

Cooperation and competition in the wave of British student protests 2009-2011

Hector Ríos-Jara

Abstract

This study analyses the impact that the dynamics of cooperation and competition of collective action had over the political trajectory of the wave of student protests in the UK between 2009 and 2011. Using an exploratory qualitative case study design, the research describes the political trajectory of the student conflict, analysing the relationships of alliance and competition between the main social movement organisations during the conflict. The study suggests that the presence of multiple factionalisms and a predominant competitive relationship between the leading organisations produced a fragmented social movement, which reduced the political impacts of the wave and extension of the protests.

Keywords: anti-austerity movements, students protests, collective action, social movement organisations, factionalism.

Introduction

During the last decades, Europe has been fertile ground for extended and diverse forms of anti-austerity movements (Hayes, 2017). This label describes a wide range of protests that developed distinctively in the region after the 2008 crisis, as well as the correlative implementation of austerity packages (Hayes, 2017; Della Porta, 2015). In the UK, the wave of student protests of 2010 is a paradigmatic case of one of the earliest anti-austerity movements. The wave of student protests was a reaction against the reduction of teaching grants, an increase of the tuition fees cap from £3,000 to £9,000 and an expansion of the student loan system implemented by the government during the winter of 2010 (Scott, 2013). As an anti-austerity movement, the wave opposed material and political changes introduced by austerity policies, the rise of inequality and the lack of representation associated with them (Hayes, 2017; Della Porta, 2015a).

Despite their relevance, the wave of protests remains in an exploratory state of inquiry with significant gaps in its history and internal organisation. For example, most of the studies have been focused on the main events of November and December 2010 (Cini, 2018; Myers, 2017, Hensby, 2017, Ibrahim, 2014; Solomon, 2011), leaving unexplored the processes of prefiguration and configuration of the conflict during the last months of 2009. Additionally, the internal organisation of the wave and the links between the leading social movement organisations (SMOs) have not been thoroughly analysed. Those omissions make it difficult to construe the internal dynamics of collective action

and its impact on the political trajectory of the movement, which represents relevant aspects of anti-austerity movements.

Anti-austerity movements have been associated with the spread of new forms of political participation and processes of democratisation (Hayes, 2017; Benski, Langman, Perugorría & Tejerina, 2013). They have innovated the ways of organising movements and of introducing horizontal and open structures of association that combine territorial assemblies with offline and online networks of participation. Protests also show a distinctive pre-figurative character, where the forms of contention and organisation are always moving between a critique of undemocratic practices and an innovation in the form of political organisation (Della Porta, 2009, Della Porta, 2015a). To explain those aspects, scholars have emphasised the impact of technology and the use of social media networks as material or technological support of democratic organisations (Hardt, 2017; Rheingans and Hollands, 2013). Authors have also suggested that the adoption of horizontal and democratic organisations represent an ideological transition from old left values to a new political tradition, characterised by the incorporation of experiences and values from New Social Movements and political traditions of anarchism and feminism (Prichard and Worth, 2016).

One of the limitations of the ongoing discussion is the uncritical approach towards the novel aspects of anti-austerity movements, which misses the existence of common processes of competition inside and between movements (Prichard and Worth, 2016; Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Balsler, 1997). For example, analysing the digital protests in the context of anti-austerity movements, Treré, Jappensen and Mattoni (2017) explain how the dynamic of competition between eco-pacifists, anti-neoliberals and post-autonomists produced divisions among anti-austerity groups. The competition among groups stopped the process of convergence of the anti-austerity movement in Italy. Similarly, in Britain, the tension between Marxist, Anarchist and Feminist traditions are still significant objects of conflict that keep several expressions of the left and anti-austerity struggles fragmented (Maignashca, Dean and Keith, 2016). Those examples challenge the romantic view of anti-austerity protests as a pure expression of horizontal and participatory democracy, pointing out the role that the dynamics of cooperation and competition play in the political trajectory of anti-austerity movements.

Despite the relevance of the British student protests of 2010, the role of social movement organisations (SMOs) and their alliances have not captured the attention of scholars. The internal organisation of the wave and the links between SMOs have not been analysed in detail. In light of this, the article proposes a new timeline of the wave of protests, which includes the process of articulation and resolution of the conflict. The article also analyses the process of cooperation and competition between SMOs, and the impact that the processes have on the extension and influence of protests. The study suggests that the existence of a fragmented social movement limited the capability of

SMOs to articulate a convergent strategy and make the movement prevail. This effect tended to reduce the extension of protests and their impact over policy.

The article is organised in four sections. First, it describes the current debates on organisational dynamics of anti-austerity movements, and the dynamics of cooperation and competition between SMOs. The second section describes the methodology of the study. Third, the article provides a historical overview of the political trajectory of the movement. Then, the research analyses the alliance system of the wave and the limitation of its collective action. The article finishes with historical reflections on the wave of protests, the role of factionalism and cooperation in anti-austerity movements, and some lessons for activists engaged in anti-austerity struggles.

Cooperation and competition in social movements

The relationship between activist groups has always been a fundamental element to understand the trajectory and power of a movement. As Fligstein and McAdam (2011) argue, social movements can be defined as a strategic field of actions where different groups interact in a constant dynamic of articulation and differentiation. As a symbolic space, social movements are collective agents, circumstantially formed of different groups, associations and networks or social movements' organisations (SMOs) (Zald & McCarthy, 1980). Kriesi (1996) describes SMOs as formal organisations whose support is based on the direct participation of their members when they share common political goals, and mobilise their constituency through different forms of contentious activity. As part of a social movement, SMOs share a common understanding of the conflict and their political orientation, or collective framework, which provides a sense of membership and makes the political coordination between SMOs possible (Tarrow, 2011; Della Porta and Diani, 2006). However, as independent organisations, SMOs are in a continuous process of differentiation between each other, affecting the ability to mobilise resources, and limiting the range of cooperation between groups (Balsler, 1997; Rucht, 2007).

