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Title: “Solidarity is our weapon”. Social mobilisation in Scotland in the contest of the post-political condition

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“Solidarity is our weapon”.

Social mobilisation in Scotland in the contest of the post-political condition

Abstract

The consensual climate of the post-political order has been recently disrupted in Europe. The mass protests staged in different European countries and the resurgences of the extreme parties in response to the multiple European crises witness the “cracks” in consensual politics. While much of the scholarly attention has been drawn onto the socio-political implications of large-scale upraises, the contribution of bottom-up sub-national groups to the “return of the political” has been under-researched. Therefore, this article focuses on sub-national grassroots groups as instances of the “properly political” (Swyngedouw, 2009). It is contended that these groups, by putting in place acts of solidarity, are “agonistic” political forms, containing *in nuce* the potential to counter-act the post-political order and to shape a new politics. To interrogate this argument, the article reports the findings of a case study analysis involving four grassroots groups based in Scotland.

Keywords: post-politics, social movements, solidarity, Scotland.

Introduction

Many authors defined the present era as post-political, characterised by the disappearance of “the political”, intended as the expression of the dissensus and antagonism, from politics. According to this stream of thought, the political has been suppressed in the name of the politics of consensus (Rancière, 2001; Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 1999). Thus, politics can arguably be characterised as the mere exercise of administrative powers. However, some events might open up new political avenues. From the abrupt rising of broad social movements to small local grassroots groups, the current political landscape is preludeing a new political season. Despite the much touted “end of history”, marked by the ‘victory’ of liberal democracy as the optimal form of government (Fukuyama, 1992) and signalling the starting point of the post-political order (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014), it appears now that a new politics may be shaped and an embryonic set of ideas – which is probably too early to be called ideology - is emerging. By reclaiming social justice and equality, new social groups and movements are gaining

momentum. The Occupy movement, the Indignados' protest, the Syntagma Square movement, the Arab Spring, the Taksim square protests and the increased support of radical left- and right-wing parties in many Western countries may hint at a "return of the political" (Swyngedouw, 2014).

However, this trend cannot be detected only in broad social uproars. Not only insurgent movements at national and transnational levels, often short-lived, witness such return of politics. These mass social uprisings that have caught the imagination of radical scholars have indubitably the merit of contributing to new political expressions. However, other smaller, localised - and less visible - grassroots groups are also contributing to the redefinition of the political and of the relationship between the state apparatus and the citizens. For instance, those local grassroots groups campaigning for the introduction of specific policy measures and/or providing services in policy sectors such as housing or unemployment. Rather than challenging the political elite through disruptive actions, such as protests and boycotts, in the name of the grand ideals of democracy, participation and equality, these organisations act to change the status quo through acts of solidarity. Solidarity is here understood as a political idea reclaiming unity and cooperation among individuals sharing common beliefs, social backgrounds and/or experiences. Acts of solidarity thus define actions performed to address specific social issues and whose rationale rests on a specific political vision (see Arampatzi, 2017; Daskalaki, 2017; Vaiou and Kalandides, 2015).

These practices, developed by non-partisan grassroots groups, which criticise institutional responses to social problems acting *within* mainstream society, arguably represent instances of the "properly political" (Swyngedouw, 2009). Thus, this article explores whether and how such sub-national solidarity praxes contribute to the redefinition of the political. Taking a critical stand towards some of the contributions on the post-politics scholarship, we argue that these solidarity acts are the political manifestation of reciprocal bonds developed among members of different social groups and pose a new direction to the post-politics. Consequently, this article has a two-fold aim: firstly, it attempts to show that "the political" has neither been totally "evacuated" from politics (Rancière, 2001), nor is a rare and disruptive moment (Swyngedouw, 2009; Žižek, 1999). Secondly, we seek to substantiate our argument with empirical flesh through the analysis of four cases of grassroots movements based in Scotland. This article draws on the findings of an EU-funded project under the Horizon2020 scheme, whose overarching aim was to identify and analyse acts of solidarity across different European

countries. In this respect, Scotland makes an interesting case to explore, characterised by a long history of vigorous civil society groups (Lindsay, 2006) and by a renewal of political enthusiasm, spurred by the independence referendum in 2014, which has prompted ordinary citizens to engage in politics (McGarvey, 2015).

The article unfolds as follows. After this introduction, the ensuing section discusses the enactment of solidarity against the post-political backdrop. Next, the methodology will be outlined, followed by the presentation and discussion of the findings. In the final section, these findings will be used to interrogate the research question.

Post-politics and solidarity acts

The post-politics literature denounces how the consensual climate, established after the fall of the Soviet Union and the consequential demise of Communism, has led to the elimination of ideologies and thus the annihilation of the confrontation from the political arena. Post-politics scholars suggest that the domination of liberalism has suppressed dissensus and disagreement – the core characteristics of “the political” – reducing politics to a technical and managerial field aimed at maintaining the functioning of the bureaucratic apparatus (Mouffe, 2005, 2013; Rancière, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2011, 2014; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Žižek, 1999).

