The Anti-Austerity Protests in Europe since 2008: The Dominant Logic of Social Movement Politics

Peter N. Funke

Summary

In the wake of the recent anti-austerity demonstrations in Europe and the globally spreading occupy-type protests and encampments, many observers have argued that these mobilizations manifest a novel protest cycle, distinct from prior demonstrations and social movement organizing. In particular, the mobilizations’ novelty consists of the accepted diversity of actors and struggles, leaderless horizontal governing structures and networking dynamics for which new information and communication technologies and in particular internet-powered social media are vital tools. While I broadly agree with the outlined characteristics defining the (mostly southern) European anti-austerity protest cycle, I want to suggest that these protests are in fact not the first instantiations of this particular movement logic. Rather, these protests in Europe as well as the “Arab Spring” or Occupy Wall Street are part of a broader arc of contention, stretching back to at least the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) of the 1990s and the broader Global Social Justice Movements of the 1990/2000s.

Keyed to the ascendance of neoliberal capitalism and to shifts in communication technologies, this arc of contention or what - drawing on Deleuze and Guattari - I have called elsewhere the “rhizomatic epoch of contention” (Funke, 2014) is defined by the widely shared acceptance of diversity and equality of actors and struggles, the multi-connectivity of the same, horizontal, consensus-based decision-making processes and pre-figurative politics as well as the infrastructural use of communication technologies. This logic has been successful in fostering quick movement growth. However, it simultaneously bears shortcomings for resilient movement building.