Internally, SMOs are formed of different groups or factions, which compete with each other for leading or having a more influential role within the organisation. When this competition becomes regular, it can lead to factionalism or splits. Boucek (2009) defines factionalism as an informal process of subgrouping in a given social group. Particularly in left politics and social movements, factionalism has been described as a process of an informal grouping of members of the same organisation that modifies the process of the movement (Balsler, 1997; Zald & McCarthy, 1980). Factionalism can trigger processes of division or splits of an SMO that happen when competing subgroups can no longer be part of the organisation, and they divide or separate from the original organisation.

Cooperation, competition and alliances in SMOs

Dynamics of cooperation and competition between SMOs are fundamental to understand the strength of movements and their impact. Since social movements are collations of activists and organisations, the development of an alliance between SMOs is a fundamental process in the generation and trajectory of social movements. Brooks (2004) remarks that alliances between SMOs rely on programmatic affinity and mutual political gain that allow to mix sources during a common campaign. However, alliances are fragile and depend on the degree of affinity in structures of organisation between movements. The literature remarks cultural and organisational differences as common factors that determine the strength of alliances or the development of competing relationships.

SMOs usually have different values, ideologies and organisational habits embedded in the everyday activities of each organisation (Caniglia & Carmin, 2005; della Porta & Diani, 2006). These are elements of cohesion within movements. This notwithstanding, values also play the role of exclusion and distinction from other groups, operating as barriers that limit the opening of the group to new members and cooperation with other groups. Organisational differences are also relevant (Minkoff & McCarthy, 2005). In social movements, differences about tactics, decision-making processes, or the level of internal formalisation are critical points of cohesion and differentiation between organisations (Brooks, 2005). Alliances also rely on the organizational capabilities that each organisation has in order to interact with others. Emergent organisations, with less developed structures of coordination, tend to be more flexible and less formalised than old ones, with more institutionalised systems of coordination. These differences can produce clashes of communication, temporalities and doubts between SMOs that can reduce the possibilities of cooperation (Zald & McCarthy, 1980).

In light of these factors, Rucht (2007) proposes the concept of social movement alliance system to analyse the dynamics of cooperation and competition between SMOs. The alliance system can be defined as the new network of agents involved in collective action and the factors that determine their dynamic of cooperation and competition (Rucht, 2007). The author suggests that the possibilities of cooperation relay on the infrastructural and strategic affinities of SMOs in a specific conjecture. SMOs with high infrastructural and strategic affinity will have more chances to cooperate than groups with organisational and political differences, who would probably tend to compete or ignore each other during a conflict.

To understand the alliance system of a movement, it is also essential to consider the interactive effect between SMOs and the political context (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Alliances between SMOs can be affected by political opportunities and the links with third parties. If SMOs privilege a more instrumental orientation in an attempt to maximise their influence or success on a target, they will be likely to establish pragmatic alliances with third parties and distribute the

benefits with their constituencies (Tarrow, 2011). On the contrary, emergent SMOs that are more inclined to ideological cohesion or that have a strong identity will be more reluctant to alliances with other movements and third parties, protecting their autonomy and the symbolic value of their membership (Tarrow, 2011). In contexts of political negotiation or critical conjunctures, these orientations tend to cause tensions in the alliance system of social movements.

The interaction between the features of movements and their context makes it difficult to offer a general theory of cooperation and competition in social movements. However, the theoretical contribution described earlier provide useful tools to explore the relationships between SMOs involved in the wave of student protests of 2010 and analyse how competition between these organisations affect the trajectory of an anti-austerity movement.

Methodology

The design of this research was a case study with an exploratory qualitative design (Flick, 2009). It encompassed three qualitative sources of inquiry. The first one was a selection of mass media reports. The analysis considered 211 pieces of news published during June 2010 and March 2011, which were explicitly related to the conflict. The collection was made using the Lexus database and considered the news that included the words "students, protests and higher education". The selection of articles involved three newspapers: the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, and *Times Higher Education*. These media outlets contain the highest number of articles on the subject. The BBC is not part of Lexus, therefore it was not considered. Local media with less than ten news articles during the 2010-2011 period were also excluded.

Critical event analysis was used as a data analysis technique. This facilitated the study of the historical process and the actors' dynamics involved in a conflict (Tarrow and Tilly, 2007: 16). The data obtained from the media were organised into a timeline, which included the contentious and political issues related to Higher Education. The initial map was complemented and triangulated with selective reviews of media and other sources. The map of critical issues was composed of the 155 critical events developed between January 2010 and March 2011, including government, stakeholders, SMOs, and activists' actions.

The second source was documents produced by the SMOs relevant to the conflict between 2009 and 2011. The selection included official documents that described the organisational structure and documents that expressed strategical changes during the conflict, such as declarations, blogs, or press releases. The majority of the documents were collected from official websites, and some sources that were shared by the participants. The selection considered: 12 documents from the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), eight from the University and College Union (UCU), and seven from the National Union of Students (NUS). The selection of these organisations was based on four criteria: an explicit structure of work, a declared national range of action,

an active role during the conflict, and current existence. The analysis technique at this stage was deductive and selective content analysis, which considered an organisational analysis of the SMOs and political strategy as main categories.

The third source was a group of 7 semi-structured interviews with local and national leaders of the SMOs described before. The strategy of participant contact was direct contact through social media and snowball strategy through gatekeepers (Flick, 2009). In the research participated three students, two were members of the NCAFC, one of the NUS, two academic members affiliated to UCU and party officers of the left organisations involved in the NCAFC and NUS. Qualitative content analysis was used as a data analysis technique using NVivo 10.