Post-politics accounts stress the difference between “politics” and “the political”: the first indicates the administrative governing practices, whilst the latter represents the true expression of disagreement (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014), although there is no agreement about the precise meaning of the two terms. For Mouffe (2005, p.9), “the political” coincides with “the dimension of antagonism [...] constitutive of human societies” and “politics” indicates those “set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.” Drawing on Schmitt (1976), Mouffe (2005, p.11) maintains that the inner essence of the political is “antagonism”, emerging from the opposition between the binary “friend/enemy”, “we” against “they”, therefore pertaining to “collective forms of identification”. To solve the impasse between consensus and antagonism, Mouffe (2005, p.20) proposes the notion of “agonism”, a dialectical relation between “adversaries”, which avow their respective “legitimacy” despite the impossibility to reach a “rational solution to their conflict”. The centrality of contestation in

the political is also stated by Rancière (2001), for whom the constitutive element of politics lies in the “manifestation of dissensus”. However, political disagreement should not be conceived as the divergence between different views, but as “a conflict over the common itself”, “a dispute over the situation itself, a dispute [...] over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it.” (Rancière, 2004, p.6). Politics should then be understood as “a local, precarious, contingent activity” (Rancière, 2004, p.8). In this sense, “[t]he political arises when the given order of things is questioned” (Swyngedouw, 2009, p.607). However, as Swyngedouw (2014, p.129) explains, the political does not pertain to those attempts of movements and groups to prompt policy-makers to address a social problem; rather, it lies in the request by those “‘that do not count’ to be counted, named, and recognised.” However, it is questionable whether all movements advocating for solving social issues can be dismissed as non-political. Campaigning or lobbying for state intervention on a social issue may be a strategy to achieve a political project. Many movements – as the cases studied here - give voice to marginal sections of the society and, by drawing the attention of policy-makers to a social problem, contribute to change the political attitude towards who “do not count”.

Despite endeavouring to erase political disagreement, the post-political condition offers opportunities for the political to come into being, since “de-politicization” is not realised entirely (Swyngedouw, 2011, p.373). Therefore, the containment of the political dissensus – the central characteristics of politics (Rancière, 2001) - may explode in acts of protest and dissidence. The post-political consensus, to say it with Marx and Engels (2004), generates its own “gravediggers”. By flattening the dissensus, consensus politics produces either political disengagement or extreme responses (Mouffe, 2013). Hence, the politics of consensus, whose primary aim is argued to be to silence contention, has not succeeded in delivering social pacification and even produced forms of contestation, such as far-right xenophobic groups, which ultimately are the by-products of “the erasure of democracy and politics constitutive of the logic of consensus” (Rancière, 2004, p.4). The post-democratic order will thus lead to “identity politics and violent fundamentalisms” (Rancière, 1999) and “ultra-politics”, based on the narrative of the “us” versus “them”, whose interaction can only assume violent connotations (Žižek, 1999).

Radical scholars foresee various possibilities to end the post-political order. Hardt and Negri (2009) call for the “withdrawal” from the state, the abandonment of the institutions through “exodus” – i.e. practices of “disobedience” – as the only way out the post-political order (Hardt

and Negri, 2009, p.368). Against the advocates of the defection from the state, Mouffe (2013, p.71) argues that the “engagement with institutions” is the most effective way to ensure an agonistic politics. In the same vein, Beveridge and Koch (2017, p.37) claim that the interaction with the “visible nodes of power” would enable “radical politics” to supersede the post-political status quo and assert its political character.

Even though post-politics literature lends a useful framework to analyse the contemporary political context, some criticisms have been voiced, especially noting the limited definition of what constitutes the truly political, which marginalises relevant modes of dissensus (Beveridge and Koch, 2017; Crossan, 2016; Larner, 2014; McCarthy, 2013; Nolan and Featherston, 2015). Therefore, the post-political thesis dismisses the plethora of locally based groups as non-political, in that they adopt non-insurgent methods to contest the post-political order (Beveridge and Koch, 2017). Against the concept of the political as a rare and disruptive event subverting the post-political status quo, brought forward by some post-politics scholars (Rancière, 2001, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2009; Žižek, 1999, 2011), it can be counter-argued that the “properly political” can be detected in less grand popular outbursts. In the post-political scholarship, we would argue, there is an inherent underestimation of the political power of what Swyngedouw (2011) calls the “micro-politics of dispersed resistances, alternative practices and affects” (Larner, 2014, p.194). On this point, Larner (2014, p.191) expresses her concern for the “relentless pessimism” underpinning much of the post-politics literature and claims that there are forms of social mobilisations engaged in the quest for radical and diverse political realities.

Born out of the post-political order, the micro-politics of localised social movements may contribute to the re-politicisation of the political realm. At sub-national level, social organisations have reacted to policy voids and inefficiency of the political class by putting in place acts of solidarity, that is concrete social actions exerting political effect and aimed at improving the situation of a specific social group, such as migrants or unemployed. Drawing on Arampatzi (2017, p.2161), solidarity is here understood as a “mutually constituted narrative and [...] ‘praxis’ ‘from below’”, seeking “to empower the disempowered”. Further, following Brown and Yaffe’s (2013) distinction between “humanitarian” and “political solidarity”, we maintain that solidarity is not the manifestation of philanthropic generosity, but constitutes a form of contestation: given the “ambivalent character of human sociability”, “reciprocity and hostility cannot be dissociated” (Mouffe, 2005, p.3). Understood as such, solidarity predicates

a non-discriminating inclusivity of individuals, rejecting the “exclusionary” meaning characterising xenophobic discourses (Arampatzi, 2017).

