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DOI:
10.1057/s41295-016-0072-8

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Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Bailey, D, Clua Losada, M, Huke, N, Ribera Almandoz , O & Rogers, K 2016, 'Challenging the age of austerity: disruptive agency after the global economic crisis', *Comparative European Politics*.
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-016-0072-8

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

Publisher Rights Statement:
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Challenging the age of austerity: disruptive agency after the global economic crisis

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Abstract. This article explores the different forms of disruptive subjectivity that have developed in the context of the post-2008 global and European crises. The article traces developments both before and after 2008, with a specific focus on events in Spain and the UK. These country contexts are chosen due to their considerable differences in terms of the impact that the crisis had; yet we witness notable similarities with regard to the instances of refusal and resistance observed, especially in terms of the motives held and forms adopted, albeit with differences in scale. The paper presents the results of qualitative research, including 65 in-depth interviews, to highlight the way in which disaffection, the search for voice, and the threat of withdrawal from relations of exploitation, have each become problematic as means of dissent following 2008. As a result, we have seen a merging of these more conventional forms of dissent with a number of more radical prefigurative practices that had been developing prior to 2008. As a result, the stagnation of neoliberal capitalism from 2008 onwards has witnessed the development of a new form of pragmatic prefigurative disruptive subjectivity, responsible for some of the more important and interesting political developments in contemporary advanced industrial democracies.

The global economic crisis and the subsequent crisis of the Eurozone have revealed the instability of contemporary capitalism, sharpened inequalities and insecurity, and decreased the responsiveness of democratic states to the demands of their respective populations. The crises, however, have not only altered (and in many cases intensified) structures of domination; they have also led to new forms of agency which disrupt those attempts to consolidate domination. Innovative and developing forms of disruptive agency - or disruptive subjectivities - have emerged throughout this period, confirming the autonomist Marxist claim that there exists an ever-present capacity for refusal on the part of those targeted for subordination (Tronti 1964). These disruptive subjectivities have had a significant impact upon the post-2008 political economy of the advanced capitalist democracies (Huke et al., 2015).

This article sets out a framework through which to understand the forms of disruptive agency and subjectivity that have emerged within advanced neoliberal capitalist democracies during the post-2008 period of prolonged economic stagnation. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to both social movement studies, which we consider to have an often underdeveloped consideration of the role and relevance of capitalist social relations (on which see also della Porta 2015), and to comparative and critical political economy, which we consider to be too greatly focused on structures of domination (rather than the forms of agency that have the potential to disrupt and change those structures) (for exceptions see, Huke et al., 2015; Wigger 2016). We argue that the transition within neoliberal capitalism from 2008 onwards, towards a period of stagnation, has resulted in the emergence of a new type of 'pragmatically prefigurative' disruptive subjectivity. This has been responsible for some of the most interesting political developments in neoliberal capitalist democracies since the onset of crisis in 2008. Our argument is developed through a comparison of the UK and Spain, which had different experiences and responses to the crisis, but have nevertheless developed different forms of disruptive political subjectivities.

Theorising disruptive subjectivity

In conceptualising the disruptive political subjectivities that have emerged through the process of the post-2008 crisis, we trace the development of four 'ideal types' of disruptive subjectivity that have been prevalent throughout the period of modern capitalism and which have developed distinctive features during its neoliberal phase. These features are not discrete and mutually exclusive. Rather, collective actors can and do display different characteristics in combination with each other, and the inability to achieve demands through a particular type of agency may often prompt different strategic choices, leading to new forms of disruptive subjectivity in new socio-economic contexts. This, we argue, is what has happened during the post-2008 period of prolonged stagnation.

The paper adopts an autonomist Marxist perspective, which we consider a 'Marxism of subjectivities' in which the antagonisms that constitute capitalism's contemporary political economy give rise to the emergence of new political subjectivities, the activation of which need to be understood in order to understand contemporary politics (Pasquinelli 2014). This is based on the assumption that contemporary structures of domination, and especially (but not exclusively) the classed, gendered and racialised structures of inequality that constitute contemporary capitalism, are each inherently unstable as a result of their contested nature (Hardt and Negri 2012). Indeed, the developments, tensions and potentialities observed within capitalist contexts can be understood in terms of the impact of the disruptive agents,

agency and subjectivities which act to challenge established social relations and institutions. Our four ideal-types of disruptive subjectivity are set out below.

The disengaged, disaffected and disinterested political (non-)actor disrupts structures of domination through a simple lack of engagement or refusal to comply. This includes activity such as the 'infrapolitics' of foot-dragging and the 'hidden transcripts' that critique power informally and outside of formal public forms of interaction (Scott 1990), as well as the 'imperceptible' and micro-level politics (Papadopolous et al., 2008) of non-compliance that includes, for instance, absenteeism, circumvention of welfare benefit rules, migrants who cross borders without the permission of national governments, and/or those disaffected with or disengaged from formal political institutions of representative democracy (Huke et al., 2015). This type of subjectivity evinces despondency, disaffection, and/or pessimism towards the prospects for success of more 'visible' or 'perceptible' forms of struggle or resistance, but nevertheless includes a refusal to consent to, or comply with, relations of inequality and domination. The period of neoliberalism's ascendance, prior to 2008, witnessed a considerable growth in the number of disengaged (non-)actors, both as a result of political defeat, especially of organised labour, and disillusion with a political elite and political process that appeared to offer no substantial alternatives and therefore no incentive to engage. For higher skilled and higher educated workers and professionals, disengagement could take the form of non-participation and a predominantly privatised, relatively materially-satisfying, non-rebellious existence fuelled by debt and/or 'privatised Keynesianism' (Crouch 2011: ch.5). This includes the political and civic disengagement associated with declining voter turnout and party membership, declining public trust in the political elite, and growing Euroscepticism (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Ezrow and Hellwig 2014). But it also includes what we might term 'empty labour', or the new types of 'non-work at work' associated with the rise of the internet as an everyday form of distraction in the post-Fordist workplace, and opportunity to mock elites, for instance through the sharing of internet memes (Paulsen 2014, 2015; Lonkila forthcoming). In contrast, for lower skilled/lower education workers, or those in regions that were unable to adjust to the apparently post-industrial context, disengagement had a greater tendency to include everyday forms of rebellion (oftentimes sparking moral panics amongst an elite concerned about 'anti-social behaviour').