Additionally, the research considered some ethnographic tools and different levels of personal engagement with the topic. Having moved to the UK from overseas in 2015, I did not have any previous contact with British student movements and British left politics. However, as a part of my political interests and experiences as a student-activist in Chile, since my arrival in the UK, I got involved in the political field of the British left. These personal and political connections facilitated the production of an understanding of the local students' politics and the development of connections with some activists involved in the wave of protests of 2010. Therefore, my position as a "foreigner activist" facilitated the engagement of the interviewees with my project and gave me access to discuss the dynamics of competition and divergence in the social movements, topics that are usually discussed in informal contexts.

The political trajectory of the wave of protests

This section analyses the political trajectory of the wave of anti-austerity student protests between 2009 and 2011. The trajectory was built using the categories described by Della Porta (2015), who suggests four main processes involved in the production of a conflict. *Structuration*, which refers to the convergence of different preconditions that create a climate of change in the political regime of the targeted social field. *Identification*, where the agents of a target field recognise the changes and assume themselves as an affected community or group. *Mobilisation*, which refers to the explicit conflict and confrontation with the political regime. Finally, a wave can find different types of resolution, which include processes of institutionalisation, commercialisation, radicalisation or dissolution (Tarrow, 2011).

From an overall perspective, the political trajectory of the wave of British students' protests can be described through four main stages that occurred between November 2009 and March 2011. From October 2009 to January 2010, it was a stage of pre-figuration of the conflict. This stage was characterised by the generation of the conditions of conflict, which included changes in the HE policy and the first experiences of students' mobilisation. From February to October 2010, it was a process of articulation of the conflict,

characterised by parallel and distributed episodes of contention with a low level of coordination. From November 2010 until January 2011, it emerged a stage of direct conflict, which included the most radical and famous events. Finally, after January 2011, it was a stage of decline or resolution with different processes of resolution for each organisation. The next sections analyse each stage in detail.

Prefiguration of the conflict

The prefiguration of the conflict started with the draft of a new agenda in Higher Education (HE) policy. This agenda was introduced by the Labour government through the Spending Review of 2009, and the parliamentary agreement to call for an independent panel to review the HE finance system in November 2009, the so-called "Browne Review" (Browne, 2010). Both issues marked the beginning of a mixture between structural reduction in public spending and the radicalisation of the marketisation process of HE (McGettigan, 2013: 150; Roberston, 2013). Those changes opened a wide range of conflicts at national and local levels that structured the wave of protests (Hensby, 2017). Nationally, the first package of austerity and the new system of funding triggered a conflict between the Government and HE stakeholders, which mainly involved the Russell Group and other university associations. Locally, and because of the new policy, universities implemented correlative plans of reorganisation, which included the restructuring or elimination of departments, schools, and programmes, in addition to changes in the contractual regime of academic and professional staff (UCU, 2010f).

These transformations changed the attitude of social agents in the HE field, which started parallel processes of articulation and association to oppose the measures. These processes operated at the local level with the emergence of different anti-cut groups, whose most advanced expression was the occupation of Art College in London during November 2009. This occupation transferred the repertoire of occupations from the anti-war movement to HE, acting as an example and cannon of the collective action in the new HE struggle (Ismail, 2013). Nationally, the reform also changed the position of the more institutionalised SMOs. The University and College Union (UCU) and the National Union of Students (NUS), the main unions of HE, created a context of opposition to the reform using media pressure and political lobby preferentially. For example, in June 2009, the NUS launched the blueprint document, "Funding our Future" (NUS, 2009a; 2009b) suggesting an alternative progressive tax system to avoid raising fees. Similarly, UCU published frequent statements criticising the intention of the Labour government to modify the HE policy.

Articulation and identification of the conflict

The process of articulation of the conflict started in February 2010. The stage was composed of local and isolated episodes of contention with reduced

adherence and participation, but with significant processes of association and alliances. This stage was defined by the concatenation of three main processes that facilitated the radicalisation of the conflict during November and December of 2010. The most significant element was the rise and creation of new SMOs. The NCAFC was organised because of the first National Convention Against Fees and Cuts held the 6th February 2010 in London (Ismail, 2013). This convention was the first national effort to coordinate and expand the organisation of local groups of activists against the cuts across the country. As one of the NCAFC founders said, "We organised the convention in February 2010, and we passed the motion to build the convention as a meeting of delegations of local activist groups engaged in anti-cuts struggle or in industrial issues in education" (Participant 4, 2017). Similarly, the Education Activist Network (ENA) was formed after the "Take Our Education Back" conference organised by the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) in King's College on February 29th, 2010 (ENA, 2017). Although with differences, both organisations were created as a national, grass-rooted coalition of activists, explicitly focused on opposing HE reforms.

From the side of the institutionalised SMOs (NUS and UCU), the opposition kept growing and becomes more organised and coordinated. Between April and May 2010, the NUS approved the motion for a national demonstration to oppose raising fees (NUS, 2010a) and led the campaign "Vote for Students". The campaign included a pledge signed by parliamentary candidates who promise do not support rising fees policies (NUS, 2010e). Similarly, during this period, the UCU's National Executive Committee and different UCU branches led different kinds of contentious activities. Particularly significant was the call for a strike led by London UCU on the 19th of March 2010 and a regional march the next day (NCAFC, 2010c). Even though these actions were not massive, they were the first local coordination between local anti-cuts groups, emerging national organisations, and unions. Additionally, in June 2010 the NUS and the UCU founded the "United for Education" coalition, a common platform to oppose changes in HE. This coalition called for the first day of action on the 21st of June, without perceived massive support and adherence (UCU, 2010e).

The third factor of structuration was the creation of a coalition government between the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats Party. The coalition produced a peculiar political situation in the country that opened multiple foci of tension in the government and the political system. As Mathews and Flinders (2017) and Evans (2012) describe, the first challenge for the coalition was to define a common programme and cabinet. These processes of negotiation changed the governmental priorities of each party, increasing the tensions between parties, party MPs and cabinet members, and between voters, elected MPs, and policy networks. The Coalition tried to control those tensions with an explicit agreement between the parties to postpone the HE policy until the publication of the Browne Review (HM Government, 2010: 31). The agreement defined freedom of action for each party if they thought that the policy was not in line with the principles and party policies. This agreement successfully

reduced the tension during the first months of the government. However, during the last weeks of October, when the Browne review was published, the tensions reappeared and provoked the stage of explicit conflict (Scott, 2013).