Empirical research has documented the territorial interventions of grassroots groups, such as: small social enterprises (Larner, 2014), community organisations and riots (Nolan and Featherston, 2015), social centres (Crossan, 2016) and anti-austerity praxes (Arampatzi, 2017; Daskalaki, 2017; Vaiou and Kalandides, 2016). These civil society organisations (CSOs) contribute to the development of political narratives and practices alternative to the hegemonic neoliberal order, thus constituting a rupture with the post-political condition. While not as big, disruptive and potent as the mass movements born out the Great Recession, these small groups contribute to the re-creation of the “properly political” (Swyngedouw, 2009), by providing material assistance to disadvantaged sections of the population or campaigning for a common cause, giving voice to a specific “part that has no part” (Rancière, 2001, 2004). The actions and the discourses elaborated by sub-national grassroots groups disrupt the consensual climate established by the post-political order. These groups are antagonist since they challenge consolidated policy practices as well as the mainstream neoliberal thinking, introducing alternative ways of approaching issues of social relevance. Rather than being attempts to escape from the institutional perimeter, these territorial organisations seek to challenge the political establishment on unresolved social issues. However, the redefinition of the political sphere is being shaped in urban social spaces, thus outside institutional settings, but without “withdrawing” from them (Hardt and Negri, 2008). We would argue that grassroots social action seems to indicate a reawakening of the political, disturbing the political apathy and the consensual climate of the good governance. The very same implementation of bottom-up practical responses to social issues is a critical praxis against the good governance model: these acts presuppose a critical stance towards the policy-making of the political class, indicating problems that mainstream politics has not resolved. What is more, stirring the opposition between the political class and the “part that has no part” (Rancière, 2001), these organisations contribute to rekindle “political agonism”, which is the engine of the political confrontation (Mouffe, 2013).

In this article, it is thus contended that these grassroots groups cannot be dismissed as marginal and scattered local attempts to defend particular interests, or as movements at risk of being co-opted by the post-political order (as suggested for instance by Žižek, 1999), thus losing their political strength. By way of contrast, their practices build upon a highly political and

ideological vision of the society where solidarity, inclusivity and equality are the constitutive values. Being a “relational” concept drawing on the “we/them” dichotomy, solidarity ties in with the political, which is “the dimension of antagonism” (Mouffe, 1995, 104-105). Hence, sub-national grassroots groups can be conceived as a reaction to the post-politics: as the “evacuation” of the political has not been absolute, the consensual post-political condition has left interstitial spaces for the re-making of the political sphere, not only through grand popular movements, but also - and perhaps especially – through small subnational bottom-up groups. Therefore, this article argues for a broader understanding of the political, encompassing value-laden and radical praxes developed by local movements.

Our argument resonates with the pledge for a multifaceted and less hefty definition of politics made by some authors (Beveridge and Koch, 2017; Darling, 2013; Nolan and Featherstone, 2015), encompassing what Marchart calls “minimal politics” (Beveridge and Koch, 2017, p.41). Solidarity praxes can thus be conceived as instances of “minimal politics”, since they satisfy the “minimal conditions of political action: collectivity, strategy, conflictuality, organization” (Marchart, 2011, p.971). To substantiate empirically this argument, we asked the question as to whether and how subnational grassroots groups contribute to the “return of the political” (Swyngedouw, 2014) through the implementation of solidarity acts.

Overview of the method

To answer the research question, a multiple case study analysis involving four civil society organisations (hereafter CSOs) was undertaken. By enabling an intensive analysis of a small-N sample of cases, this method made possible to cast light on the activists’ views and understand how new political meanings and praxes are developed (Yin, 2013).

This study was conducted in Scotland, where the 2014 independence referendum mobilised people not usually engaged in politics. This political awakening translated in an increased membership of existing movements and the establishment of new ones, as many of our participants argued. The four case studies were selected to reflect the variety of grassroots organisations operating in Scotland. These represent different associative types, ranging from more organised to loose groups, and tackle different social problems, namely unemployment, education, migration and housing; and finally, they operate in different Scottish cities. These organisations are the following: *Living Rent Campaign* (LRC), *Unity Centre* (UC), *Time for*

Inclusive Education (TIE) and *Scottish Unemployed Workers Network* (SUWN). A summary of their characteristics is provided in Table 1. Beyond any purposive attempt, the case studies were left-leaning associations. As will be further discussed, the overwhelming majority of the respondents claimed to be on the left of the centre, albeit their organisations were not linked to any party. This outcome was unintended and depended on the willingness to participate of the targeted organisations.

The data were gathered through face-to-face and telephone semi-structured interviews with four activists for each organisation. This method is suited to examine social movements, as it enables the research to shed light on activists' reasons for mobilising, their worldviews and the movement structure (Blee and Taylor, 2002). The interviews, conducted in the period from March 2016 to July 2016, were aimed at exploring how solidarity is conceived and enacted through their actions. To corroborate the findings of the interviews, documents (either publicly available or provided by the respondents), such as reports, press releases, social media feeds, books and newspaper articles were analysed to obtain further information about the groups' activities and organisation. Such "triangulation" (Denzin, 1989) is a robust means through which to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

The transcripts of the interviews were examined through a thematic analysis to gain an insight on the participants' conceptualisation and enactment of solidarity and the political and social impact of their organisation. NVivo was used to systematise and analyse the data. The participants are identified with acronyms to ensure their anonymity.

Findings

As discussed previously, much of post-politics literature argues that only “insurgent” movements that will not be co-opted by the neoliberal system and will reject the cooperation with the state constitute the political. This study suggests otherwise, in that the CSOs under scrutiny, while not being big movements with a revolutionary scope, have impacted on the political system and have contributed to elaborate a new definition of the political through praxes and discourses where solidarity is the founding value.

