider social transformation. He said: '…there are lots of VOs that provide service delivery at the local level. But they don't have the capacity, confidence or will to campaign because they are afraid this will put funding under threat and use up man-hours'.

In a few instances, activists' criticism of VOs has erupted into public confrontations. One of our respondents was involved in Boycott Workfare (BW), which is a grassroots anti-austerity group that campaigns against workfare.[7] BW names, shames, and protests against the use of workfare not only by private companies, but also by VOs. BW activists have engaged in direct action against VOs and on one occasion they occupied the headquarters of the Salvation Army to protest its continuing use of workfare placements (Boycott Workfare, 2013). Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), which is another grassroots group from which we interviewed an activist, also frequently criticises

[7] Workfare refers to a range of government programmes under which unemployed people are required to volunteer for up to six months or face losing their benefits

the actions or non-action of disability VOs (DPAC, 2013, DPAC, 2017). In one article DPAC writes,

> DPAC have had an odd kind of non-relationship with DRUK [Disability Rights UK]. We've disagreed about many things…The fact that a so-called user led organisation is putting forward anything different with the spectra of institutionalisation added to the mix is a tragic condemnation of all that disability activists have ever worked and fought for. We are appalled that DRUK are willing to sacrifice disabled people's futures in this way and sadly can only assume this is to ensure on-going funding from the government (DPAC, 2014) .

Some activists we interviewed, who were employed by VOs or trade unions, were particularly helpful in illustrating the complexities of and challenges facing VOs in allying with activists. Matthew, an activist who is a trade union employee, explained the difficulties VOs or unions face when they engage with informal, leaderless groups. He said:

> …[Occupy] are very amorphous. Even if someone is in a "leadership" role or undertaking some tasks, these change very often and the people change very often. It's harder to have a structural relationship with them. They have less of a tactical blueprint that you can support and not much of a strategy.

Apart from the organisational challenges, Mark, who was a VO employee, explained the risks facing VOs that openly align with anti-austerity groups and activists. While he did not directly reference the 'gagging law', he noted how overtly political stances can endanger VOs' chances of receiving statutory funding. He said,

> We [the VO] are caught in between local government and the community. If we get too close to the local authority, we are accused of selling out and being co-opted. If we get too close to the community groups we are accused of being too radical and anarchistic. *But we don't really have a choice. Losing funding isn't an abstract concept; it really happens and if we want to help people, we need to survive as an organisation*. [Emphasis added]

Charlie, who is an NGO employee, similarly argued that VOs are constrained by these competing demands and maintained that there is little tolerance for contentious action within some VOs. He explained his decision to join an anti-austerity group noting that 'a lot of people involved in [the anti-austerity movement] themselves work in NGOs and VOs where their personal politics are not always acceptable'. He said:

> For those of us [who are NGO/VO employees], this group is a way to get away from that…it is about using more radical means and having a more radical message and of being more autonomous than NGOs can be…NGOs pay you to work, but you start at the bottom of the ladder and you do not have enough influence to make real change.

In this section we discussed the range of activists' view and relations with VOs, highlighting that the relations are complex and can change over time. Elsewhere one of the authors has analysed the relations between activists and NGOs characterising theses relationship as a form of 'surreptitious symbiosis' (Glasius and Ishkanian, 2015). Here we recognise the surreptitious nature of some activist- VO relations, but also demonstrate the contentious dynamics that exist and the challenges of developing and sustaining activist – VO relations beyond episodic interactions and over a longer period of time. To be clear, in this article we focused on the perspectives of the activists, with some views from those activists who are employed in VOs. Further research is needed to better understand the range of VOs' perspectives.

Conclusion

The recent activism against austerity in London, which we discussed in this article, shares many similarities with anti-austerity protests and movements elsewhere (Biekart and Fowler, 2013, Castells, 2012, Glasius and Pleyers, 2013, Tejerina et al., 2013). We discussed how activists, working through grassroots groups that are part

of the wider anti-austerity movement, adopt horizontal, participatory forms of agenda setting and decision-making and strive to be maximally inclusive. They describe their organising as a form of real or direct democracy and distinguish it from the existing spaces and practices of engagement and participation organised by VOs or Government. In challenging both the austerity policies as well as the neoliberal ideas and assumptions that inform and legitimise those policies, activists are contesting the status quo that there is no alternative to austerity. In the context of continuing austerity, coupled with the uncertainties of Brexit, it is important to consider what role civil society, broadly understood, will play in policy shaping in the years to come.

In discussing the range of activists' views and relations with VOs, we illustrated how positive collaborations can exist, but that these have tended to be below the radar, episodic, and transactional in nature, with more substantial, long term partnerships being difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. We argued that activists' demands, practices, and dissensual stances are diametrically opposed to the aims, consensual stances, and technocratic practices adopted by many, though by no means all, VOs. Activists, as we have shown, contest VOs' claims of representativeness and argue that VOs are more concerned with ensuring their organisational survival and future funding than in achieving 'real change' (Charlie). Undoubtedly, VOs will contest the activists' claims, and as discussed earlier, further research is required to have a more robust understanding of VOs' views of activists. However, it is not only the activists' critiques that should concern VOs. In recent years, public trust in VOs is also declining. In 2013 60% of respondents reported having high levels of trust in VOs and in 2016 this had fallen to 32% (Cooney, 2017). According to the Charity Commission,

this 'fall in trust and confidence can be attributed to critical media coverage of charity practices, distrust about how charities spend donations, and a lack of knowledge among the public about where their donations go' (Charity Commission, 2016).

While VOs' inability and/or unwillingness to more openly and effectively ally with anti-austerity activists in the current political context is understandable, their reluctance also raises questions about how VOs see their wider role and purpose in society. The time has come for VOs to re-evaluate their wider purpose in society and to re-think their understandings of effectiveness and success which extend beyond the organisational level. They should consider how effective they truly are, and are perceived to be, in tackling the structural causes and consequences of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Otherwise, it is difficult to see how VOs in England can still be considered 'agent[s] of social and democratic renewal' (Cairns, 2009: 35).

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