Triggering the conflict

The third stage was the conflict triggering, from October 2010 until January 2011. Even though most of the literature defines November 10 as the beginning of the stage of national conflict and December 9 as its end (Solomon, 2011; Kumar, 2011). Most of the participants recognised that the beginning of the national conflict occurred during October 2010, as a result of the concatenation between the tensions produced by the HE reform, and the programme of the coalition Government. Similarly, the majority of the participants placed the end of the national conflict in the last activities of January 2011, when the national conflict lost social support and media attention.

This stage groups the main and most significant episodes of contention during the wave of protests. It was characterised by an explosive and massive display of collective agency, which operated through centralised actions, or day of action calls by the main SMOs, together with frequent and distributed local actions, organised by local groups weekly. Both activities reveal the existence of hybrid mechanisms of coordination with parallel processes of top-down coordination when many SMOs called for different national activities and distributed bottom-up activities that were not formally connected with the SMOs.

The results facilitated the enumeration of the leading national events. During this stage, there were eight national days of actions, which included the national demonstration called by NUS-UCU on November 10. The national walkouts called by the NCAFC on November 24 and November 30. The day of action called by NCAFC-EAN and the parallel vigil called by NUS during the day of legislation of raising fees on December 9. In January 2011, there was one day of action for the 'save Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) campaign' called by the NUS on January 19, one day of action for free education called NCAFC-EAN on January 26, and finally the parallel demonstration called by NCAFC, EAN and UCU in London and by NUS and UCU in Manchester on January 29.

This stage was also characterised by an explosive wave of university occupations across the country. The exact number of occupations is still part of the debate, ranging between 40 and 59 occupations across the country (Hensby, 2014; Ibrahim, 2014; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011: 60). Even though the analysis could not provide a precise number, the qualitative analysis gives a significant characterisation of the phenomenon. As described by the participants, the occupations assumed an idiosyncratic character, which was not derived directly from the national conflict. The number of participants, their internal organisation, purposes, relations with other organisations, and their temporal and physical extension on campuses were different (Hopkins, Todd, Newcastle Occupation, 2012; Salter and Kay, 2011). In fact, some occupations started

during the first stage of the conflict as a local reaction to cuts, as was the case of University College of Communication occupation in November 2009. Westminster, Sussex, and Aberdeen Universities, which were occupied during March 2010, and Middlesex University in May 2010. Clearly, the majority of the occupations were concentrated in November and part of December 2010 (Solomon, 2011). After that, just a few occupations persisted, such as the case of Kent until January (BBC, 2011a) and Glasgow until March 2011 (Scotsman, 2011). This heterogeneity suggests that despite the general adherence to the national wave of protests and the general opposition to the set of HE reforms, each occupation had their own dynamics and their own purposes, having in some cases a different trajectory with respect to the national movement. As one participant who was involved in the local campaign at UCL occupation remarks:

Yeah, so there were basically three levels. One was university-specific demands. So, for instance, a lot of the catering staff had been outsourced to a different company, and their conditions were worse. There was kind of a problem with the low payment for basic staff and a problem of cuts in the university. Then there were demands about the university taking a stance against the government and opposing it (Participant 5, 2017).

Two main processes explain the explosive and massive character of this stage. Firstly, the articulation of an unexpected juncture that was created by the first round of policies of the new government. Secondly, the articulation of a system of alliances between SMOs that spread the contentious activity across the country. In October 2010, the legislation and implementation of a broad number of changes in HE occurred concurrently. The changes included the Spending Review 2010 on October 10, the publication of the Browne Review on October 12, and the general alignments of the HE reform announced by David Willets, including the announcement of raising fees on the November 3. As a reaction to those changes, there emerged early and expanded waves of sectorial anti-cuts groups and networks, the new SMOs, and the formal campaigns led by the UCU and the NUS. Additionally, an emergent and large sector formed of school students and families against the EMA reform, university students against the triplication of fees, and voters who denounced the break of the electoral pledge made by Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems). As Ibrahim (2014) and Hensby (2017) remark, the last issue gave the generalised sense of deception, indignation, and betrayal of the political system which characterised the movement.

The early development of a system of alliances between SMOs capitalised this critical juncture facilitating the coordination and expansion of protests across the country. As the participants recognised, the demonstration called by the NUS and the UCU on November 10 provided an opportunity for a national mobilisation of all groups who opposed the new policies, becoming a catalyser for the national conflict. Additionally, the occupation of the Conservative Party

HQ gave a national image of the movement that was quickly spread around the country, becoming a symbol of the students' protests (Hensby, 2014; Haywood, 2011). Even though this element had negative connotations for the public and media (Cammaerts, 2013), from the activists' point of view, it was a political symbol that expanded and encouraged the students' protests, further spreading the conflict (Haywood, 2011).

Despite the historical role of the demonstration on November 10, the wave of protests showed a low level of articulation in terms of demands, campaign coordination, framework (Hensby, 2017), repertoires of action, and strategy. Particularly relevant were the tensions between the NUS and the rest of student organisations after the occupation of the Conservative HQ, which ended with the NUS' motion for not calling for a new national demonstration and the split of the movement during the last day of actions on January 29, 2011 (NCAFC, 2010a; NUS, 2011). This also applied to the occupations, which, despite their connections with the general context, were correlative and independent actions led by local students. Although some of them had an organic relationship with the NCAFC – the principal SMO that called for occupations – most of the occupations worked independently from national co-ordination. As one of the participants recognised, "in the majority of the cases was something already organised, we certainly provided a lot of materials, but we left people to lead and do locally their own, and we tried to affiliate those anti-cuts groups to NCAFC" (Participant 6, 2017).