The data analysis aimed to trace “the political” in the CSOs. To do so, a set of themes drawn from the theoretical framework above outlined was examined. First, the drivers of social action were explored to understand whether, as for many social movements, the mobilisation of the CSOs was motivated by an antagonist stance against the system. Second, the analysis sought to identify the CSOs’ repertoire of praxes to detect the “minimal conditions of political action” (Marchart, 2011, p.971). Third, we focused on the CSOs’ political discourse to discern the participants’ political visions underlying their engagement in solidarity acts. Fourth, the social and political impact of their actions was examined to understand the contribution to the recreation of the political. These themes are discussed in the ensuing sections.

The drivers of social action

As emerged in the interviews, grassroots action appeared to be prompted by the ability of individuals to identify a problem within society and to support end-users. This suggests that the existence of a policy void – i.e. the lack of adequate policies to address matters perceived as urgent by the population, or at least part of it - prompts social mobilisation and social action. On this point, most of the respondents emphasised the absence of a specific service or policy to address what was considered as ‘a problem’ by a social group. Consequentially, some respondents signalled the uniqueness of their mission, pointing out that no other groups were tackling that given issue. For example, SUWN1¹ realised that there was no campaign tackling issues around unemployment. Given the widespread blame culture against unemployed people - depicted by the media as “scapegoats” - SUWN founders “recognised the need for an organisation by and for unemployed people” (SUWN, 2016, p.3). Similarly, respondents from the LRC highlighted the absence of an organisation campaigning for tenants’ rights.

All the cases analysed revealed a sense of disapproval of the solutions provided by mainstream institutions to tackle a problem - being it fighting homophobia in school, protecting tenants' right, supporting immigrants or re-integrating unemployed people into the labour market. More precisely, the participants felt that the government, charities or NGOs had failed to address a problem in an effective and adequate way, which entailed an in-depth and personal knowledge of the issue in question - an ability the participants had developed. Indeed, most of the groups included in the study was set up by individuals who experienced a specific problem first-hand (as for the LRC, TIE and SUWN).

Such a critical opposition to the political response to a social issue appears to be the manifestation of a more general scepticism towards the political elite. In this context, the typical distinction between *politics* (partisan politics) and *Politics* (issues concerning the collectivity) well describes the attitude of the participants towards political engagement. While mainstream parties were criticised by many respondents, especially for their inability to address a social issue, the importance of the political involvement of ordinary citizens was also emphasised. Hence, grassroots activism appears to be conceived as the 'transmission belt' between society and political parties. As SUWN2 stated, "if you start struggling, you take control of your life back. That creates an entirely different dynamic. It transforms the dynamic between you and power." Significant in this respect is UC1's statement, for whom engagement in voluntary work was a way to change "the system".

The argument about political scepticism and disapproval as a driver of social mobilisation resonates with the "grievance" thesis, whereby people tend to coalesce in movements as a reaction to vexing socio-economic conditions (Giugni and Lorenzini, 2014). Although not constituting the sole driver of social mobilisation (Giugni and Lorenzini, 2014), the dissatisfaction for the situation of a social group may fuel social mobilisation. In other words, the discontent towards the political elite does not necessarily engender a total political disaffection and refusal to participate in the political life – phenomena that engender anti-politics, but it may spur social mobilisation, leading to the elaboration of alternative political discourses and praxes.

Finally, the independence referendum of 2014 increased the participation in the CSOs and even led to the creation of one of the case study (TIE). The respondents highlighted how the referendum prompted an intense political mobilisation, which did not cease after the vote, but

remained alive through engagement in social movements, as witnessed by increased number of new members.

The ideal-practical duality

The CSOs under scrutiny were strongly pragmatic, as they sought to address a specific problem. However, their actions hinged on a coherent set of political beliefs. Borrowing the definition of TIE3, the activists came across as “pragmatic dreamers”, that is “idealists” putting in place concrete actions to achieve an objective. This ideal-practical duality was reflected in the mission of the CSOs: on the one hand, they provided services or assistance to the targeted population; on the other, their actions are inscribed within bigger aspirations, aimed at changing societal conditions. For instance, the LRC, while established with the concrete aim of feeding into the consultation on the Private Housing Billⁱⁱ (LRC2), they demanded affordable housing and rent control for private market tenants in the attempt to transform the “appalling” “state of housing in Scotland” (LRC3). Similarly, this duality characterises the SUWN, making it a “front-line advocacy group” (SUWN3). On the one hand, this CSO provides a practical, bottom-up assistance to unemployed benefit claimants (SUWN3). On the other hand, SUWN activists campaigned for broader welfare reforms. As SUWN1 argued, they are “fighting against the current changes, but [...] also [...] for a bigger picture”. Similarly, the TIE campaign has a more idealistic goal – i.e. an inclusive education, whilst providing active input to teacher training itself.

The pragmatic idealism of the CSOs was also reflected in the choice of trade unions as the organisational ideal-type. Historically, trade unions combined the adherence to the principles of mutualism and class solidarity to represent workers. Several respondents cited them as organisational models they would like to emulate: each CSO mentioned the willingness of creating a union for tenants, for migrants, for unemployed. Unions were seen as the very same symbol and the first and foremost structural manifestation of solidarity. From an organisational perspective, the defence of a social group (the tenants, the teachers, the unemployed and the migrants) was deemed by the respondents as better addressed the creation of sectoral organisational forms mimicking the structure and functioning of trade unions, synthesised by the respondents by the phrases: “led by tenants for tenants” and “led by teachers for teachers”.