The vocal agent of political equality, in contrast, draws upon contemporary democratic values, discourses and legal rights to espouse their right to a voice, and for that voice to be heard with an equal degree of attention to that of others within the political community. This is a longstanding form of subjectivity within capitalist modernity. Indeed, representative democracy largely came about by excluded groups - especially the working class - demanding, through disruptive acts of protest, dissent and political violence,

that their voice be heard (Przeworski 2008; Roper 2013). This demand for a voice, and for it to be heard, remains an important disruptive mechanism within contemporary democracy, albeit one that is often framed differently by different collective actors. In the period immediately prior to the crisis, populist movements had increasingly begun to cause consternation for much of the mainstream political elite in contemporary democracies, drawing largely upon a critique that accuses the political elite of being self-serving and unresponsive and therefore failing to listen to 'the people' (Mudde 2004), who are typically those 'disaffected and disillusioned' workers left behind by the neoliberal phase of capitalism (Werts et al., 2013). To a degree, therefore, the rise of populist right politics represents an attempt by conservative and reactionary forces to channel the demand for a voice by an otherwise politically-silenced working class (on which, see for instance, Ford and Goodwin 2014 on the rise of UKIP). Likewise, the much-noted trend over the past three decades away from 'conventional' forms of political participation and towards 'unconventional' (or 'innovative') forms, often rests upon a concern that formal channels of political representation fail to enable a voice to be expressed and/or heard. In this latter case, participation is more likely to be conducted by women with higher levels of education, suggesting that the growing trend in innovative forms of political participation represents an attempt by vocal middle class agents of political equality to redress non-class based forms of discrimination (such as sex/gender) (Marien et al., 2010). Indeed, for much of the pre-crisis period the unemployed were less likely to engage in non-institutionalised, innovative forms of political participation (Kern et al., 2015).

The refusal-prone materialist is both a subordinate actor within contemporary relations of production, and empowered by that position of subordination (and the requirement for consent that it creates). This subject is therefore prone to participation in collective acts of refusal - including, most obviously, strikes (both official and unofficial), but also extending to mass demonstrations, occupations of property, and acts of disruptive civil disobedience (such as road-blocking) - as a means by which to impose (potential) sanctions upon dominant actors in pursuit of a material improvement in, or redistribution of, the range of resources available to her. The capacity for the powerless to cooperate in this sense disrupts the experience of domination and enables a material improvement in resources available (Bailey 2015). The refusal-prone materialist is often a waged worker, and obviously the most common reference is to the organised industrial working class, but might also be a benefit claimant, a woman conducting gendered care work, and those who struggle to resist the privatisation of public spaces. The impact of the three neoliberal decades prior to the crisis, however, did much to undermine the capacity for refusal-prone materialists to flourish. The post-industrial working class has tended to be more precarious and less able to organise (although the emergence of skilled post-industrial service sector employees with greater capacity for creative work and action has created the possibility for alternative forms of cooperation).

Further, the renewed commitment by both the capitalist class and the state to confront strike activity has created a situation in which the frequency of strike incidents has declined across the advanced industrial democracies (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013).

The prefigurative radical actively attempts to create new, alternative social relations, or what we might term autonomous forms of social reproduction (Federici 2012). By posing and working towards the creation of alternative and radically egalitarian social relations, the prefigurative radical actively and directly disrupts established relations of domination through her everyday activity (Graeber 2009; Katsiaficas 1997). The prefigurative radical rose to prominence within the alter-globalisation movement, which focused directly on challenging the key tendencies of neoliberalism. She was arguably a legacy of '1968' and the subsequent new social movements which emerged following the transition from the Keynesian consensus to neoliberal capitalism. Rather than seeking demands from the state, capital, and/or other hierarchical structures of authority and inequality, the prefigurative radical disrupts existing hierarchies by creating alternative means through which humans co-exist, cooperate and co-produce. She refuses to accept that formal political institutions of representative democracy, or the capitalist market, can effectively meet societal requirements, and instead values self-determination and direct action (or a 'do-it-yourself' attitude towards the challenges of social reproduction), thereby eschewing externally-imposed forms of hierarchy and domination, and adopting a thoroughgoing politicisation of all forms of everyday life (Dinerstein 2014*a*). She might be found, for instance, in worker-managed factories, mutual support groups for immigrants and refugees, autonomous social centres, or community self-education projects. In Dinerstein's (2014*b*) terms, the prefigurative radical seeks the, 'creation of alternative relations and arrangements that assert a dignified life *beyond* capitalism', including through, 'new forms of production, self-management and cooperative work, nonrepresentational politics, anti-oppressive education, the notion of "living well", communal property, and economic possibilities' (p. 369).

