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[Featherstone, D.](#) and [Karaliotas, L.](#) (2018) Challenging the spatial politics of the European crisis: nationed narratives and trans-local solidarities in the post-crisis conjuncture. *Cultural Studies*, 32(2), pp. 286-307. (doi:[10.1080/09502386.2017.1354050](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2017.1354050))

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Deposited on: 30 May 2017

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Challenging the spatial politics of the European crisis: Nationed narratives and trans-local solidarities in the post-crisis conjuncture

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for the formation of political solidarities across the spatial divisions being intensified by dominant responses to the European crisis. In doing so it takes inspiration from Doreen Massey's thinking around the contested terms on which space and politics are articulated and her engagement with the 2008 crisis through projects such as the *Kilburn Manifesto*. We argue that her book *World City* powerfully articulates a way of thinking about the spatial politics of a particular conjuncture. The paper traces the ways in which various political interventions in post-crisis politics have been shaped by distinctive 'nationed' geographical imaginaries. In particular we explore how left-wing nationed narratives impact on the discursive horizon and unpack their implications for the articulation of solidarities and emancipatory politics in the context of the 'European Crisis'. Building on this, we reflect on how trans-local solidarities and alliances might be articulated across socio-spatial divisions and contest the decidedly uneven, racialised, gendered and classed impacts of dominant European politics. We argue that such solidarities and alliances can form a crucial intervention in challenging the dominant spatial politics of crisis and articulating left political strategies on different terms.

Keywords:

Space, Politics, Conjuncture, Solidarity, Populism, Nationed narratives.

Introduction

"It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life." Antonio Gramsci, (1971: 184).

The nation has forcefully returned as a key signifier in the discursive horizon throughout Europe. In a political landscape marked by austerity and uneven and exclusionary responses to ongoing migration flows, divisive geographical imaginations articulated around nationed¹ narratives have acquired center stage in elite discourses seeking to legitimise such political rationalities. The pathologisation of Southern European countries and the scapegoating of immigrants are key ways through which European and national elites have sought to construct the discursive horizon around the more-than-economic 'European Crisis'. The flipside of this rhetoric is the emergence of discourses and practices that posit the nation as the primary locus through which grievances and resistances are articulated and

¹ We use the term 'nationed' to refer to discourses and imaginaries articulated around the signifier of the nation either to explain the 'European Crisis' and the spatial politics around it or to articulate alternatives to the post-crisis conjuncture.

envisioned. Such responses are most prominently manifested in the upsurge of right-wing nationalist and xenophobic movements in most European countries and have been central to the right-wing support for projects such as Brexit.

Grappling with the challenges posed by these exclusionary geographies necessitates engaging with the spatial politics of the current post-crisis conjuncture. To do so we take inspiration from Doreen Massey's engagements both with the contested terms on which space and politics are articulated and with her distinctive analysis and critical engagement with the politics of the 2008 crisis. In particular we seek to demonstrate what a focus on solidarity across spatial divisions can contribute to "project[s] of conjunctural analysis" (Massey, 2014: 2034, see Hall et al, 2015b). This is in the spirit of the attempt to change the 'terms of debate' of the politics around the crisis that animated the *Kilburn Manifesto* which Massey co-authored with Stuart Hall and Michael Rustin (Hall et al, 2015a). As she noted in a discussion of the rationale behind the project they had sought to intervene in a context where "there had been this massive economic crisis, there was no ideological or political crisis. There were no major political fractures, no serious unsettling of neoliberal ideological hegemony, no significant ruptures in popular discourse" (Massey, 2014: 2034).

By tracing some of the ways in which distinctive nationed geographical imaginaries have been articulated through different interventions in the post-crisis conjuncture the paper seeks to shed light on the possibilities for left politics. The political importance of engaging with nationed responses is underlined by the way such imaginaries are not solely the terrain of the political right. Left-wing support for Brexit, sometimes referred to as Lexit and partly articulated around left claims to national sovereignty, has, for example, gained a positive response from some movements and left parties across Europe. Nationed imaginaries have also been important in shaping the political rhetoric of New Left parties and governments such as Podemos and Syriza (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; Prentoulis, 2016). Podemos, in particular, have drawn explicit influence from the writings of Massey's friends and interlocutors Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, particularly their engagements with populism.

The paper challenges the relation between political projects of austerity and exclusion and the uneven and divisive geographies on which they both depend and reproduce. In parallel, we seek to dislocate the nationed ways in which the crisis has been

articulated within left-wing movements. Our analysis of nationed left-wing discourses, however, does not in any sense attempt to reproduce the hegemonic discourse that assimilates left- and right-wing resistances under the banner of a reactionary and dangerous nationalism/populism, in an effort to delegitimise the possibility for any radical alternative to the dominant crisis politics. On the contrary, our interest here is to explore how left-wing nationed narratives impact on the discursive horizon and unpack their implications for the articulation of solidarities and emancipatory politics in the context of the ‘European Crisis’ and beyond. Building on this, we explore how trans-local solidarities and alliances might be articulated across socio-spatial divisions and contest the decidedly uneven, racialised, gendered and classed impacts of dominant European politics. We argue that such solidarities and alliances can form a crucial intervention in challenging the dominant spatial politics of crisis and in articulating left political strategies on different terms. Further we argue they can potentially play a crucial role in shaping the terms of debate around the political construction and articulation of left populisms.