Conflict resolution

After January 29, the last national episode of contention called by the SMOs, the wave of protest tended to dissolve as a massive and generalised form of conflict. As the literature suggests, social movements and SMOs have different routes of resolution or exits from a conflict (Tarrow, 2011). In the case of this trajectory, it is possible to identify four routes of resolution, which operated differently at local and national levels.

At a local level, there were parallel processes of dissolution, re-localisation, and institutionalisation of the conflict. In the case of dissolution, some emerging anti-cuts groups tended to disappear after the conflict because their members were no longer students (Brooks, 2017). In the case of re-localisation and institutionalisation trajectories, emergent activist groups and networks kept operating locally in new episodes of contention but organised themselves around new sectoral and local campaigns, within more formalised structures. After January 2011, many groups remained involved in the campaigns to save the EMA, the local opposition to a new package of university cuts, the reduction and redefinition of international student visas proposed by the Home Office, and the decision to raise fees in each university.

At the national level, the emergent SMOs formalised their groups, following a process of institutionalisation. For example, during their summer conference,

the NCAFC defined a formal structure of working, which remained active until 2011 (NCAFC, 2011a). The EAN kept growing and played a role in the years after the conflict but was dissolved after 2012. In the cases of the NUS and the UCU, the research did not consider their trajectories after February 2011; but the participants agreed that the protests introduced a political cleavage in these organisations, which tended to assume a more radical position, renewing their repertoires of action, and becoming more socially oriented (Woodcock, 2013). This process was also related to the articulation of a new political coalition of activists from the NCAFC and the EAN, who tried to compete for the leadership of the NUS immediately after the conflict had ended (NCAFC, 2011b). As the participants confirmed, the purpose of this coalition was to radicalise the NUS leadership and capitalise the political cleavage created by the wave of protests. Even though the coalition could not obtain any position in the 2011-2012 NUS National Executive Committee (NEC), the participants agree that after 2010, more left-wing officers were part of the NUS and its political attitude changed, becoming more engaged with students' activism.

Finally, from a general perspective, there was a process of extension of the contentious activity, where the local and national networks converged and became part of a general anti-austerity movement. The general movement emerged in the UK during 2011, after the first general strike and national demonstration called by the Trade Union Conference (TUC) on March 27, 2011 (BBC, 2011b). Around 250,000 people in London attended the march called for that day, becoming the first national demonstration against austerity and the coalition Government. The action had the support of the majority of the SMOs involved in the wave of student protests. This post-conflict trajectory is not considered in the literature (Tarrow, 2011) but has been particularly relevant and common in the study of AMs, which are described as a broad coalition of social movements (Della Porta, 2015: 213).

From the perspective of outcomes of the movement, the participants and the literature recognise that its impact was highly limited considering the size and power of the wave of protests in the UK (Hensby, 2017; Ibrahim, 2014). The wave of protests could not stop the main changes proposed by the Government and the installation of the new policy agenda. In 2011, a new wave of cuts was implemented with the first growth in tuition fees and the legislation of a new Education Act in 2012 (Scott, 2013). Authors such as Myers (2017) and Cini (2018) emphasise that the wave delayed and softened some reforms initially proposed by the Brown review, like the cuts on maintenance loans and other financial aids. However, after 2015 a new wave of HE changes was implemented, and the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) was passed, completing the unfinished business of 2010 and 2011 (Hillman, 2014).

The results confirm that the main impacts of the movement were in the cultural and political fields (Tarrow, 2011). The movement renewed and radicalised the repertoire of action of a generation, acted as an example for other social sectors, and become a fundamental part of the general anti-austerity movement (Myers, 2017). Additionally, it legitimised the demand for free education in the public

debate, established mechanisms of political participation between factions of the Labour party and other left groups, and became fundamental in the articulation of Corbynism and the emergence of a left-wing British party-movement (Hatcher, 2015). As a participant summarised:

for British history, it marks the beginning of what we are seeing now, an age, because happened at the same time when became the tory government, so marked the beginning of the anti-austerity movement, of contention of social policies and also mark of the beginning of the new labour party politics that we are seeing today (Participant 6, 2017)

On the whole, it is possible to point out some fundamental characteristics of the political trajectory of the wave of protests. It can be described as a reactive or defensive concatenation of protests, which emerged as a non-centralised convergence of diverse and distributed struggles, whose main purposes was to oppose the HE policy changes. The contention activities played an important role in building a diversified opposition to the HE policy changes, being highly determined by the characteristics of the HE system and the policy process of the reform. Nonetheless, the wave was just partially canalised by parallel and divergent efforts led by SMOs. For the organisations involved, the size, complexity, and intensity of the contentious reaction were unexpected and hard to conduct. Those difficulties made the consolidation of a cohesive and convergent social movement problematic, and inhibited its ability to capitalise the political opportunities opened by the HE reforms. The next section explains why SMOs had problems to cooperate with each other, and how competition affected the trajectory of the movement.

The alliance system and collective agency

This section analyses the impact of the alliance system of the social movement field on the political trajectory and outcomes of the wave of protests of 2010. Although the system of alliances is composed of a wide range of organisations and actors, the research focused exclusively on the main SMOs.

The social movement field of the wave of the 2009-2011 protests was organised by two blocks of SMOs with a competitive relationship. The first block was a coalition of institutionalised SMOs composed by the NUS and the UCU; the second one was an instrumental co-ordination of emergent SMOs composed of the NCAFC and the ENA. The coalition of institutionalised SMOs was formally organised at the end of June and was called the "United for Education coalition" (UCU, 2010e). This block was characterised by a high level of co-operation, determined by infrastructural affinity and political agreement during the conflict. The second block was not a formalised coalition, but the result of a pragmatic coordination developed during the last stages of the conflict. Despite the level of infrastructural affinity that the second block had, the political

disagreement and the existence of strong factionalism caused a competitive relationship inside the emergent block.