Method

In seeking to study the forms of disruptive agency and subjectivity that have emerged in the post-crisis context, we draw here on a range of qualitative sources taken from key moments of disruption during the post-2008 period in the UK and Spain. These are often instances during which disengagement has been transformed into more visible forms of disruptive engagement or re-engagement. Our sources include qualitative interviews with 65 participants in a range of anti-austerity organisations or events taking place from 2008 onwards, participant observation of key assemblies and events, as well as documents, political statements, reports and video footage produced by individual and collective actors and secondary

observers. The UK and Spain are selected because they differ over a range of key variables (see table 1), thereby enabling us to compare outcomes and (especially) to identify commonalities across contrasting contexts, in order to explore developments associated with the post-crisis context rather than the specific context of the UK or Spain. We address this body of material through a qualitative approach that seeks to think 'with theory' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). That is, we use the four ideal-types outlined above as a means to think through the ways in which the four disruptive subjectivities that developed during the period of neoliberal capitalism subsequently developed through the course of the post-2008 crisis era. We use our typology, therefore, to identify attributes – including motives, attitudes, strategies, and identities – that might help us to put together a picture of disruptive subjectivities and agents of the post-crisis context. As such, 'the theoretical concepts that we engage [that is, our four ideal-types of disruptive subjectivity under neoliberalism] evoke different questions and produce different thought' (p.13), by informing and underpinning our engagement with the post-crisis context and the forms of disruptive mobilisation that it has experienced. The four types of subjects, therefore, represent a heuristic device that allows us to consider the development of subjectivity after 2008.

Table 1: Variance across cases: Spain and the UK

	Eurozone membership	**ECB-imposed austerity**	**Crisis-period unemployment >20%**	**Change in GDP (2008-2014)***	**Widespread sustained popular dissent?**
Spain	Yes	Yes	Yes	-1.6%	Yes: indignados/ 15-M and multiple general strikes
UK	No	No	No	12.5%	No; although increased frequency of dissent around particular grievances (esp. student-led)

* source: OECD (2015), Gross domestic product (GDP) (indicator). doi: 10.1787/dc2f7aec-en (Accessed on 20 November 2015)

The argument: disruptive subjectivity in the post-2008 context

The European crisis included: a crisis of debt-led capitalism that structurally limited the scope of state interventions; a hardening of the state and decline in its representativeness under the pressure of rating agencies and institutional investors; an increase in the degree of precarity and impoverishment facing

sections of advanced capitalist societies; and the emergence of a new form of disruptive subjectivity (Huke et al., 2015). This new disruptive subjectivity is marked by both an increase in the extent of disruptive activity but also a change in form associated with what we label a new 'pragmatically prefigurative' form of agency and subjectivity.

In terms of the pre-crisis forms of disruptive subjectivity introduced above, we have witnessed further disengagement with established institutions and relations of authority, as politics during the so-called 'age of austerity' has become more closed and unresponsive to popular demands. The post-crisis context has highlighted further still the lack of alternatives to neoliberal, hollowed-out, democracy, and the failure of the political elite to offer substantive democratic alternatives or policy initiatives that benefit people's daily lives, thereby extending what Crouch (2004) has termed 'post-democracy'. This transformed during the post-2008 period into the 'non-death of neoliberalism', in which private corporations have overwhelming power to determine political outcomes (Crouch 2011: 164-6). As a result, we have seen a proliferation of disengaged, disaffected and disinterested political (non-)actors - especially in their more openly rebellious forms. At the same time, however, disengagement has become increasingly difficult to sustain as an exit route, as austerity measures and labour market restructuring have restricted the possibility that people might avoid the more disciplinary elements of neoliberal capitalism. The growing ranks of those who are disengaged and disaffected have therefore increasingly moved to adopt alternative forms of mobilisation.

Vocal agents of political equality have also grown in number over the course of the post-2008 period. They have become both more assertive in their attempts to espouse their right to a voice, and experienced a heightening of their dissatisfaction with the established channels through which they might do so - as a result of the combination of increased demands upon the state to make societal provisions, and the growing sense that the state is unresponsive, as sections of the population are more explicitly excluded from it. This has prompted growing criticism of established institutions of representation, alongside growing demand for alternatives through which to ensure that a voice might be both expressed and heard (Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013). The populist right have sought to channel this disaffection into an anti-immigrant agenda (Kriesi and Pappas 2015), whereas for others it has manifested itself in a more thoroughgoing rejection of the political establishment (Roos and Oikonomakis 2013).

Further, refusal-prone materialists have become more prominent disruptive actors within the post-2008 context, in many cases as a direct result of the reduced resources that have been available to them due to the crisis. Workers, residents and benefit-recipients have found themselves with less material resources, so they have also sought to find ways in which to refuse their experience of subordination and

scarcity in an attempt to enhance their material condition. They have increasingly questioned the organisational form through which that refusal is conducted, and collective self-organizing and civil disobedience are increasingly looked to as the only means through which material demands might be successfully expressed. The struggle over resources within the workplace has become increasingly open to the adoption of more autonomous and radical forms of refusal, as established trade unions have tended towards cooperation with management in an attempt to secure jobs in the context of an economy in crisis, and employers have been less likely to negotiate with labour due to the perception that increased unemployment and labour market insecurity has weakened employees' hand in the bargaining process (for a discussion of these trends in the context of Japan, see Shibata 2015).

It is also within this context that we observe perhaps our most important development in terms of post-2008 innovations in disruptive subjectivity. The increase in disaffection, frustration with established channels of representation, and enhanced demand by subordinate actors for resources and the search for alternative forms of refusal, have each created opportunities for prefigurative radicals to present and advocate prefigurative strategies as alternatives. Prefigurative radicals, having gone through a period of gestation within the anti-globalization movement prior to 2008 (on which see Scholl, 2013), found themselves with an increasingly receptive audience amongst the growing ranks of vocal agents of political equality and refusal-prone materialists, both of whom have become increasingly frustrated with established channels of expression. Prefigurative radicals have been able to connect and work with, and share ideas, revitalise, radicalise, and combine with both of these subject positions, offering prefiguration and prefigurative activity as a means through which to achieve an effective voice and a redistribution of material resources. We therefore see a new combination of the different forms of disruptive agency that had marked the pre-2008 period of neoliberal capitalism emerging, producing a new and different type of crisis-context disruptive subjectivity.