The paper commences with an engagement with Doreen Massey’s work, particularly in *World City* (2007) and the *Kilburn Manifesto* (Hall et al, 2015), to foreground a way to analyse and intervene in the spatial politics of the post-crisis conjuncture. The second section unpacks how nationed narratives are a nodal point in discourses seeking to legitimise the political project of austerity and the socio-spatial divisions upon which it depends and reproduces. The following two sections focus on left-wing articulations of the post-crisis conjuncture. More specifically, the third section focuses on the left-wing populist discourses of Podemos and Syriza to unpack the role of the nation in their articulation, while the fourth explores the formation of trans-local solidarities as an alternative to national-populism. The concluding section summarises the argument and seeks to maintain a sense of hopefulness on the transformative political potentialities of trans-local solidarities and “networked, practiced internationalisms” (Massey, 2007: 184) in the current conjuncture.

Crisis and the Spatial Politics of Conjunctures

Doreen Massey's engagement with space, politics and the 2008 crisis open up important ways in grappling with the spatial politics of the current conjuncture. One of the distinctive contributions Massey made to the *Kilburn Manifesto* was to bring a focus on uneven spatial politics to understandings of the 2008 crisis (see Massey and Rustin, 2015: 191). This contribution was related to a broader sense of the importance of spatial politics as integral to understanding the terms on which conjunctures are understood and practiced as a mode of analysis. As Grossberg argues, a conjuncture can be defined as "a social formation understood as more than a mere context – but as an articulation, accumulation, or condensation of contradictions" (2005: 5). Massey mobilised this conceptual approach in ways which give direct purchase on the terms and practices through which the crisis was politicised, with a keen sense of how it might be articulated leftwards. This explicitly political use of the term conjuncture was shaped by Massey's focus on the importance of understanding the ways crisis were articulated. As she noted in a conversation with Stuart Hall, reflecting on the approach to understanding the crisis they developed through the *Kilburn Manifesto*, their account of the conjuncture was directly concerned to foreground the political as well as economic dimensions of moments of crisis. She commented that:

The other thing that's really striking – and I went back as you have been doing and looked at the *Prison Notebooks* and Althusser – is the importance of thinking of things as complex moments, where different parts of the overall social formation may themselves, independently be in crisis in various ways, but at a certain point they are condensed. Although we see this movement as a big economic crisis, it is also a philosophical and political crisis in some ways – or it could be if we get hold of the narrative. So it's really important that we don't only 'do the economy', as it were. (Hall and Massey, 2015: 62).

The terms of this conversation emphasise the shared project of moving beyond the dominant economically-focused accounts of the crisis. As Hall noted this was integral to a "serious analysis" which would take "into account its other "conditions of existence" such as in a UK context the "way 'New Labour' became disconnected from its political roots and evolved as the second party of capital, transforming the political terrain" (*ibid.*). The dynamic role they give to the political in terms of shaping the terms on which the crisis was constituted and negotiated is significant.

Further it suggests the importance of thinking seriously about the terms on which conjunctures are narrated, analysed and contested.

Central to Massey's engagements here was her characteristically distinctive take on the spatial politics of conjunctures. To think seriously about the spatial politics of conjunctures was significant because conjunctural analysis has tended to be envisioned in primarily temporal and national terms. Thus summarising Stuart Hall's account of the conjuncture, John Clarke argues that the concept "highlights the ways in which moments of transformation, break and the possibility of new 'settlements' come into being" (Clarke, 2014: 115). Further conjunctures "have no necessary duration" but rather "their time is determined by the capacity of political forces – the leading bloc – to shape new alignments or to overcome (or at least stabilise) existing antagonisms and contradictions" (*ibid.*).

Stuart Hall's work did engage in significant ways with the geographical articulations of, and processes through which, conjunctures are shaped and articulated. *Policing the Crisis*, for example, develops a significant sense of how different geographies of politics, particularly in relation to postcolonialism, shaped the crisis conjuncture of the post-war period (Hall et al, 1978). This led to an analysis which foregrounds the ways in which disparate social and geographical antagonisms, such as 'mugging', trade union militancy, civil rights movements in the North of Ireland and campaigns for gender/ sexual liberation became articulated by the political right as 'an interlocking set of planned or organised *conspiracies*' against "the British way of life" (Hall et al, 1978: 309). There is direct attention to the geographies through which this sense of crisis was produced, not least a fine-grained sense of the political articulation of the impact of decolonisation on the UK. As Bill Schwarz has noted, in this period organisations like the Monday Club gave an 'organizational form to the opinions of the radical right' in the 1960s and 1970s and 'became the means by which the sensibilities of colonial defeat, overseas, were translated into a domestic idiom' (Schwarz, 2011: 389).

Hall's sense of the spatial politics of conjuncture, however, also shaped the terms on which resistances were theorised, particular through a dynamic sense of transnational black working class formation. The discussion of the writings of the *Race Today Collective* in *Policing the Crisis* emphasises that the geographies through which

Caribbean working class formation was produced are significant and, crucially, shape the dynamics through which resistance might be envisioned and theorised in a particular conjuncture (Hall et al, 1978: 378). There were then dynamic geographies at work in Hall et al's articulation of conjunctural politics. These spatialities, however, were not reflected on in explicitly theoretical ways.