The practical repertoire

The groups made concrete demands and engaged pragmatically with their cause, putting in place a variety of actions. These can be grouped in three analytical categories: mainstream, mobilising and confrontational actions (Table 2). Mainstream forms of action included actions to influence policy-making, such as lobbying, advocacy and the elaboration of policy proposals. Mobilising actions seek to sensitise and engage the public on a particular issue, while confrontational actions include public displays in reaction to policy-makers' intervention or lack thereof.

Lobbying activities, which entail the direct interaction with the political elite, were largely practiced by the CSOs to draw policy-makers' attention of an issue of public relevance and to prompt them to act. Coherently with their anarchist bent, only the participants from the UC claimed that their collective did not lobby the Scottish government or political parties, although - as UC2 argued - single individuals did get in touch with their local MPs.

An important form of action undertaken by the groups under study is advocacy, which is about "giving voice" to a specific social group (i.e. tenants, migrants, unemployed etc.), considered not adequately and fairly supported by the mainstream policy elite. For example, the LRC sought to "give tenants a stronger voice in the creation of housing policy"ⁱⁱⁱ and to redress the "power imbalance" between landlords and tenants, giving the latter more power and security and "ideally some more power to bargain over rent levels" (LRC2). Likewise, the SUWN "combines campaigning with practical welfare work"^{iv}, becoming what SUWN3 defined as a "front-line advocacy group".

Regarding the elaboration of policy proposals, only two of case studies proposed specific policies. For instance, the LRC proposed the introduction by the Scottish Government of "second generation" rent controls, consisting of a connection of the rents set at the beginning of the tenancy to a "points system", a connection of the increments of rents to a "Scottish Rent Affordability Index", and the improvement of security of tenancy (Maloney, 2015, p.11). Moreover, the LRC advocated the introduction of rent controls and the elimination of the "no-fault ground" for eviction, avoiding the unjust eviction of tenants.

Mobilising forms of action are aimed, on the one hand, at gaining public support, on the other, at supporting targeted groups. All the case studies sought to attract attention over their cause (e.g. rent control, the inclusion of LGBTI+ training as part of teachers' professional

qualification, or stopping the detention or deportation of refugees), by organising various form of public manifestation, including street stalls, petitions and contacts with media.

Some of the groups also provided support and advice to the end-users, as in the case of the SUWN, TIE and the UC. The SUWN activists organised regular stalls outside the jobcentres, providing people entering with informative leaflets illustrating the rights of claimants. They also assisted people experiencing problems with the jobcentre, for instance by accompanying them to “tricky interviews” (SUWN, 2016, p.7) - acting as “welfare workers sans frontiers”. The TIE campaigners implemented a training course for teachers on LGBT+ issues for free and available for teachers working in primary and secondary schools as well as for teachers working with additional support needs pupils. Moreover, the UC volunteers tried to address the various needs of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, such as shelter, food, clothes or simply advice (UC2). In addition to the practical support to migrants and refugees, the UC has engaged in direct action protests. To do so, the UC volunteers made referral to food banks or to night shelters, gave vouchers to be used in charity shops, or booked a first appointment to “trusted immigration lawyers”, according to the need of the people (UC2).

The last category of CSO’s actions includes confrontational actions, which presuppose the disruption of political status quo through demonstrations and protests. The respondents claimed that they participated in demonstrations and rallies, although this was not a core activity of their CSOs. In particular, the respondents from the UC stated that they were involved in demonstrations in the past, when they used to block the Home Office to prevent dorm raids. However, they stopped those demonstrations after some protesters were arrested, opting for the organisation of protests with no risk for the participants to get arrested (UC1).

To further examine the practices in which the CSOs are engaged, the relations developed by these movements with institutions and with other social groups deserves attention. This aspect helps to understand the position of the CSOs in the broad political landscapes. The case studies displayed a critical and adversarial stance towards political institutions. However, the manifestation of such antagonism varies from one organisation to another. While some respondents denied any collaboration with governmental institutions, others extensively lobbied the Scottish Government. Not surprisingly, the anarchist group manifested a more uncooperative attitude towards the government and as documented in press releases, they had been engaged in demonstrations in the past, and fiercely criticised the immigration policy. Others, such as the LRC, tended to be more collaborative. Yet, groups like the SUWN and TIE

had a two-fold attitude: on the one hand, they criticised the government. On the other, they sought the support of mainstream parties. A case in point was the TIE campaign. In the interview, three respondents from TIE described the use of “inflammatory” language (TIE1) and “angry” and “emotional campaign style” (TIE2). More specifically, TIE1, TIE2 and TIE3 mentioned a newspaper article written by the two founders after their petition was rejected by the Scottish Parliament, where they used dramatic words: “Each time an LGBT+ youngster takes a razor to their flesh or wraps a noose around their neck, your government has blood on its hands”^{vi}. However, the TIE founders were also able to attract political personalities to support their campaign; consequently, TIE’s demands were incorporated in political manifestos and a motion about TIE was passed in a recent Scottish National Party conference. Similarly, the SUWN activists sought to act against what they consider a flawed system of benefit allocation by making people aware about their rights to act against any unfair treatment from the DWP.

The development of non-contentious relations between CSOs and policy-makers should not be interpreted as a sign of co-optation. Rather, these movements sought to strike a balance between antagonism to and engagement with mainstream politics to gain a wide support to their cause. The CSOs not only engaged with institutions, but also establish relations with other movements. All groups were included in a web of relations developed with other organisations, with which they share functional and ideological affinity. For instance, the UC is affiliated to the *No Border*^{vii} organisation, a network of organisations opposing the existence of national borders. Some of the groups also have linkages with other organisations abroad, such as the LRC, present in Scotland through branches in Glasgow and Aberdeen. The group has also built links with other groups in England and outside the UK, as in Ireland and Spain, and some LRC members participated in campaigns or conferences in other European cities. Similarly, some activities of SUWN were undertaken in other Scottish cities (Paisley and Glasgow). The network also engaged in actions in Arbroath and tried to organise some activities in Perth. Some of the respondents from SUWN stated that they were approached by groups based in Austria, Germany, Greece and Canada.