This crisis-era disruptive agent is characterised by a somewhat contradictory combination of prefigurative-style efforts to express voice and seek redistribution. That is, the disruptive crisis-era protester is not a move towards some 'pure' form of prefiguration; she is insufficient in number to bring about entirely autonomous forms of social reproduction. In this sense, we question Hardt and Negri's claim that the post-2008 movements against austerity are 'organized horizontally as multitudes, and their insistence on democracy at all levels is more than a virtue but a key to their power' (Hardt and Negri 2012: 90). Whilst some sections of the anti-austerity movements can be described in this way; others either distance themselves from this position or adopt horizontalist values on a much more piecemeal or pragmatic basis. The disruptive crisis-era protester represents an attempt to achieve some of the more 'conventional' goals

of disruption (voice and resource-seeking) through a form of agency that is *influenced by and combined with* prefigurative ideas, thereby representing something of a hybrid form (see also Flesher Fominaya, forthcoming; Kiersey 2014). Indeed, it is this hybrid and potentially contradictory form of disruptive agency that explains a number of the more strange combinations of different types of refusal during particular moments of disruption since 2008, such as occasions where 'conventional' and 'radical' agents have apparently worked in unison, but also in parallel and side-by-side each other. Think, for instance, of the combination of the conventional TUC march in London in March 2011, alongside a black bloc protest attacking the London Ritz *and* the UK Uncut occupation of Fortnum and Mason – each apparently working towards the same aim, but with little in common and little interaction between each other. On other occasions we have seen the cross-contamination of different forms of agency produce a strange and novel mixture. *Barcelona en Comú*, for example, represents an attempt to bring radical social activist practices and logics into the institutions of representative democracy, at the same time as highlighting the contradictions and limits embedded in such institutions. It is the emergence of this new, different, sometimes strange, hybrid or mixture of these types of disruptive subjectivity that formed during the pre-2008 context of neoliberal capitalism, that mark the novel form of disruptive agency that has emerged during the period of neoliberal stagnation from 2008 onwards. The ideas and actions of prefigurative radicals have been combined pragmatically with more conventional demands for voice and redistribution.

In sum, therefore, the form of disruptive subjectivity that we see emerging during the post-2008 period of stagnating neoliberalism is pragmatically prefigurative, characterised by a combination of attempts to find alternative means through which to both express a voice and acquire improved access to resources, driven by a heightened frustration with existing channels of representation and established forms of refusal, in a context in which the limitations of the formal institutions of representative democracy have become increasingly evident in the light of austerity politics, and in which the capitalist firm has become both increasingly unwilling to meet, and empowered to deny, demands for concessions in its pursuit of worker acquiescence. Resource-seeking has also become increasingly pressing, and therefore been accompanied by an increased appetite for risk, as real standards of living have been pushed downwards throughout the post-2008 period (Navarro and Clua-Losada 2012). Apathy towards establishment actors in terms of their ability to represent the interests of 'the people' has heightened. These changes have therefore created increased demand for new ideas, strategies and tactics in pursuit of both a voice and of resources. It is in this context that prefigurative radicals have sought, at times successfully, to promote prefiguration as a set of tactics and values through which innovative forms of voice and resource-seeking can be achieved. This has therefore led to the pragmatic adoption of prefigurative politics, connecting and combining with more conventional goals, actions and actors, in a somewhat contradictory manner. As a

result, we see a willingness amongst the disruptive subjects of stagnating neoliberalism to employ prefigurative principles - participation, horizontality, direct action, and organisational fluidity - in combination with more conventional goals, strategies, institutions, and actors, in a pragmatic attempt to improve access to both voice and resources in a context in which existing avenues are increasingly closed down (see figure 1). It is the claim of this article that we can witness these trends in both the UK and Spanish context, to which we now turn.