Massey's work is significant in this regard as her work has significant resources for understanding the spatial politics of conjunctures. Thus as we will suggest below, through tracing London's uneven relations both with the rest of the UK and globally, Massey gives a dynamic sense of the differentiated geographical processes through which a shifting conjuncture is produced. While this has important affinities with Hall's work, it opens up a different way of understanding the spaces through which conjunctures are shaped. Where Hall (1988: 127) saw a conjuncture as "the complex historically specific terrain of a crisis which affects – but in uneven ways – a specific national-social formation as a whole", Massey's account offers ways of de-centring the spaces of the national in understandings of the conjuncture. This enables an analysis of how particular responses to crisis become articulated through particular nationed imaginaries and strategies.

In this sense for Massey the question of what the spaces are through which we imagine and analyse conjunctures are not a secondary concern of analysis, but rather concerns with structural and causative implications. As she made clear in various interventions, the ways in which space is envisioned and conceptualised has significant implications for the terms on which politics is understood and left political alternatives envisioned (Massey, 2005). As she argues the "issue here is not to stress only the production *of* space but space itself as integral *to* the production of society" (Massey, 1999: 39-40). At the same time, her insistence on thinking space as "always in the process of being made [...] never finished; never closed" (Massey, 2005: 9) opens up possibilities for thinking about left responses/articulations of crisis that seek to intervene in the spaces of the post-crisis conjuncture and foreground alternative imaginations of the spaces to come.

While Massey rarely wrote explicitly about the spaces of conjunctures her work contains important resources for theorising the relations between space, politics and conjuncture. Further useful elements of a spatial approach to understanding

conjunctures have been foregrounded by Jamie Peck's recent work on "conjunctural urbanism". Peck uses the term "conjunctural urbanism" to draw attention to the importance of the spatial relations through which conjunctures are understood and analysed. He argues that to "appeal to 'conjunctures' is not just a matter of deferring, *a priori*, to some overarching explanatory edifice like a deterministic reading of financialised capitalism or a hierarchically rigid conception of neoliberal rule" (2017: 9). Rather he contends that "it requires the recognition of contextual complexity 'all the way down', necessitating the production (and restless revision) of midlevel theoretical formulations appropriate for interrogation across multiple cases and sites, along with reflexive interpretations of the interplay between ground circumstances, mediating conditions and contingent effects on the one hand, and their enabling conditions of existence, operational parameters and connective circuits on the other' (*ibid.*).

Peck's account usefully draws attention to the spatialities through which conjunctural politics are constituted. In this respect one of the contributions of Massey's understandings of spatial politics is to stress the locatedness of conjunctural politics and projects. This has important consequences. Firstly, it prevents the term conjuncture becoming a vague appeal to an 'a-historical and a-spatial zeitgeist'. Secondly, it emphasises that her work sought not merely to go 'all the way down' to the micro, but arguably posed rather different ways of envisioning the relations between placed politics and conjunctures to those argued for by Peck. In this sense she treated placed activity as potentially generative of conjunctures and as articulating conjunctures in distinctive and productive ways. This was shaped by the way she challenged associations of "place, the local and vulnerability on the one hand, and capital, space and place on the other" (Massey, 2005: 185).

Central to Massey's understanding of the construction of conjunctures is the ways in which constellations of relations in particular sites and places are articulated together to generate broader projects and relations. This is an important move politically as it allows interventions in particular places/sites to be generative of different conjunctures and political projects. Her work, particularly some of her writings in London, gives an incisive sense of how struggles over the terms on which places were shaped and articulated in dynamic relation to the making and re-makings of conjunctures. While *World City* is arguably best known for its accounts of "place-

beyond-place” and its original focus on “geographies of responsibility” the book also powerfully articulates a way of thinking about the spatial politics of a particular conjuncture. Her account opens up a sense of important political possibility through its focus on the spaces and politics through which conjunctures might be thought otherwise. The following elements of this approach are particularly significant and have useful resources for thinking about forging solidarities in the context of the uneven spatial politics of the European crisis.

Firstly, by focusing on how neo-liberalism was constituted through a particular response to ‘crisis’, and how a particular spatial politics was central to this conjunctural project, the book shapes a dynamic sense of the relationalities and trajectories of place. Through tracing London’s uneven relations both with the rest of the UK and globally and thinking about the terms on which London’s relations and connections were articulated Massey gives a dynamic sense of the differentiated geographical processes through which a shifting conjuncture is produced. She also was able to envision ways in which such connections and relations might be articulated differently through different political imaginaries. This enables an analysis of how particular responses to crisis become articulated through particular nationed imaginaries and strategies. Further, it offers important possibilities for imagining/articulating a left politics around the post-crisis conjuncture which is not confined within bounded and/or exclusionary articulations of the nation. This is particularly useful in the context of arguments about the spaces of populism emerging in the wake of the crisis.