The ideological armoury

Although pragmatically engaged in actions on the ground, the activists of the case study organisations were often motivated by a “grand” political vision. For instance, along with

material support to migrants and refugees, the members of the UC “want to fight for no borders, [...] want an end to immigration detention, [...] want the right to work for everyone [...] and [...] the end of racist immigration control” (UC1). Underlying the concrete actions undertaken by these groups – be they campaigning, provision of material support, provision of services etc. - is the “narrative” of solidarity (Arampatzi, 2017, p.2161). Solidarity can be the manifestation of the activists’ individual empathy with a specific cause. Such empathy builds on emotional connections, but in some cases, also on political affinity. For some respondents, their activism stemmed from their personal experience of a specific situation - and sharing the same problems is what constitutes solidarity. For instance, the members of the LRC experienced the problems engendered by tenancy. As LRC1 noted, solidarity bonds among group members and with supporters is a “combination of self-interest and ideology”. For other respondents, the willingness to engage in solidarity actions was motivated by personal (and often political) beliefs. In this respect, SUWN3 mentioned the “notion of fellowship”, intended as “a support mechanism for people”, as central to their action. A significant example of solidarity based on political idealism, more than mutual experience of a condition, is the militant engagement of many UC members. While not being refugees or asylum seekers, UC respondents supported the cause of the latter as they believed in the elimination of national borders. Similarly, UC2 pointed that people going to them will find “empathetic people”, who, despite having “limited power or knowledge, [...] will fight for anyone in the struggles”, in that they do not support the extant migration system.

Therefore, individuals united by the experience of a shared problem have the capability to elaborate policy proposals and/or delivering bespoke support. A common condition (e.g. being a tenant or unemployed) or the empathic connection and support to an issue create a sense of group solidarity. Such sharing of specific difficulties informs the implementation of joint actions to fight against the cause of the problem and possibly to propose a solution to it. The construction of the collective social identity (e.g. tenants or migrants) through the direct or indirect experience of a problematic issue and the appeal to mutual support and social action underlay the development of the political manifestation of the group.

Further, solidarity is perceived as a common struggle, as the glue holding together people sharing a host of values and objectives. Thus, the CSOs enact a “fighting solidarity”, reacting to “unjust and oppressive situations” (Laitinen and Pessi, 2014, p.10). As SUWN1 argued, “it’s the fact that it’s not you alone fighting the system, but you’re part of a group of other people

who're fighting the system". Similarly, for SUWN2, the opposition to "the power" is not feasible, as individuals cannot alone struggle against the system. However, "once you realise that solidarity is not just an option, is an absolute necessity, that transforms your relationship with power, you're in a much stronger position" (SUWN2). Even further, solidarity is conceived as "the most meaningful form of [...] resistance" and the basic element for building a movement (UC2).

The findings suggest that solidarity is a strong and powerful engine for social action and mutual help, constituting the precondition for the enactment of supportive practices aimed at helping individuals in need. The type of solidarity found in the case studies is "mutual", where there is no hierarchy between the giving-end and receiving-end (Olesen, 2004). Following from that, some respondents distinguished solidarity from charity: while the latter creates dependence, "solidarity" enables the recipient of help to actively resolve their condition. For instance, UC3 stated that:

"charity paralyses community sort of struggling and [...] reinforces [...] inequality on lines of like wealth, race, gender, everything. [...] [C]harity is something that can be withdrawn anytime; it creates a culture of dependence and charity can just stop, while solidarity can't. Solidarity is something really like inside, it's a really deep relationship [...] and built around a shared set of values."

Likewise, UC1 argued:

"we are on the same side as the people that we are supporting, so we're not looking down and saying: 'I'm here to help you'. We're saying: 'We're standing with you and we're with you and we're here and we'll do what you need and we're available 24 hours a day'. It's not like when you're going to a big charity and they're behind a big desk and they're giving you charity, it's very different than that. It's much more solidarity."

As UC2 explained, "you come in here and you're going to find people in the same situation as you, or people that have compassion and boundaries that are very different to those in the charity sector." Similarly, LRC1 argued that what differentiated their organisation from others working in the housing sector is that they "were actual tenants, getting involved in the decision-making process and getting other tenants involved".

The difference between solidarity and charity was identified in some previous studies (Arampatzi, 2017; Featherstone, 2012). While charity is concerned with the “wellbeing of the other”, solidarity emphasises the “us together”, hinging thus on the “presumption of reciprocity” (Laitinen and Pessi, 2014, p.2). Furthermore, the criticism towards charities resonates with the literature on “philanthrocapitalism”, which highlights the paradox of wealthy philanthropists – made as such by capitalist system - endeavouring to rectify the inequality engendered by capitalism (Bishop and Green, 2008; Kohl-Arenas, 2017; Morvaridi, 2012; Whitaker, 1974). In this sense, charitable actions are top-down, providing donors with the benefit of the “warm glow” (Andreoni, 1990).