UK

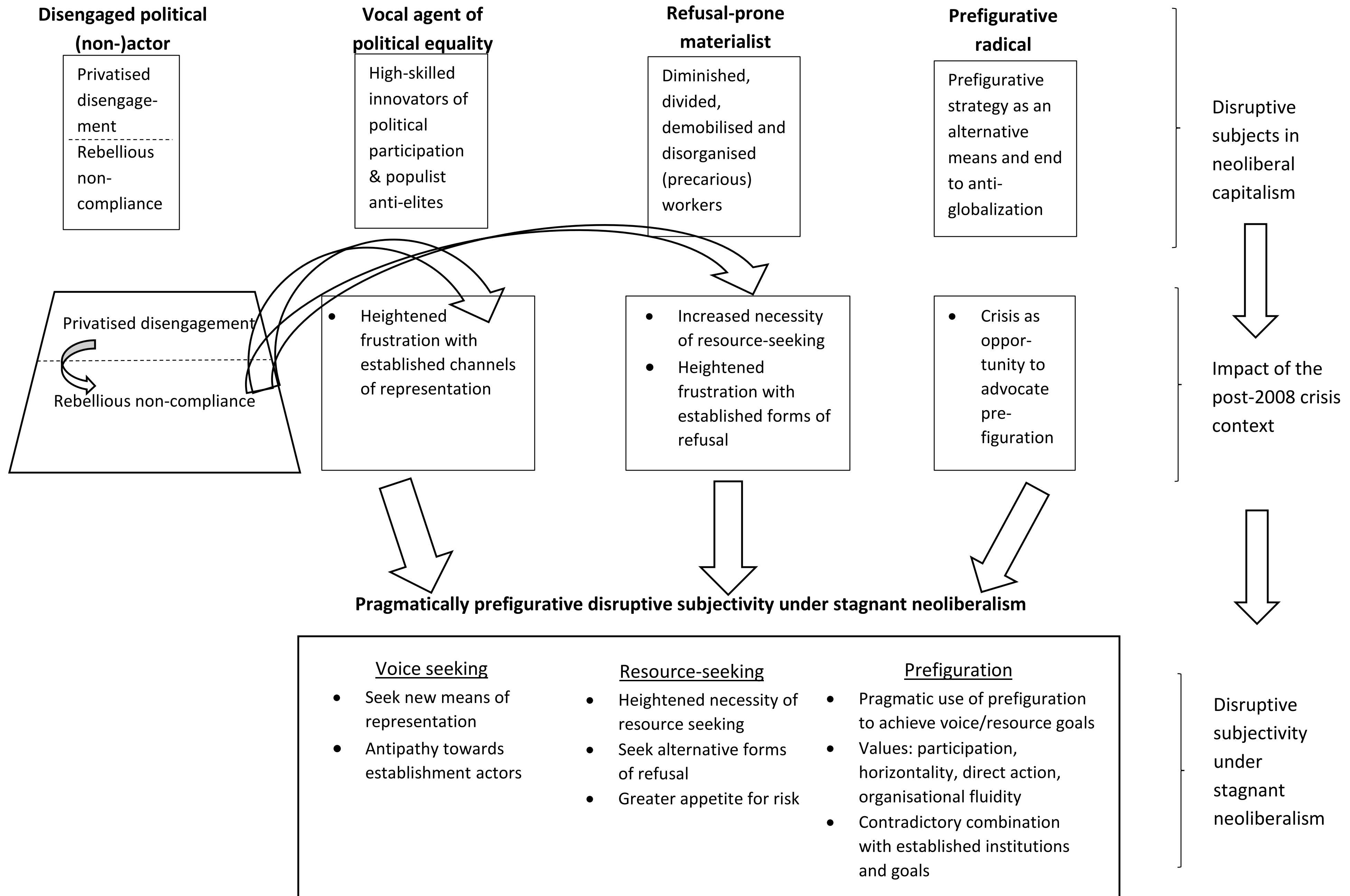
The collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 and the onset of the post-2008 crisis-context resulted in a wave of extra-parliamentary contention in British politics displaying several of the features introduced above (Bailey 2014: 78).[1] This includes: the move from disengagement to more visible forms of disruptive activity; the increased urgency with which disruptive subjects have sought to voice demands and seek material gains alongside a growing frustration with established channels through which to express those demands; the role of prefigurative radicals in posing alternatives means by which to mobilise; and the resulting emergence of a pragmatically prefigurative disruptive subjectivity characterised by a hybrid of prefigurative tactics with more conventional demands, methods and modes of seeking to both express a voice and realise material demands.

Perhaps the most visible instance during which everyday forms of disengagement transformed into more open forms of dissent and rebellion came with the 2011 London (and then national) riots. In the words of one of the rioters, 'We hate the police, hate the government, got no opportunities [...] I became involved in the riots in Salford because it was a chance to tell the police, tell the government, and tell everyone else for that matter that we get fucking hacked off around here and we won't stand for it (Lewis et al. 2011: 20; quoted in Tyler 2013: 204; see also Kawalerowicz and Biggs 2015). Alongside this rise in rebellious dissent, a corresponding increase in the presence of refusal-prone materialists is perhaps best illustrated by a number of groups that are typically averse to strike activity beginning to adopt conventional strike action. This includes actions by barristers, lawyers, probation officers, midwives, and junior doctors. The heightened focus on material necessity as a result of the post-crisis context was also evinced by the

[1] The online appendix that accompanies this article details the major anti-austerity events during the post-2008 period. The events selected are those with higher numbers of attendees, length of time occurring, or instances where they exemplify some of the key trends discussed in the present article. See: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/190EkaUyXIC2A2F6CkafWbr6zDzbjwpMB3wPAxDn7AV8/pubhtml#

increased focus on living wage campaigns, for instance with the 90-day strike by Care UK (ex-NHS) workers in demand of a living wage and the living wage campaign by cinema workers in Ritzy and other independent cinemas across London. The increased sense of frustration with established means by which to express a political voice was also evident in the Lindsey Oil Refinery dispute that lasted for much of the first half of 2009. This dispute witnessed trade unionised engineering workers use direct action tactics (wildcat strikes) to respond to their employers' attempts to undermine workplace conditions. Independently organised strike action was coordinated outside of the established trade unions (as in the 1990s, see Clua-Losada 2010) around populist slogans such as 'British jobs for British workers', and with a direct focus on the inability of both the government and trade unions to properly represent their interests as both workers and British nationals, or to offer the means through which to challenge their heightened sense of labour market insecurity. As one member of the strike committee put it, 'the full-time [trade union] officials and the Labour Government at the time - Mandelson and what-have-you - wouldn't listen to our concerns and complaints', thereby prompting mobilisation (interview, 28 May 2014; see also Ince et al. forthcoming; on the tensions within the organised labour movement with regard to European integration, see Horn 2012).