Similarly, the relationships between blocks triggered the development of a competitive pattern during the conflict, with constant efforts of differentiation in terms of values and strategy. It included public criticism and confrontation between SMOs and few attempts of infiltration, particularly between students' organisations. The next sections analyse the internal determinants of the alliance system and its impact in the articulation and political trajectory of the social movement field.

Infrastructural affinity between social movement organisations

From an organisational perspective, the NUS and the UCU can be described as bureaucratic centralised unions. They are formed of constituencies that delegate power in an elected and centralised executive body, which is in turn formed of full-time officers who are responsible of administrating the Union and implementing the annual policy (UCU, 2010b; NUS, 2017). In terms of social composition, the NUS is composed of sabbatical officers, employed by NUS and affiliated Student Unions (NUS, 2017). The UCU is formed of employees in higher and further education, which includes lecturers and professional staff, plus retired employees and postgraduate students. Regarding the predominant values, both organisations shared a mutual sense of corporatism as they privileged the exclusive interests of affiliated members and had a limited or sectorial range of action. Nevertheless, the NUS is characterised by predominant managerial values, assuming the position of a professional provider of student services rather than being a political representative of its constituency (Brooks, Byford & Sela, 2015; Woodcock, 2013). In contrast, the UCU shared the sense of welfare provision and group representation, displaying a more confrontational performance, highly committed with other unions and with a more extensive range of action.

During the wave of protests, the prevailing pattern of governance of the institutionalised SMOs was "executive"; it was highly centralised, professionalised and vertical, and had a low level of accountability and participation from their constituencies (Schnurbein, 2009). This description is particularly accurate for the NUS and less so in the case of the UCU, in which case the local branches and the more extensive and regular bodies of members introduced federal mechanisms of governance and accountability from local groups over the executive body. Despite these differences, the characterisation of both organisations is coherent with the tendency of highly institutionalised SMOs to adopt a more commercial and constituency-orientated position, reluctant to disruptive mobilisation and more orientated to act as an interest group rather than a pressure one (Kriesi, 1996).

During the conflict, this infrastructural affinity between unions facilitated mutual recognition as equals in terms of status and political value (Rucht,

2007). Similarly, the highly formalised structure and the common pattern of governance of the alliance facilitated the definition of formal and recurrent mechanisms of communication. Additionally, their corporatist view and the existence of well-differentiated constituencies avoided community competition, assuming a corporatist representation of a shared political field, with mutual and equal benefits. Moreover, they had access to the policy process, in terms of information and consultative participation, which facilitated their mutual recognition and a similar political strategy.

In contrast, the emergent block presented a reduced level of infrastructural affinity. The NCAFC was a semi-factional coalition of local activist groups, organised in an open network, composed of a body of affiliated members and an elected executive committee of volunteers. The EAN was a factional coalition of left-wing activists with a monopolistic and centralised network of one left-wing organisation, which was led by a designated National Committee (EAN, 2017). Culturally, both shared radical leftist values. Perhaps, the predominant values of the NCAFC were a mixture of left-wing traditions, mainly Trotskyism, and Libertarian-communism, highly orientated to massive disruptive repertoires of action (direct action), with preferences for direct and participatory democracy (Ismail, 2013, Woodcock, 2013). This combination of values and structure produced a delegate or federal pattern of governance, with a strong influence of the local groups over the central body (Schnurbein, 2009). In contrast, the predominant values of the EAN were inspired by British Trotskyism, highly inclined to direct action, working-class solidarity, and entryism¹ (Webber, 2009), which produced an inner-circle pattern of governance, characterised by a centralised but non-formal distribution of power, and controlled by minority groups of influence (Schnurbein, 2009).

Additionally, the emergent SMOs shared a similar social composition and constituency that stimulated their differences and competition. While the NCAFC was more student-orientated and the EAN was worker-student oriented, both were formed of a mixture of independent local groups of student activists, non-student activists, militant activists, and militant HE employees. Therefore, both organisations competed for the incorporation of activists who emerged from local anti-cut struggles, who were not represented by the institutionalised SMOs. The infrastructural differences, the absence of well-developed organisational structures, and a shared constituency led to relationships of competition between the organisations of the emergent block. Likewise, the same factors explained the relationships of exclusion and competition between blocks. The low infrastructural affinity between the SMOs created a structural tendency to scatter the social movement, which affected the political affinity between the SMOs (Rucht, 2007), producing a bipolar alliance system with a limited range of expansion to third parties and other actors.

¹ Entryism refers to a political strategy characterised by establishing relationships with other groups for one's own cause, to provoke and capitalise on political division between groups, and influence external groups through infiltration (Webber, 2009).

Political affinity between social movement organisations

The second dimension to analyse is the political affinity between SMOs. This variable describes the strategic position and tactics of SMOs during the conflict (Rucht, 2007). The SMOs shared a sense of criticism to the HE reform and the marketisation process, with an explicit opposition to a specific group of measures. In that regard, the SMOs had a similar conflict framework, which placed the government as the main adversary, HE reform as the main object of contention, and civil society and MPs as the central public to persuade. The main differences between the SMOs were related to the predominant repertoire of action, the political aims of the campaigns, the factional composition, and the position of influence in the policy process.