Secondly, her account stresses the ways in which the articulation of London as a ‘neoliberal’ city was a particular political project – but one that was always contested and challenged. She argues that “[t]he victory of neoliberalism over any alternative more democratic, more egalitarian, future and the associated victory of banking, finance and related sectors and of a vision of London’s status as this particular kind of world city has changed the conditions of existence of all else” (Massey, 2007: 88-89). This stress on the political contestations through which this was achieved, however, emphasises that this was a political set of choices/priorities that were always contested and foregrounds a particular emphasis on the ongoing trajectories of resistance to neo-liberalism. As she notes elsewhere this “‘victory’ was never complete. Both within its heartlands, in the USA and the UK, and elsewhere around the globe, there have

continued to be resistances to its terms, the imagination of alternatives and concrete demonstrations of other ways of living in a society' (Massey, 2009: 137). By seeing left opposition and alternatives as ongoing parts of the story rather than as merely defensive responses to a crisis constituted by the right, Massey's account can inform contemporary left strategies (cf. Featherstone, 2015, Kelliher, 2016).

Third, she argues that a key political question in the contemporary period becomes "what does this place stand for?" (Massey, 2007: 10). This seemingly straightforward question opens up an important sense of the geographies and "politics of place beyond place" (Massey, 2007: 15) – and crucially of how such relations might be thought otherwise. This allows a challenge to the particular constructions of place on which hegemonic logics of crisis depend, predicated as they are on competitive logics both within and between countries, cities, regions, places, etc. This opens up significant political challenges for understanding the uneven terrain of contemporary Europe – and beyond – marked as it is by fissures of division and inequality. It stresses the possibilities of thinking about how solidarities within and between places can bear on rethinking how places relate to each other.

Finally, Massey here used this thinking around the relations between place beyond place to articulate forms of "networked, practiced internationalism" (Massey, 2007: 184). Rather than envisioning internationalism as a scale positioned above placed-interaction, this intervention positions internationalisms and solidarities as articulated through placed relations. This also was part of an internationalist understanding of the contemporary conjuncture which drew on understandings of political achievements and struggles of the left elsewhere to illuminate understandings of political possibilities in cities such as London – and particular populist left projects such as the GLC under Ken Livingstone. Thus her essay "Learning from Latin America" emphasised the ways in which the left in Europe/North America might draw important lessons from the 'pink tide' of post-neo-liberal experiments in different parts of Latin America (Massey, 2012). As Sarah Elwood notes, "transnational theorizing from postneoliberalisms allows us to identify and theorize as connected seemingly very different instantiations of struggle over (post)neoliberal futures" (Elwood, 2016: 4). The remainder of this paper uses a focus on such transnational articulations to challenge nationed narratives around the crisis and think about solidarities across the uneven geographies of European crisis.

Uneven Geographies of Crisis: Nationed narratives and socio-spatial divisions in the post-crisis conjuncture

In their closing contribution to *The Kilburn Manifesto* Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin contend that “[a]cross Europe the remedy very quickly adopted for the failure of the neoliberal system was to insist that it be imposed with even greater rigour on economies and societies already ruined by the crisis” (Massey and Rustin, 2015: 191). To envision articulations of solidarities/alternatives across differences in the context of the European crisis, then, it is necessary to understand the logics through which both the imposition of austerity and its differentiated effects on different groups within and across national borders were/are legitimised in political discourse. A key way through which austerity politics have been legitimised throughout Europe has been via discourses narrating the crisis as the manifestation of national exceptionalities and pathologies, particularly in countries of the European South. This narration of the spatial politics of the crisis drew on and exacerbated existing inequalities between different parts of Europe. As Costis Hadjimichalis and Ray Hudson have argued, Southern European “regional economies, including those formerly seen as ‘success stories’, together with Ireland, became the weak link in a very unstable monetary union and the old social and spatial division of labour between North and South in Europe began to be reproduced in a heightened manner” (2014: 211). At the same time, socio-spatial divisions – not solely around the division of labour – within countries have also been intensified and politically mobilised through austerity politics. This section unpacks the centrality of nationed constructions of the crisis in this discursive operation.

The hegemonic discourse around the so-called Greek crisis is paradigmatic in this respect. Crucially this discourse has been promoted by European political elites as well as the mainstream media, political commentators and successive governments in the country between 2010 and 2015. In 2010, the celebratory discourse around the Greek success-story, of a strong modernising Greece that was an equal member of the EU and had successfully organised the 2004 Olympic Games at Athens, almost momentarily gave its place to discourses of failure, catastrophe and national salvation. As Yannis Stavrakakis argues “various medical, pedagogical and even zoological metaphors [were] central – from the beginning – in the institutional discourses

responding to the crisis and advancing the ‘solution’ offered by the so-called troika” (2013: 316).

Greece, as a whole, was a patient that had to swallow the bitter medicine prescribed by its doctors, according to – then president of the IMF – Dominique Strauss-Khan (Papachristou, 2010) and - then Prime Minister - George Papandreou (2009). While debt was the symptom of the country’s sickness, the underlying cause was ascribed to ‘Greek exceptionalism’: lack of productivity, corruption, political clientalism, an inefficient but ever present state-bureaucracy leading to the country’s deviation from ‘normal’ European states. Importantly, all Greeks were said to be equally responsible for this deviation, a notion effectively captured in PASOK’s vice-president, Theodoros Pangalos (2010: n.p.), statement “We all ate it together” [i.e., we are all responsible for the accumulation of debt]. In this context, as Glynos and Voutyras detail, successive governments and Prime Ministers – from social-democrat George Papandreou to the unelected technocrat Lucas Papademos to conservative Antonis Samaras – have argued that responding to the ‘Greek crisis’ was a “patriotic duty” calling for the unity of all Greeks (2016). Similar logics were present in the “we’re all in it together” rhetoric of UK arch-austerian George Osborne.