Figure 1: Mapping disruptive subjectivity in the post-2008 context



In addition, we see a combination of voice and resource-seeking mobilisation with novel and pragmatic engagement with prefigurative radical actors and/or principles in the case of the Vestas factory occupation, which took place in the summer of 2009. Here, an unusual alliance between seasoned anti-globalization and environmentalist activists, formal trade union officials, and workers and local residents concerned about the impact of the proposed factory closure upon their jobs and the livelihood of the local community emerged. In combining a direct action occupation of the factory with a sustained solidarity camp and a number of publicity stunts (including hanging a banner from the top of a crane) the impact of prefigurative radicals in facilitating the development of an alternative means by which workers and local residents could seek to find an avenue through which to express a voice and seek to improve their access to resources was clear. Indeed, one of the key campaign demands was for the government to heed the demands of the community for government support for an important local employer; and the secondary demand was for an improvement in the material compensation that would be made for the proposed redundancies. In the words of one of the workers participating in the protest, "Primarily, we want the government to step in and nationalise this company. If that can't be done … then we want a better enhancement of our redundancy packages, as a cushion that we need to go into a market when there's no jobs".[2] Similarly, UK Uncut represented an attempt to combine relatively conventional demands for the improvement of tax collection with radically disruptive, open and fluid forms of protest mobilisation. Finally, the New Era estate campaign skilfully combined traditional opposition to rent increases with a political campaign focused on generating pressure through social media and focusing on the reputation of the key property owners, Westbrook Partners, who had also been the subject of similar protests in New York.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this article to detail each of the instances of disruption observed during the post-2008 period (for more on which, see Bailey et al. forthcoming), the student anti-tuition fee movement provides important insights into the emergence of pragmatically prefigurative agency in the context of austerity Britain. The anti-tuition fee student movement emerged, somewhat unexpectedly, out of the official National Union of Students (NUS) demonstration that had been called for 10 November 2010 in opposition to the Government's proposal to introduce a three-fold increase in tuition fees. The demonstration was expected to be a conventional march through central London, with the support of both the NUS and the academic staff union, UCU. However, disruption emerged on the route of the march as

[2] Sean McDonagh, Occupying Vestas worker, speaking on *Vestas Occupation: One Year On*, YouTube. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KC1stnYQdo

a group of more militant students entered the building that housed the headquarters of the Conservative Party. The scenes - broadcast through both traditional media and social media - of anarchist flags (amongst others) being waved from the roof of the building, students occupying the building, and a large group of protesters gathering outside the building, all combined to prompt the biggest wave of student mobilisation in over three decades, accounting for roughly one-third of all protest events for 2010 (Bailey 2014). This emerged out of a prolonged period of disillusion amongst the student population - during which the NUS had appeared unable to offer any substantive opposition to apparently inexorable tuition fee increases, alongside the ongoing development of a nascent radical student movement committed to prefigurative politics. This could be seen in the earlier wave of student occupations that were staged to highlight opposition to Israel's military operation in Gaza (Operation Cast Lead) in January 2009, the anti-G20 protests of April 2009, and two high profile student occupations of Middlesex and Sussex Universities in May 2010 in opposition to course closures and privatisation.

The 2010 student movement displayed all of the characteristics associated with the pragmatic prefigurative actor that we discussed above. The move was prompted by anger at the promises that had been broken by the Liberal Democrats (minority partner in the Coalition Government), who had pledged to oppose the raising of student fees prior to the election - highlighting and heightening frustration amongst students at the apparent inability to have their voice heard and acted upon in government. This was combined with frustration surrounding the official channels of representation through the NUS, which was widely perceived as an ineffective and unrepresentative organisation. In the words of one of the participants, 'the student unions in the UK are obviously so incredibly ineffective and so the reason you need some kind of student anti-cuts group because of the student unions' (interview with student activist, 27 June 2014). Further, the wave of student militancy was clearly focused on material, or resource-based demands, with the increase in student debt that would be created by the fee rise being one of the central grievances underpinning the mobilisation. In addition, we see a clear move towards the adoption of strategies and values associated with prefigurative radical ideas and individuals, with many of the key organisers having experience within earlier environmentalist, peace, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalisation movements, with some having experienced the earlier protests observed in the post-2008 period, such as the solidarity movements in support of the Vestas occupation (interviews). In part as a result of this background, a key feature of the anti-tuition fee protests was the use of occupations of university buildings as a means by which to highlight students' demands.

This direct action form of activity also witnessed consensus decision-making emerge as a common practice, informed by prefigurative principles, in which innovative methods of deliberative and consensus-

oriented decision-making practices that had been associated with prefigurative radicals for a number of years prior to the crisis (so-called ‘wavy hands’ or ‘jazz hands’) became an increasingly normal part of decision-making within the anti-tuition fee movement. It also represented an attempt to develop new strategies and methods of refusal, with the disruption of the university viewed as a means by which to present material demands. As one protester put it,

> ‘it’s disruptive, it’s embarrassing, it’s a news story; for the university, reputation damage is a big thing and if we’re press releasing every day - “Students in Occupation; Students Unhappy’, whatever - then that’s, again, something the university wants to avoid and the hope is that they’d rather not want to damage their reputation more by [bringing in] police and rather implementing some sort of ameliorative policy or change (interview with student activist, 30 June 2014).

The anti-tuition fee movement also evinced the pragmatic way in which prefigurative practices were adopted in the post-2008 context. Thus, the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) emerged as an organisation challenging the leadership role played by the NUS within the anti-fees campaign, taking a much more strident position in opposition to tuition fees, promoting direct action forms of protest, as well as being critical of the internal democracy of the NUS. This saw the combination of the creation of a formal organisation with a strategy that was largely based around prefigurative principles of direct action protest and horizontalist decision-making. In addition, however, many of the key NCAFC actors also sought to gain election to office within the NUS, evincing the pragmatism with which the commitment to prefigurative action was held. That is, in an attempt to gain a more effective voice and in seeking to challenge the resource implications of the tuition fee hike, NCAFC members would be simultaneously committed to direct action, horizontal and fluid decision-making structures, the formal decision-making structures of the NCAFC organisation, *and* seek election within the established institutions of the NUS (of which they were highly critical). In this sense, we argue, the key elements of the disruptive subjectivity we term ‘pragmatically prefigurative’, which are central to the stagnation period of post-2008 neoliberalism, can be clearly observed within the development of the anti-tuition fee student movement, which itself exemplifies the new form of disruptive subjectivity associated with the post-2008 crisis context.