The NUS focussed on influencing the policy process, avoiding raising fees, and stopping the elimination of widening access mechanisms (NUS, 2009a; 2010a). These were the most restrictive and corporatist aims in the social movement field. In addition, they were pursued through a predominantly managerial form of influence, focussed on technical and political lobby with selective tactics of pressure and a low preference for constituency mobilisation and direct action. In the case of the UCU, its political aims were more expansive and inclusive. Their main goals were to stop the university job cuts, pension reform, and changes in their contractual regime. They also included non-corporatist demands. In the manifesto, "Education for the Future" UCU declared a campaign for "the removal of all financial barriers to access to education, a high quality publicly funded education system, accessible to all [...], institutional autonomy, academic freedom and democratic governance, an end to privatisation, marketisation and bureaucratisation of education," (UCU, 2010a: 3). In addition, the UCU displayed a more diverse and more disruptive repertoire of action, which included a combination of a technical and political lobby with direct action as local strikes, demonstrations, rallies, and concentrations. Additionally, the deep engagement of some local branches in direct action and their alliances with students pushed for a more militant engagement of the executive body, which facilitated expansive and less selective strategies (UCU, 2010c).

The NCAFC formally had a double political aim; to fight for free education, opposing the HE reforms, but also to unify the student left on a national platform (NCAFC, 2010b; 2010c). This combination of sectorial and general political purposes placed the organisation in an open but highly selective dynamics of alliances privileging collaborations with emergent local anti-cuts groups rather than other SMOs or political organisations. The EAN had a similar motive but with an emphasis on a student-worker alliances rather than left-wing student unification. If such preferences were objects of mutual criticism, both organisations displayed a similar repertoire of action. They aimed to promote local organisations, occupations, and days of action to create a generalised massive state of agitation that was able to block the government's

agenda. The political pattern placed the new organisations in a competitive position with the NUS, which was increasingly antagonistic during the last months of the conflict. This was especially so after the critique of Aaron Porter for the Milbank occupation and the NUS' refusal to support the demonstration between December 9 and January 29, that was called by the emergent pole, denoting public critique of the NUS' leadership and a campaign for removing the NUS president.

We the undersigned believe that Aaron Porter should be removed as NUS National President as he is unable to lead the student movement. His failure to call or even back another National Demonstration, his refusal to back up his promises of support for occupations, his weak stance on police brutality and his collusion with the Government in identifying cuts means that he has lost the confidence of the movement. (NCAFC, 2010d: 1)

Another factor to consider is the role of the dominant factions within SMOs and their relationships with political parties. If formally the members of NUS could not play a role as members of political platforms (NUS, 2017), the participants coincide that before and during 2010, the majority of the NUS' NEC members were members of "Labour students" – an internal structure of the Labour party, largely dominated by "Blue Labour" or "Blairite" factions of the party. In the case of the UCU, the two dominant wings were UCU-left, which groups SWP militants and members of the left-wing faction of the Labour party, who were dominant in the UCU's NEC since its foundation in 2006. In the case of the emergent pole, during 2010, the NCAFC was formed of an alliance of far-left wing organisations, which included the Alliance for Worker's Liberty, Worker's Power, and Counterfire, plus independent activist groups (Ismail, 2013). The EAN was led unilaterally by the SWP.

This factionalised distribution of the social movement field had a double impact. On the one hand, it facilitated the articulation, diversification, and expansion of the movement. The radical left-wing organisations led parallel and competitive processes of national co-ordination between isolated local groups, and they created new SMOs, being a case of expansion by competition (Tarrow, 2011). For the most institutionalised SMOs, the factions used their networks of information and influence as sources to proactively building an early opposition to the HE reform, particularly in the first stage of the conflict. Nevertheless, the tension between political groups and factions inside of the SMOs limited the executive capabilities of some organisations, increasing the cost of internal negotiation and reducing their consistency during the stage of conflict (Zald & McCarthy, 1980). This was relevant for the UCU and most significantly for NCAFC, which could not define an executive body until 2011 (NCAFC, 2011a). As an NCAFC member suggested, "It was impossible to make decisions, and the decisions that we got were made in a given day was made by full-time Trotskyists who were answering their emails fastest" (Participant 4, 2017).

For the monopolistic factional organisations, namely, the NUS and the EAN, the hegemonic position of some political groups produced antagonism and distrust between SMOs, stimulating dynamics of competition between organisations (Zald & McCarthy, 1980). It also reduced the adaptability of the organisation to new political scenarios, limiting the range of strategical and tactical innovation. This was particularly relevant in the case of the NUS, when the convergence between managerial values and its predominant Blairite composition enforced the dependence on technical and political lobby as the main mechanisms of pressure, dismissing the innovation of repertoires of action produced by the emergent block, which, during November, concentrated the majority of attention and supporters.

Another impact of factionalism was the lack of connection between SMOs and political parties. After the elections and the articulation of the government's coalition, the only potential political ally for the movement was the Labour party. Even though the Liberal Democrats were the fundamental actors in the critical juncture, the new right-wing political tradition of reluctance to ally with social movements, plus the absence of organic relationships with them, and their position in the government's cabinet (Scott, 2013; Hillman, 2016) made it practically impossible to oppose the reform. In the case of Labour, its post-election crisis and the extended factionalised social movement field impeded a political articulation and the extension of the alliance system to a third party. Additionally, although during legislation the majority of Labour MPs voted against the fee triplication (HCH, 2010), the Blairite sector of the Labour party was involved in the early stages of the design of the policy and shared, at least, an ideological agreement with the reform (Hillman, 2016). These limitations placed the political parties as irrelevant allies for the SMOs and as objects of mistrust amongst them, being excluded from the alliance system.

The national system of alliance and local activism

Another element to consider is the independent or non-aligned actors involved in the movement. They were preferentially non-aligned groups and activists involved only occasionally in contentious actions, but they were the most numerous and explosive agents of protests. As the participants coincided, the protests had a generalised sense of anger and injustice (Ibrahim, 2014). Even though were not the SMOs who spread those emotions, they had an impact on the population outside the SMOs' agencies, having an unexpected and floating participation. These were characteristics of the stage of direct conflict, but absent in the previous and later stages.