Such nationed narratives sought to efface political questions and antagonisms from the discursive horizon. If all Greeks were/are responsible for the crisis and all Greeks together need to fight for ‘national salvation’, then political questions become redundant. This is not to deny that the idiosyncracies of the Greek political economy had an effect on the unfolding of the crisis but to highlight that talk of the ‘Greek crisis’, attributing it solely to such particularities, effectively silences questions over the spread of the financial crisis of 2008 and its transformation into a sovereign debt crisis in Europe; the massive bank bailouts throughout Europe; the architecture of the European Monetary Union and the position of the countries of the European South in it (Hadjimichalis, 2011); as well as the role of Greek and European politico-economic elites. Similarly, the devastating and deeply unequally distributed consequences of austerity policies in terms of class, gender (Vaiou, 2016), ethnicity and age are also glossed over in the altar of ‘national salvation’. Such silences become even more pronounced when it comes to migrant populations in the country: the role of the exploitation of immigrants, mainly from the Balkans, in the ‘golden years’ of growth (1997-2008) is forgotten, the experiences of many undocumented or semi-

documented immigrants are marginalised, their increasing exclusion and precariousness are ignored and they are often inscribed in narratives of blame and hatred (see Dalakoglou, 2013).

Similar trends can also be discerned throughout Europe and beyond, albeit differentially structured and experienced. Processes of austerity in the UK, for example, have had key racialised, gendered and classed impacts, with a disproportionate impact on BME women and their organisations (Vacchelli et al., 2015). Silencing these differentiated impacts, Akwugo Emejulu argues, constructs “whiteness as a victimhood purposefully mak[ing] it difficult to understand how and why public services are in crisis” and blaming migration as a cause of the crisis (2016: n.p.). Indeed, there is a significant and cruel irony in that some of the groups at the sharpest end of austerity politics have become the scapegoats on which narratives of austerity depend. As Stuart Hall (1978: 31) argued in the late 1970s, “race” can function as a key “lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing” and can be “the framework through which the crisis is experienced”. It is essential here to articulate a challenge to – and to attempt to transcend – the racialised, gendered and classed divisions that neoliberal strategies and precarious working practices thrive on and intensify.

In this context a key indication of the reach of hegemonic crisis discourse has been the extent to which various forms of left and trade union organising have been structured as responses to these divisive geographies rather than as challenges to them. In the UK, for example, high profile disputes have mobilised around slogans like “British Jobs for British Workers” (Ince et al., 2015). Similarly, as Oscar Garcia Agustín and Martin Jørgensen have argued, in a recent discussion of trade union organising in the Danish construction sector a “critique of the neoliberal model and its dominant role in Europe was displaced by critique of the EU principle of free movement, which was perceived as a risk for the Danish welfare state (or the so-called ‘flexicurity’ model) and Danish workers’ rights and decent wages” (2016: 156). This mobilisation, they go on to suggest, “gave the far-right Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti) an opportunity to target the debate about the threat represented by Eastern European workers” (2016: 156).

Some influential union leaders have also reproduced dominant framings of the geographies of responsibility for the crisis. Thus Berthold Huber, then General Secretary of IG Metall, in a speech in 2012 first “blamed Spanish unions for the fate of the Spanish economy. Having obtained ‘too high wage increases’ they would be responsible for undermining the competitiveness of Spanish economies. Then he argued that the Spanish labour market should be restructured to regain competitiveness” (Bieler and Erne, 2014: 163). Huber also dismissed “planned strikes in some Southern European countries for the European-wide trade union mobilisation of 14 November 2012 as ‘voluntaristic nonsense’”. Indeed, Simon Dubbins, international officer of the UK union Unite, has noted the resistance of major German and Dutch unions to mobilizing around austerity (Dubbins, 2015).

This emphasises that some unions and many centre-left parties have supported, acquiesced with and even shaped the intensification of a market-driven European project in the wake of the crisis. Indeed, as Hall and Massey note, this was part of the political terrain that was foundational to the crisis (2015). Crucially, the use of the crisis as a political opportunity to further a market-driven European project, underlines the importance of challenging the relation between austerity as a political project and the divisive geographies on which it both depends and (re)produces. This foregrounds the need to unearth and challenge the proliferation of internal and external inequalities, fractures and borders that mark European societies.

Challenging austerity, articulating solidarities: demos or ethnos?

The intensification of social and spatial divisions raises important questions of how solidarities that challenge and refuse their unequal and exclusionary character might be articulated. In posing this question we understand the forging of solidarities as part of the process of politicisation itself. Such an understanding has two important implications for an analysis of the articulation of grievances and resistance. Firstly, rather than the expression of given qualities and identities or the pursuit of shared goals, solidarity should be seen as a transformative political relation; as something that is forged in and through political activity (Featherstone, 2012). Solidarities, in other words, are active in shaping politics and political subjectification. Second, and following from this, solidarity is a ‘political relation without guarantees’. Solidarities, in other words, can be forged and articulated in multiple and at times conflictual ways

and through diverse spatial relations (Massey, 2006). This is not only to say that differences in political orientation can exist within political struggles, but more importantly to highlight that solidarities can also be forged in hierarchical and exclusionary terms (see Featherstone, 2012). This section focuses on the left-wing populist discourses of Syriza and Podemos in order to problematise the ways in which both parties have often articulated grievances and resistances through nationed narratives. Before doing so, we briefly situate the rise of both left- and right-wing populist discourses in the post-crisis conjuncture and posit the distinction between the *ethnos* and the *demos* as a crucial terrain in differentiating populist discourses (see also Karaliotas, 2017).