Spain

In 2007 the real estate led growth model in Spain collapsed due to a shortage in credit in the aftermath of the subprime crisis in the USA and over-indebted Spanish households (especially in the form of mortgages). At the same time, the car industry suffered cutbacks in production as demand decreased. Mass dismissals, business closures and the destruction of jobs in construction sectors led to a massive increase in unemployment. Under the pressure of investors and the EU, the Spanish government of the social-democratic PSOE and the right-wing PP introduced a series of far reaching austerity measures (Clua-Losada and Ribera-Almandoz, forthcoming). Austerity programmes, combined with the effects of the economic crisis, intensified everyday precarity, seen in rising poverty rates and hundreds of thousands of evictions of households unable to pay their mortgages (Clua-Losada 2012; Haas and Huke 2015; Navarro and Clua-Losada 2012).

While the crisis began in 2007, the cycle of contention had a much later start. By 2009, it was becoming clear that rising levels of unemployment would have serious consequences. As a result, and as the online appendix details, the period after 2008 (and especially from 2011 onwards) witnessed the emergence of a range of different types of disruptive agency.[3] The first few months of the crisis saw a response by organised labour, including transport strikes linked to petrol prices or working conditions, and to a large degree represented a continuation of the forms of subjectivity that had existed prior to the crisis. The refusal-prone materialists were out in force. This was also the moment when the Catalan self-determination movement took to the streets (starting in July 2010), as *vocal agents of political equality* (demanding equal voice for the regions of Spain with those of the centre) mobilised - where earlier they had shown no interest in protesting. The key moment for these two types of subjectivities was during the summer of 2010. By September 2010, a one-day general strike had been called by the major trade unions and a myriad of social movements. In Barcelona, a few days before the strike a large bank building had been occupied in *Plaça Catalunya* by many activists seeking to discuss alternatives. Many interviewees pointed to that occupation as the key decisive factor in the move towards the 15-M occupation of the squares a few months later. According to one of the occupiers "this was the moment when autonomists, anarchists and even hippies got together" (interview with 15-M activist). Indeed, from February 2011, the meetings often organised by Real Democracy Now started to become the space where activists (people who had been involved in squatting movements, housing struggles and the alter-globalisation movement) would meet with people involved in cyber-activism (primarily around x-net and

[3] Online appendix:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/190EkaUyXlC2A2F6CkafWbr6zDzbjwpMB3wPAxDn7AV8/pubhtml#

Partido X). This period, between the start of the crisis and the occupation of the squares on 15 May 2011, thus witnessed the pragmatic combination of both conventional and radical forms of disruptive agency.

The 15-M represented a break in the protest cycle between the old and the new. In one sense, 15-M expressed concrete political demands that were social-democratic in nature; seeking equality, political inclusion and (some) material concessions. At the same time, however, the empty signifiers it used (such as 'real democracy'), the fundamental rejection of traditional forms of representation (parties and trade unions, but also 'identitarian' leftist collectives) and especially its social forms (assemblies, politics in the first person, consensus based decisions and the collectivization of individual social crises) paved the way for an unprecedented extension of prefigurative radical politics. The occupations of the squares sparked an intensive process of grassroots community organising in Spain and contributed significantly to the creation or revitalization of neighbourhood assemblies as well as thematic working groups and collectives (for instance, in health, education and especially housing). Its 'destituent' moments - the de-legitimation of the existing forms of institutionalised representation as well as the activation and inclusion of formerly disengaged, disaffected or disinterested parts of the population - acted as a breeding ground for subsequent movements to emerge, including the movement against the privatization of hospitals and health centres in Madrid (*marea blanca*), protests in the education sector (*marea verde or SOS Educació*), and unconventional forms of radical strike action from below (e.g. Panrico, Coca-Cola, Movistar technicians, and the teachers strike on the Balearic Islands) (for a more detailed discussion, see Bailey et al. forthcoming; Huke 2016, Clua-Losada and Ribera-Almandoz forthcoming). We also see attempts by conventional actors to incorporate the new methods adopted by prefigurative radicals during this period. For instance, the major trade unions, CC.OO. and UGT, included more grassroots-based and prefigurative forms in their political repertoires (Huke and Tietje 2014), albeit evincing a certain pragmatism in that they were characterised by "cautious and partially diverging efforts to revise and modify the prevailing strategies" (Bieling and Lux 2014: 158).

In terms of the extension of prefigurative politics, the Spanish housing movement that emerged in response to the evictions of those Spanish households unable to pay their mortgage debts represents perhaps the most important of these developments. The first major event of the housing movement was the creation of the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) in 2009. For many weeks a small group of activists from V de Vivienda (an organisation that had appeared during the 2000s to denounce the housing bubble and the negative impact it was having on the right to housing) met weekly in Barcelona. The group encouraged people struggling to keep up with mortgage repayments to attend an assembly in order to receive "collective counselling". For weeks, no one except the activists attended.

One day, however, a man who had reached a point of no return attended the assembly. After assessing his situation, the activists travelled to his home in a residential suburb outside Barcelona and managed to stop his eviction by placing their bodies outside his front door. This use of direct action as a method of refusal was to become the start of the PAH as a real alternative. The man's eviction was stopped and the story was rapidly spread and replicated throughout the country.

It was the 15-M movement, however, that acted as a catalyst for the expansion and regional extension of the housing movement in Spain (interview with PAH activist, 14 November 2013). For 15-M activists, the housing movements marked a point where material demands could be sought through strategies associated with prefigurative approaches and in coalition with those actors with experience of prefigurative practices. In the words of one 15-M activist:

> this part of 15-M that is academic, intellectual, very 'from the city', had real contact with the popular classes of the suburbs. [...] There is a space in the centre where social movements are, and the harsh reality of the everyday is in the suburbs (interview with Intercomisión de Vivienda, 13 November 2013).