While all the participants claimed the neutrality and political non-alignment of their organisations, the overwhelming majority of the respondents reported themselves as left-wing, with most of them positioning themselves on the “hard left” (i.e. radical left) or at the left of the mainstream centre-left parties. The perception conveyed by many respondents is the existence of an ‘imagined left’, i.e. a left that exist through social solidarity, grassroots activism and bottom-up engagement of ordinary citizens, albeit not being formally represented by specific parties. Outside this left-leaning landscape were the UC respondents, who described themselves as anarchists. However, the respondents pointed out that, given the increase of the number of non-anarchist members in the collective over the years, the Unity Centre was no longer an explicitly anarchist group. Nevertheless, the ideas followed by the collective resonated with anarchist ideology, especially the adherence to the “No Borders” principle. The left-leaning interpretation of solidarity emerged in the interviews is not surprising. As Featherstone (2012) argues, solidarity is a core value of the left. Although groups on the right allegedly appeal to solidarity, their rationale hinges on an exclusionary logic, advocating for the defence of specific social groups (i.e. the nationals), while marginalising others. For example, Arampatzi (2017, pp.2162-2162) discerns between “solidarity-making” practices - which create “inclusionary spaces” - and “exclusionary” initiatives put in place by far-right groups.

While the respondents had a precise political vision, this did not hinder the primary object of the group – the solution of a problem. For this, most of the cases had cross-party collaborations, to broaden the consensus on the urgency of their cause. Even the anarchist collective, while not engaging with political system, was not completely alien to it: some respondents from the UC conceded that, if individual members want to liaise with politicians, they are free to do so.

Social and political impact

The case groups' actions all exerted a social and a political impact, although to a different extent. The grassroots groups sought, on the one hand, to provide benefits to the individuals they support; on the other, to influence policy-making and the political debate. For instance, for the respondents from the SUWN, the network engendered significant improvements for individuals, insofar as helping claimants to obtain benefits means "securing their income" (SUWN4). According to SUWN3, the network helped "hundreds" of people over the years and achieved a reduction of the number of sanctions applied to claimants in Dundee. As this respondent explained, although in the recent years there was an increase in sanctions in Dundee, "between January 2015 and March/April 2015 there was a 40% drop in sanctions in Dundee" and the SUWN can "claim credit for that. Because people were more confident of what their rights are." These feelings of achievement were shared by other respondents. The LRC activists felt triumphant for their achievements, since the group "put rent controls firmly on the agenda, with a clear commitment from the SNP, Labour and the Scottish Greens to implement rent controls in the future"^{viii} and "has been helping the government to give tenants actual security of tenure" (LRC1). In particular, the Bill was deemed to improve the conditions for the tenants, inasmuch as it removed the "no-fault ground" for repossession, enabled the automatic continuation of tenancies without any minimum or maximum tenancy period, and introduced the possibility for local authorities to make an application to the Scottish Ministers to designate "rent pressure zones" in areas characterised by rapid rent increases^{ix}. While succeeding in achieving "minimum rights" for tenants in Scotland, the LRC was not very successful in terms of "empowerment and feeling capable of doing actions and feeling legitimate to do actions" (LRC3.) This respondent explained that the lack of paid staff has been a limitation to empower people. By way of contrast, LRC1 claimed that the impact of the LRC on the new bill passed by the Scottish Parliament was "massive", since the bill "is going to really make a lot of difference to the lives of thousands of people". Further, LRC1 stated that they received "feedback saying that the consultation process has really put a lot of pressure on the government to give tenants more rights. It's given them a balance to the landlords' lobbying organisations."

Respondents from the UC believed that, while engendering a significant impact on individuals, their achievements were limited, since they cannot change the immigration system and ensure

the right to stay in the country to all migrants. Likewise, the respondents from the TIE campaign emphasised that it gave a voice to young LGBT+ students, who now are aware that “there’s an advocacy group that speaks directly for them” (TIE1). However, TIE has not realised its end goal yet – i.e. the achievement of an inclusive education system (TIE1). As TIE3 admitted, “other than shaping the debate, other than bring the subject on top of the agenda”, to date the campaign has not achieved anything concrete yet. Nonetheless, the respondents pointed out that TIE started a debate on the importance of having a LGBT+ inclusive education. As TIE2 stated, the campaign “created that kind of culture of acknowledging this is a problem and thinking about how to tackle it”.

From a political perspective, some respondents felt they exerted some influence. Respondents from the LRC emphasised how the LRC activists have been able to put rent controls on the political agenda, an issue ignored until recently (LRC2) and considered as a “taboo” (LRC3) in the British debate. While before their campaigning, rent controls were seen as a “very radical idea”, different parties are now discussing options to make the housing system fairer (LRC4). The TIE campaign claimed important political results, as they obtained widespread support from politicians across the political spectrum, such as Nicola Sturgeon (current Scottish First Minister), members of Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservative, RISE (Respect, Independence, Socialism and Environmentalism) and the Scottish National Party. The campaign has also gained the support of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC)^x, and various celebrities and campaigners^{xi}. Moreover, the issues of LGBT+ education have been incorporated in several party manifestos, demonstrating that “the strategies of the campaign have had a huge influence on their policy” (TIE4). Finally, as the respondents reported, a motion asking for a more inclusive education in schools in Scotland passed at the last SNP conference. The SUWN was more modest about their political achievements. As SUWN1 admitted, while on the individual level they had a positive impact, their work as pressure group to the government did not influence political decision significantly. By way of contrast, shying away from lobbying activities, the UC did not try to influence political decisions. Nonetheless, the collective “has influenced the political feeling in Glasgow around refugees and migration and that kind of influenced political change” (UC3).