In contemporary Europe, austerity policies and the divisive geographies on which they depend and reproduce have been coupled by concerted efforts to foreclose the institutional and public spaces for the expression of political disagreement. The institutional structure and governance of the Eurozone characterised by decision-making beyond democratic accountability and the proliferating role of techno-managerial elites in governing the crisis – exemplified in the temporary appointment of technocratic governments in Italy and Greece under Mario Monti and Lucas Papademos respectively – are key examples in this respect.

And yet, the dominant crisis politics have time and again been challenged by multifaceted political mobilisations, multiple forms of political organising and different political parties. Anxious to maintain its legitimacy the ‘extreme centre’ rushes to group every instance of challenge against the existing order as populism: from Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson to public protests and the squares movement (Kaika and Karaliotas, 2016) to Syriza and Podemos to Marine Le Pen and Golden Dawn. The invocation of the spectre of populism has been central in the policing of the boundaries of the proper and responsible political discourse and denying the deep crisis of legitimacy that European and national institutions are facing. At the core of the elites’ assimilation of radically different right- and left-wing discourses lies an effort to foreclose the appearance of *the people*, those who have no part in the existing order, as a political subject; an effort to maintain a “democracy after *the demos*” (Rancière, 1999: 102, *emphasis in original*).

Contemporary New Left parties for their part – and particularly Syriza and Podemos – have mobilised populist² discourses to challenge austerity politics and re-invigorate democratic debate and disagreement. While it is important to reject the pejorative and superficial grouping of left- and right-wing populism attempted by the elites, however, it is equally important not to lose sight of the increasing attractiveness of deeply exclusionary, racist and nationalist discourses throughout Europe and across the Global North. In parallel, Nigel Farage’s role in Trump’s campaign and Le Pen’s collaboration with Trump’s strategist also point towards the consolidation of an ‘international’ of exclusion, discrimination, misogyny and racism. Therefore, if, as Chantal Mouffe has argued, the emergent terrain of “political conflict will be between right-wing and left-wing populism”, and it is imperative that progressive sectors understand the importance of involving themselves in that struggle, it becomes crucial to differentiate the terms on which left and right versions of populism are constructed (Mouffe, 2016: n.p.).

Indeed, it was Ernesto Laclau himself who in a critique of Rancière’s conceptualisation of politics has pointed out that “there is no *a priori* guarantee that the “people” as a historical actor will be constituted around a progressive identity (from the point of view of the Left)” (2005: 247). Responding to Laclau’s critique, Rancière distinguishes between the *demos* and the *ethnos* as the two names of *the people* (2011: 5) While the *ethnos* signifies the construction of the people as “the living body of those who have the same origin, are born on the same soil or worship the same god”, the *demos* points to “the count of the uncounted” and transcends any given quality (*ibid.*). “The life of the demos”, for Rancière, “is the ongoing process of its differentiation from the ethnos” (*ibid.*). Rancière’s distinction points to the importance of thinking about articulations of solidarity that refuse the givenness of nation, ethnos, likeness etc.

A key challenge is therefore to explore how solidarities that refuse or dislocate such givenness might look like and to engage with the spaces through which they might be articulated. This necessitates challenging the way that the “national element has been appropriated by successful right-wing populisms” (Prentoulis, 2016: 31). This cannot,

² While populism is used in a normative and pejorative way in mainstream discourses, our use of the term here draws from Ernesto Laclau’s understanding of populism as a discourse articulated through a key reference to ‘the people’ constructing an antagonistic division of society into ‘the establishment’ and ‘the people’ (2005).

as Marina Prentoulis insists, “be countered by a left populism that confines itself to national boundaries” (2016: 31). Rather it is necessary to generate articulations of left populism that refuse to be contained within narrow, exclusionary constructions of the nation. As Massey noted in her essay “Learning from Latin America”, the relations between populism and nationalism are dynamic and contested. She contended that while contemporary left populist governments such as those in Bolivia and Venezuela, “were each nationally-based projects the very definition of the nation has come under scrutiny in a number of countries- it has not been taken simply as a given” (Massey, 2012: 137). What Massey argued was invigorating about this recognition was that “national identity” was “not to be “found” by searching for (ever more bland) common characteristics”, but rather became an “object of political contest, of hegemonic struggle” (Massey, 2012: 137).