The strategy of the PAH - and other similar housing movements close to it, such as the housing assemblies of 15-M in Madrid, the housing information and meeting points (PIVE), and the occupied housing blocs in Sevilla (*corralas*) - included a series of actions that combined demands for a political voice (for those suffering from evictions) and material concessions (in the form of calls for a change to the mortgage law) with autonomous, prefigurative politics in a contradictory, pragmatic and somewhat surprising way. The PAH's organisational structure was based on local grassroots assemblies, where individual experiences with evictions and mortgage debt and strategies to counteract these were shared collectively and advice on solutions for individual cases was given from all participants. To allow for collective self-organisation - and also due to limited financial funds - the PAH deliberately abstained from individual counselling. The subjectivity of those arriving in the PAH was marked by individual feelings of guilt and shame:

> When someone affected comes to the PAH, she comes destroyed, with shame and a feeling of guilt, it is not the profile of political subject ready to mobilise, to confront a judicial delegation and the police to stop her eviction (Macías 2013: 47).

However, the collective counselling of the PAH and its successes (or 'little big victories') in many individual cases included stopping evictions through acts of civil disobedience, collectively negotiating debt restructurings with banks, and achieving social rents. These achievements rendered the fact that problems perceived as individual failures were in fact collective, political problems, visible. Further, they also showed how participation in the PAH resulted in an enhanced capacity to act, thereby transforming desperation and disengagement into more effective means of resource-seeking activity through the adoption of activity influenced by prefigurative values:

> The platform serves as a life-saver, when you see that you are not the one guilty, you are not the only one, that [...] relieves you a bit of [...] the weight you are carrying on you." "There is a negotiation in that bank one day, maybe there are three or four families that have it very harsh, that could go to the street in two months and they go there [...] to ask for the *dación en pago*. Then the actions start coming. [...] At the door of the bank. And that gives you power. And then leave the bank. As we leave. With the problem solved. Well, this gives power to anyone (interview with PAH-activist, 14 November 2013).

The impact of prefigurative politics can also be witnessed in the *Obra Social* campaign of the PAH, which occupied housing blocs for evicted families. The prefigurative moment was most visible in the framing of the occupations as the independent assertion of basic social rights (*autotutela de derechos*) (Macías 2013). This took on a somewhat contradictory and unusual appearance, however, in that it was also combined with more conventional types of lobbying and political activity, displaying the pragmatic way in which prefigurative values were employed by the anti-eviction campaign (on these tensions between conventional and prefigurative, or institutional and autonomous, values, see also Flesher Fominaya, forthcoming). Thus, the PAH also engaged in more symbolic or traditional forms of campaigning: organising demonstrations, symbolic occupations of banks, demonstrations in front of politicians and others deemed responsible for the housing crisis (*escraches*), as well as a widely supported petition for a citizens legislative initiative for a new Spanish mortgage law that included the demand for a *dación en pago*, for social rents, and for and end to evictions of residential properties (with retroactive application). While parts of the PAH repertoire were developed in the process of action, other elements included prefigurative experiments developed in the pre-crisis period, including strategies for community organizing in precarious everyday living situations applied in the Euromayday movement (López et al. 2008).

Conclusion

In the context of a fundamental crisis of debt-led growth, of banking crises and of a subsequent crisis of public finances in which we see the hardening of the state, a decline in its representativeness, and an increase in precarity and impoverishment, rebellious subjectivities have emerged to pose new forms of disruption to neoliberal capitalism during its post-2008 period of stagnation. This crisis-era disruptive subjectivity is characterised by a somewhat contradictory combination of prefigurative values and practices with attempts to express voice and seek the redistribution of material resources. These developments also raise further important questions: To what extent will this combination of conventional and unconventional forms of political activity result in the dampening, or 'crowding out', of one or the other? To what extent will prefigurative values and practices challenge and change established institutions of representation? And to what extent should we expect the rise of the populist right wing to emerge as a more viable (and more conventional) means through which to incorporate the popular disaffection of the post-2008 period?

The disruptive crisis-era protester is not a move towards any 'pure' form of prefiguration, since she is too rare a creature to secure entirely autonomous forms of social reproduction. Neither does the disruptive crisis-era protester represent a straightforward continuation of voice-seeking or resource-demanding activity. Instead, she displays an attempt to achieve some of the more 'conventional' goals of disruption (voice and resource-seeking) through a form of agency that is *influenced by and combined with* prefigurative ideas and actions, thereby representing something of a hybrid form. Indeed, it is this hybrid and contradictory nature that, in part, we claim explains some of the more surprising political developments that have emerged during the course of the post-2008 period (for a more detailed discussion of these developments, see Bailey et al., forthcoming). In particular, the electoral success of Podemos, Barcelona en Comú (and the election of Ada Colau), and the selection of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party, each display clearly contradictory tendencies; they draw, in part, upon the support of constituencies committed to and informed by prefigurative principles of direct action, horizontalism, and participation, but in a way that is channelled through conventional forms of political representation. It is this tendency for somewhat contradictory and surprising forms of pragmatically-prefigurative disruptive subjectivity, we argue, that marks the contemporary period of neoliberal stagnation, and which underpins the ever-present possibility for disruption, and change, in the present.

Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was supported by financial support from awarded by the University of Birmingham School of Government and Society Research Fund and the project AJOVE12 funded by the Catalan government on "Social Inequality and Political Participation during the crisis". Earlier versions of

the paper were presented at Understanding the Post-Crisis Landscape: Assessing Change in Economic Management, Welfare, Work and Democracy seminar, *ESRC Seminar Series*, University of Birmingham (December 2014); European Studies Research Group, University of Birmingham (January 2015); International Studies Association annual conference (New Orleans, 2015); and Political Economy Research Group, University of Birmingham (June 2016). We are grateful for comments received on earlier drafts, especially those of Stephen Bates, Michael Biggs, Nicholas Kiersey, Laura Horn, Louisa Parks, Magnus Ryner, Matthew Watson, and Angela Wigger. We also acknowledge the assistance of Albert Jiménez in compiling the list of Spanish protest events, and the detailed and very helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers.

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