

“No ifs, no buts, no public sector cuts!”

What is the Potential of Anti-Cuts Resistance in Liverpool?

Abstract

In response to the global economic crisis of 2007-10, a politics of ‘austerity’ has been imposed across many European nations; to ‘rebalance the books’, public spending has been cut, and wages frozen. Yet, as a crisis of *finance* is being politically reframed by elites as a ‘crisis of *state* overspending’, resistance to austerity measures is growing, largely from the political left. This research explores the emergence of ‘anti-austerity’ politics in Liverpool – a city suffering the ‘double punch’ of some of the worst cut-backs, in an area of particularly high deprivation – and asks what is their potential to initiate meaningful political change, and to project alternative political futures *beyond* austerity?

Introduction

- Following the global economic crisis of 2007-10, ‘austerity’ politics have been imposed across the developed world. The logics of austerity dictate that we have a **crisis of reckless public spending**, in which only a programme of **state cut-backs** can effectively ‘rebalance the books’.
- In the UK, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government has also imposed austerity measures yet, despite promising not to allow “the poorest people in Britain to pay an unfair price for the mistakes of the richest” (Conservative Party, 2010: 1), it is public services, welfare expenditure and local government – the **services the poorest most rely upon** – that have faced the brunt of the cuts.
- Austerity measures therefore **disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable people in society** (Seymour, 2014).
- In Liverpool, the city council has experienced the ‘double punch’ of suffering some of the harshest cut-backs – **58% in real-terms** – whilst suffering some of the highest levels of multiple deprivation in the country.
- These cut-backs have resulted in the loss of leisure centres, cuts to adult care and mental health services, job losses, the selling-off of public land, and threats to libraries and children’s services, to name just a few.
- By 2016, there will be no council funding at all for discretionary services such as libraries, leisure centres, housing and regeneration – those which the council is not legally required to provide. The results will be “**devastating**” for the city, and could potentially **spark riots** like those seen in 2011, warns city mayor Joe Anderson (BBC News, 2012).

Aims & Objectives

- Unlike in countries such as Greece and Spain, in the UK there has been much less public opposition to austerity. As austerity can be conceptualised as both a consolidation and extension of neoliberal capitalism (Worth, 2013), we would expect a response from the **political left**.
 - However, the political left has largely failed to oppose austerity, which enjoys **mainstream cross-party consensus**. But there is some **grassroots resistance** to the cuts...
 - The **aim** of this research is to explore this growing ‘**anti-austerity**’ movement and to assess the extent to which anti-austerity politics **move beyond** reactive, defensive and isolated struggles for the retention of, say, a library service, towards – like in Greece – building a **coherent political alternative** to austerity. The **objectives** are as follows:
- To understand how people conceptualise austerity, and what are their methods for ‘fighting back’ (Tilly, 1986: 390)?
 - To consider anti-austerity politics in Liverpool in light of the city’s particular histories and political culture.
 - To explore the types of politics materialising out of this resistance; are they defensive, single-issue campaigns – a ‘shout’/refusal – or the **affirmation of something new** (Holloway, 2010)?
 - To examine the overall potential of anti-austerity resistance and consider its capacity to build coherent political alternatives and realise **alternative political futures**?
 - To reflect on the **limits of anti-austerity politics** in initiating political change.

Methodology

- Ethnography** 18 months observation/participation within anti-cuts networks in Liverpool: attending meetings; participating in marches etc.; observing everyday interaction; co-organising conferences/workshops
- Research Diary & Field notes** Keeping a log of all observations
- Semi-structured interviews** with movement participants and key actors within these anti-austerity networks
- Focus Groups** Holding political strategy & reflection meetings with participants
- Dissemination** participants co-produce the research through collaboration and constant feedback of results and findings



Figure 1: ‘No Cuts’ is the rallying cry of the anti-austerity movement



Figure 2: Banner at the *No Austerity!* Conference, February Liverpool, 2014

Conceptual Framework

This research is framed by two conceptual lenses which allow us to understand anti-austerity politics in different ways.

- Militant Liverpool**
 - During 1983-87, Liverpool elected a ‘militant’ Labour council that **refused to implement austerity measures** and confronted Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative central government.
 - A long, bitter struggle ensued, which had a lasting impact on the city’s reputation – Liverpool known as a ‘**radical**’ city.
 - Contemporary struggle must be situated within the broader context of the city’s **place-based politics** and its particular political histories and geographies.
 - What is the contemporary **political imaginary** of Liverpool, and how does it serve to limit political possibilities within the city?
 - The histories and geographies of past struggle *matter* - they exact both **pressures and possibilities** for the re-construction of political identities (Featherstone, 2008).
- Social Movement Theories**
 - Drawing on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to understand how austerity has gained public acceptance despite being so destructive.
 - Gramsci argues that oppositional movements must construct an **alternative political programme** in order to overturn ‘**hegemonic**’ (dominant) societal relations such as capitalism.
 - This programme must create a new ‘**common sense**’ and encompass all those taken for granted ideas and dispositions which dominate everyday life (Gramsci, 1971).
 - Another frame of analysis is the ‘post-political’ – there is a **growing depoliticisation** of political issues in which politicians convince the public “there is no alternative” to capitalism.
 - Elected politicians are reduced to managerial experts, tasked with administering the very same **ideological system** in simply either a more ‘efficient’ or more ‘human’ way than the opposition
 - Post-political discourses **deny the political possibilities** for alternative socio-political interpretations (Mouffe, 2005).



Figure 3: 50,000 people march in support of the anti-cuts stance taken by the Labour-run City Council, Liverpool 1984



Figure 4: Anti-cuts protestors hold a *No Austerity!* conference in Liverpool, February 2015

Results & Conclusions

- There is growing anger and discontent at the austerity measures being inflicted upon people, both locally and nationally.
- Participants effectively frame their opposition to austerity measures within a broader political context that **identifies neoliberal capitalism** as the structural problem.
- As a result, participants actively seek to **move beyond defensive and reactive struggles** (‘firefighting’) and towards building an explicitly anti-austerity movement.
- But participants’ demands, and therefore anti-austerity politics, are often confined to a “**return to the past**” – to repeating the actions of 1983-87 and/or the revival of social-democracy.
- This is deeply embedded within the political culture and **place-based politics** of Liverpool
- There are **limits to the political imaginary** which prevent new, and more radical, solutions to austerity from emerging..
- The British Left is in a **state of inertia** and has been unable to articulate credible political alternatives to austerity to date; both locally and nationally.
- The research upholds academic ideas about the ‘post-political’ and the **inability for oppositional groups** to penetrate this discourse – a necessity in order to initiate progressive political change (Gramsci, 1971).

References

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