In this respect, it is important to note that Syriza and Podemos have often been quick to equate the people with their respective nations in their discourses. The most prominent example in this respect is Podemos’ articulation of the national-popular as exemplified in the recent electoral debates in Spain. Podemos’ emphasis on the notion of the national-popular foregrounds a construction of the people within the framework of the nation-state, coupled with an insistence on a consideration of the ‘homeland’ as a ‘significant gap’ to be filled with new political significance. Thus Íñigo Errejón of Podemos, in a conversation with Chantal Mouffe, argues for the need to “combat right wing populism” by a refusal to “cede” the space of the nation to “them” and to “rebuild a civic, popular idea of the country” framed by “a democratic, progressive and popular patriotism” (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016: 68). While Errejón is explicit in ‘learning from Latin America’, especially in relation to constructions of the national-popular, however, he is rather less engaged with the important role of Latin Americans in shaping oppositional political cultures in Spain itself (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016: 82-3). Immigrants to Spain from countries such as Ecuador and Peru have been increasingly visible in movements against austerity. As Sophie Gonick has noted Ecuadorian immigrants, “who were the first victims of crisis after purchasing homes at the height of the bubble” have been central to grassroots mobilisations against evictions in Madrid (Gonick, 2014: 56). Engaging with these relations can perhaps re-draw our cartographies of left populisms and relate to diverse internationalist trajectories and connections.

Syriza's trajectory, as a grouping of left-wing parties and organisations in the first instance, has to a certain extent limited references to nationed constructions of populism in favour of a more explicitly left-wing discourse distinguishing between the national and European "elites" and "the people". However, nationalist instances are in no sense absent from Syriza's discourse. In fact, Syriza spokespersons often adopted a nationalist rhetoric wherein their political opponents were portrayed as traitors of the nation (see Glynos and Voutyras, 2016). Alexis Tsipras, for example, has described the previous pro-austerity governments as instruments in the hands of foreign interests. In his words, PASOK and New Democracy "looted Greece and then they lowered the flag and handed it to Merkel" (2012). At the same time, Syriza's government is in power thanks to a coalition with the openly nationalist and xenophobic right-wing party ANEL (Independent Greeks). In this context, Syriza's failure to effect any meaningful change in policies – after its election and the referendum of July 2015 – within the European post-democratic configuration has further fuelled nationed narratives both within Syriza and, even more so, left-wing opposition parties.

The terms on which Podemos and Syriza have worked together also emphasises continuities in terms of discourses of patriotism. In his discussion of Podemos' decision to sit with Syriza in the European parliament, Errejón argues that "We've always defended the decision in patriotic terms. In fact we were in the group with Tsipras and Syriza, which are the only patriotic force that has defended the interests of the people and citizens of their country against international speculators. It's a left that has put together an inclusive project for the country" (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016: 128). This emphasises the political challenges which confront attempts to delineate different articulations of left populisms and to move beyond patriotism as the grounds on which such international linkages are shaped. The formation of intersections which exceed patriotism also offer some possibilities for ways of thinking about the geographies of solidarities and internationalisms which the final section seeks to point to.

Beyond nationed narratives: Towards trans-local solidarities in, against and beyond the crisis

How are we then to imagine and forge emancipatory spaces and solidarities in the current European conjuncture? For sure, this is a challenging and demanding task and we do not pretend or want to have any pre-cooked answers. Challenging the articulation of nationed responses to the crisis should not be read as an argument prioritising the European level – let alone the existing European institutions – as the sole terrain of struggle. Rather, we maintain, that the dislocation of nationed narratives might provide the grounds for imagining and materialising a spatial politics that moves beyond divisive and exclusionary geographies.

The discussion of the divisive crisis geographies, with which we opened this intervention, suggests that there is an urgent need to unearth, highlight and challenge the racialised, gendered and classed impacts of EU crisis politics. This element has been strikingly elided in Brexit debates, for example, where whiteness has been posed as a victim (Emejulu, 2016). Further, some centre-left politicians and intellectuals have responded to challenges such as Brexit by amplifying rather than challenging fears around immigration (see Kinnock and Reynolds, 2017, Rutherford, 2017). Nationed narratives hardly provide a fruitful ground in this respect. On the contrary, we need to imagine and practice forms of solidarity that make room for a political community that equally embraces ‘nationals’ and ‘non-nationals’ moving beyond internal and external exclusions. This can speak both to projects which are broadly anti-nationalist, but also signals to the ways in which opposition to austerity configured and articulated on a broader transnational terrain can at times reconfigure nation-centred articulations of grievances.

Of course movements and resistances against austerity and its divisive geographies would necessarily be localised. However, as Massey frequently argued, place-based movements can transcend their locales constructing multi-faceted networks, links and dialogues with movements and initiatives elsewhere (Massey, 2005, 2007, see also Cumbers and Routledge, 2013). Forging relations of solidarity across differences is pivotal in this respect (Arampatzi, 2016; Kelliher, 2016) and foregrounds the potentiality to refigure divisive geographies. Challenging the role ascribed to specific places and “what places stand for”, in Massey’s terms, is also important. The political movement Blockupy, for example, has recently emerged in Frankfurt positioning

itself as “resistance in the heart of the European crisis regime” (Mullis et al. 2016). Blockupy has sought to directly challenge the centrality of German politicians to crisis politics and has since its emergence developed a more explicitly transnational focus of resistance. Building on this, in March 2015, the group brought together activists across Europe to protest the opening of ECB’s new Headquarters in Frankfurt, thus challenging the central role of the city in “Troikapolitics” and in so doing refiguring official constructions of place (*ibid*).