As the findings suggest, while most of the respondents claim that their actions have had a positive impact on the section of the population they act for, they were sceptical about their ability to have brought about systemic changes. More precisely, if the policy change supported

by the CSOs fell under the remit of the central government's competences, as with immigration and welfare state, they felt their political impact was limited. While the central government was perceived as a centre of power difficult to access, the Scottish Government was seen as more approachable.

Conclusions

Echoing the doubt expressed by some authors about the non-political nature of subnational social movements (Beveridge and Koch, 2017; Lerner, 2014; Nolan and Featherstone, 2015), this article explored the capacity of four Scottish CSOs to rekindle and redefine “the political” in the post-political era by enacting solidarity. The analysis revealed that the case studies successfully fulfilled two objectives. Firstly, the groups made concrete improvements in people's lives. The groups understood important social issues more timely and promptly than governmental institutions and acted to complement or rectify public intervention. Secondly, they generated solidarity bonds among disadvantaged groups. Sub-national CSOs thus develop a collective identity around an issue for which the system is seen responsible – an “adversary” (Mouffe, 2005, 2013) - and give voice to social dissensus, which is at the core of the “political proper” (Mouffe, 2005, p.130). By combining a political vision, based on a radical critique of mainstream politics and the desire for a just society, with active social engagement, the CSOs engender forms of militant solidarity, whereby social action expresses activists' commitment to oppose to the political status quo. Rather than challenging the political order through far-reaching disruptive actions, these organisations act to change the status quo starting from the subnational level, where they are anchored. The CSOs undertake a range of praxes, from more confrontational to mainstream activities. Although much of post-political theory would not classify these praxes as political, except for confrontational methods, we contend that this strategic blend of actions enables the movements to coalesce people around a coherent set of ideas, hence developing solidarity, and pressurise policy-makers to tackle social issues – a fundamental step towards the realisation of their political vision. Sub-national solidarity practices are thus the manifestation of the “return of the political” (Swyngedouw, 2009, 2014), as they are antagonist political forms, containing *in nuce* the potential to counter-act the post-political order, where contestation is suppressed to maintain a consensual climate.

Albeit effective at individual level, the CSOs struggled to achieve a systemic change, due to institutional barriers. Unsurprisingly, the findings suggest how grassroots organisations can influence more effectively subnational than national level, the first perceived as a more accessible centre of power. While movements as our case studies may be seen as too disperse and weak to radically change the status quo, they represent agents of resistance and antagonism, inasmuch as their actions oppose to the status quo. If we consider politics as opposition - as Mouffe (2013) does - then the groups here studied are political. Unlike transnational movements, CSOs are not grand display of political uproar, but may influence the local political class. This constitutes a significant strength of these groups, since their proximity to policy-making centres makes easier for them to make the case for change.

The findings thus support the call for the rehabilitation of the “political agency” of subnational movements (Beveridge and Koch, 2017, 37), suggesting how various forms of confrontation at various spatial levels can contribute to change the status quo. The redefinition of the political occurs outside - but not necessarily against - mainstream political circles. Rather, local grassroots groups may cooperate with the political elite: while protesting against the system, they are embedded into it, accepting – more or less willingly – the rules of the game. Therefore, the CSOs do not follow the “withdrawal from institutions”, as proposed by theorists like Hardt and Negri (2009), but an “engagement with institution” approach (Mouffe, 2013, p.65). Even when these groups seek to distance themselves from the political system, they ultimately come to terms with it, as the latter seeks consensus by engaging with them. The linkages with the political class may arouse suspicion of co-optation by the system - what Mouffe (2013, p.73), drawing on Gramsci, defines as “hegemony through neutralisation”, whereby their “demands which challenge the hegemonic order are appropriated by the existing system to satisfy them in a way that neutralises their subversive potential”. By way of contrast, the engagement with the political system should be understood as a strategy to pressurise political elites to act upon urgent social issues and to introduce radical political ideas in mainstream politics, reshaping the political discourse. As Mouffe (2013) argues, the involvement with institutions is crucial to undermine the neoliberal system.

The findings question the tenets of many post-politics scholars, for whom local circumscribed movements do not constitute the truly political, actually – as Swyngedouw (2009) notes for local environmental movements - they represent a type of “placebo-politicalness” (Marchart, 2007, p.47 in Swyngedouw, 2009, p.615). Even more, acts of resistance (as those here

described) are seen as the very same product of post-politics (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). However, the cases here examined cast some hope for a future redefinition of the political. While an over-enthusiastic rendition of the findings should be refrained from, the evidence seems to suggest that these groups may constitute a slow and “incipient return of the political” (Swyngedouw, 2014), a small “crack” in the post-political order.

ⁱ The respondents are identified by the acronym of their organisation following by a number assigned to each participant.

ⁱⁱ See: <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/Bills/92310.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Bill, Written submission to the Infrastructure and Capital investment Committee.

^{iv} <https://scottishunemployedworkers.net/about-us/>

^v <https://scottishunemployedworkers.net/about-us/>

^{vi} “Time for action to save lives of LGBT+ youngsters”, The National, 30 January 2016.

^{vii} <http://www.noborders.org.uk/>

^{viii} <http://www.livingrent.org/2016/03/scotlands-tenants-celebrate-historic-housing-win/>

^{ix} <http://www.livingrent.org/2016/03/scotlands-tenants-celebrate-historic-housing-win/>

^x <http://www.unison-scotland.org/2016/04/20/time-for-inclusive-education-and-an-end-to-homophobia-in-schools/>

^{xi} See: <http://www.tiecampaing.co.uk/>

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