Forging solidarities across differences and borders can provide a starting point for a more expansive political articulation of a “networked, practiced internationalism” rather than treating nations as the building blocks of internationalism (Massey, 2007: 184). Such solidarities can take multiple forms and can be articulated through various – more or less institutional – channels and spaces. They are, for example, articulated through the formation of links between grassroots initiatives against austerity and exclusion, the exchange of experiences among self-managed and self-organised co-operatives and the building of networked grassroots solidarities with refugees. The platform ‘Twinning Against Austerity’ linking anti-austerity movements in the UK and Greece³; the 2nd Euro-Mediterranean Workers Economy Meeting organized in Thessaloniki in October 2016 bringing together self-managed initiatives, activists and academics⁴; and the solidarities forged between grassroots movements supporting refugees along the ‘Balkan Route’ over the past two years provide interesting and promising examples along these lines. Trans-national solidarities are also articulated through the networking of city-administrations that seek to challenge dominant politics and explore alternatives to austerity, precarity and exclusion (Caccia, 2016). Such was, for example, the meeting of representatives from forty so-called ‘TTIP free cities’ in Barcelona during April 2016 that led to the ‘Barcelona Declaration’ demanding the suspension of negotiations (Commonspace, 2016). Up until today, however, the trans-nationalisation of protest, resistance and solidarities has been uneven and fragmentary. Calls for solidarity with Greece during the referendum of July 2015, for example, failed to create political momentum and exercise pressure on European political elites. Political imagination and praxis, around resistance, protest and emancipation in contemporary Europe remain to a large extent confined to the

³ <http://twinningagainstausterity.net/#content>

⁴ <http://euromedworkerseconomy.net/gathering/>

temporalities of national politics and are hindered by the uneven geographies that mark the European project. And yet, building a transnational convergence of struggles is important and necessary to challenge the ‘new international’ politics of the right (see also Routledge, 2003). Further, it can act as an ‘actually existing’ demonstration of a solidaristic politics that refuses narrow nationed politics. As Etienne Balibar has recently suggested there is “no way [...] that national-populism can offer solutions to the radical challenges of the day or satisfy the basic demands of the popular majority (made of multiple “minorities”)” (Balibar, 2017: n.p.).

In place of such a “national-populism” Balibar proposes the formation/nurturing of what he terms a “transnational counter-populism”. He uses this “oxymoronic name” for the “diverse resistances against austerity policies in Europe” and “to indicate that we need a concentration of forces and an assemblage of ideas to recreate a politics made by the people and for the people” (Balibar, 2017: n.p.). This is significant for, as Mouffe argues, the “populist moment” does not imply “that the left/right opposition is no longer relevant”, but rather that “it must be posed in another way, with reference on the type of populism at stake and the chains of equivalences through which the ‘people’ is constructed” (Mouffe, 2016: n.p.). Massey’s focus on the generative spaces of solidarities and internationalisms suggests some of the spatial practices through which such chains of equivalence might be shaped. In this sense place-based movements and the formation of trans-local solidarity networks might not just be a key mechanism through which forms of counter-populism might be shaped. Further they might emerge as central to the terms on which such left populisms are constructed, generated and delineated in ways which challenge the association of left populism with constructions of charismatic leaderships (Wainwright, 2017).

Conclusion

Writing in the immediate wake of the 2008 crisis Doreen Massey, ever hopeful, noted the possibilities opened up by the challenge it posed to the neoliberal settlement: “And now, quite suddenly, that settlement is dislocated and on the defensive; economically the whole house of cards is tumbling down. We are now witness to the (potential) implosion, in some senses, of the era which that moment of the 1980s inaugurated” (Massey, 2009: 137). She welcomed the potential of the challenges emerging to neoliberalism in the wake of the crisis and asserted the importance of

political commitment to “help and enable the release of this potential” (*ibid.*). She also warned of the danger of returning “to the situation as before; that nothing fundamental will be changed” or indeed that “[w]orse, the sufferings and discontents inflicted upon different groups and communities, and the protests in which they result, could all too easily degenerate into (and indeed be pushed into degenerating into) a reactionary backlash of parochialism and mutual antagonism, in which the voices saying ‘no’ end up only in fighting each other” (Massey, 2009: 137).

Writing after the *defeats* that marked 2016 Massey’s optimism and her conviction that spaces were unfinished and could be re-articulated in more progressive and equal ways is more necessary than ever. This paper has sought to contribute to a spatially attuned conjunctural analysis as a tool for thinking through the politics of the post-crisis conjuncture. This has shaped the stress on the different nationed registers of politics articulated in the wake of the crisis. We have explored the pressures such political imaginaries exert on the formation of solidarities across spatial divisions. We have also argued for the importance of trans-local solidarities and internationalisms in offering different political possibilities for left projects, particularly emergent left populisms. Engaging with these relations can perhaps re-draw our cartographies of left populisms and relate to diverse internationalist trajectories and connections. Indeed, such a task is imperative. As the recent call for the meeting of the Transnational Social Strike Platform in Paris in October 2016 put it:

“National policies are not simply national anymore. (...) each city, country, workplace [is] inhabited by transnational dynamics. Precarization concerns all generations and sectors, it is a general condition fed by differences and hierarchies that cross and produce borders. [...] against the illusion that the re-nationalization of political initiatives and anti-immigrants policies are the answer [...] we need to build a transnational convergence of struggles” (2016: n.p.).

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