Furthermore, local conflicts had particular political trajectories and their own alliance systems. Whilst this research explores emblematic cases that cannot be generalised to other circumstances, it gives a preliminary view of the conflict at the local level. In this regard, the conflict started from the UCU branches against cuts or/and as emergent local student groups who organised protests on campuses. Overall, the student union played a conservative role, not leading the

local protests and being particularly critical of university occupations (Salter and Key, 2011; Ismail, 2013; Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015). Therefore, the relationships of co-operation were preferentially between UCU branches and emergent student groups, who opposed university governing bodies, particularly vice-chancellors and student unions. The strategic position of local activists was to oppose cuts in jobs and departments during the first stage of the conflict and after the parliamentary vote opposed the raising of fees locally. The exception to this model was Sheffield, where the university and the Student Unions played a cohesive role, leading the mobilisation and producing an expansive alliance system that linked the university with local activists.

This structure of conflict indicated that at the local level, the experience was connected, but it was considerably different at a national scale. In fact, local groups had precarious coordination with the national SMOs. Moreover, the strategies of the SMOs that required local mobilisation were not particularly effective. The lobby and pressure on MPs called by the NUS (2010a) and the UCU (2010d) in Lib Dems student constituencies were limited. Just 21 Lib Dems MPs voted against the reform, and eight abstained from voting (HCH, 2010). Similarly, as the participants admitted, the attempt to organise a national wave of occupations to put pressure on the Vice-chancellors to be against the HE reform called by the EAN and the NCAFC (NCAFC, 2010a) was also limited in terms of coordination and consistency. The UCU was the only SMO that was able to mobilise their constituencies territorially on a national scale, but its numbers were small (Coderre-LaPalme & Greer, 2017). The emergent pole had an insufficient structure to organise a territorial mobilisation. Despite being the most prominent student organisation, the NUS had a limited mobilisation capacity. Its pattern of governance left it disconnected from the other Student Unions and far from the campuses' networks and groups (Woodcock, 2013; Brooks, Byford & Sela, 2015). Those weaknesses help to explain why the wave had a transient massive adherence to protests, which was concentrated during a few months, and it was highly reactive to a critical juncture.

Conclusions

This paper attempted to provide a historical analysis of the political trajectory of the wave of the British student protests between 2009 and 2011, and to explore the dynamics of cooperation and competition between SMOs during the conflict. The research confirms discussions of the current literature (Cini, 2018; Myers, 2017; Hensby, 2017; Ibrahim, 2014, 2011, Solomon, 2011) and it adds new elements to the debate.

First, the paper proposes the existence of a long process of articulation occurring one year before the most significant protests. Second, it suggests the presence of different stages of contentious activity during the conflict with a different political process. Third, it remarks the significant role of the emergent SMOs and the emergent local groups in the articulation of the wave. Fourth, the research contributes testifies to the existence of heterogeneous trajectories of

decline and reallocation of the conflict. It also suggests that the low structural and political affinity between SMOs and the constant dynamic of competition tended to break up the collective action, limiting the system of alliance and capability of mobilisation. Additionally, the paper shows the role of factionalism in student politics and its impact on the alliance system of the wave of protests.

From the perspective of anti-austerity movements, the research shows that the wave protests was an anti-austerity movement, sharing similar characteristics as other European movements. The most significant similarities are the explicit opposition to austerity measures, its combination with a critique of the political system, the coalitionist character of the movement, and the presence of pre-figurative political practices. Also, the analysis suggests a similar trajectory of its development. Like other anti-austerity movements, the British student-activists become part of the general anti-austerity movement in the UK and the rise of Corbynism. Those characteristics indicate the existence of a similar pattern of conflict structuration and development as the movements in Europe.

Despite those similarities, the existence of political factionalism and different dynamics of governance in SMOs challenge the assumption of internal democracy and horizontalism in the anti-austerity movements (Hardt, 2017; Della Porta, 2009). The case study shows that protests had a democratic role in terms of popularising some demands and increasing the participation of the civil society in non-formal mechanisms of participation; however, this did not mean that the movements were governed by democratic systems internally. The results reveal the existence of horizontal networks which played a role in the coordination and spread of the protests (Ibrahim, 2014; Hensby, 2014), but that these were objects of monopolistic practices, factionalism, and concentration of power. This phenomenon, usually omitted in the literature, has proved to be a relevant factor in explaining the political trajectory of movement.

Furthermore, the research does not provide any findings of the role of social media and information technology as relevant tools in the dynamics of democratisation of the movement (Rheingans and Hollands, 2013; Guigni, 2012). Even though the participants made some references to social media platforms as tools for coordination, they did not play a distinctive role in the mobilisation or the dynamics of cooperation and competition between organisations. This suggests that the role of social media is conditioned by the values and practices that activists produce during the conflict, rather than their properties as communicative instruments.

From the perspective of activism, the case study provides telling insights about alliances and internal divisions of SMOs in anti-austerity struggles. Anti-austerity movements are coalitions of protestors triggered by changes in living costs derived from policy change. This decade of austerity has been a permanent source of contention and political opportunities, which has not always generated protests. Therefore, the successful spread of protests and their achievements rely on the activists' ability to resolve internal conflicts and to build strong alliances between their organisations. The British wave of student protests

suggests that the dynamics of competition between traditional organisations (unions) and emergent ones damaged the national coordination of movements substantially. In addition, the competition between factions and groups within the emergent groups also weakened the unity and expansion of the movement.

Most of the conflicts between organisations came from infrastructural differences between groups rather than significant strategic differences about the struggle. This means that the differences between movements can be solved during the processes of conflict if organisations put the collective interests of their constituencies first rather than their quotes of power. As the case of the political shift of UCU during the conflict proves, the structure and strategy of unions are sensitive to the context. They can embrace a more confrontational role and reinforce the movement. This shift also requires a more comprehensive approach from emergent SMOs and a less interventionist critique from vanguards and factions to unions.

Overall, one the key questions that remains unexplored in this paper is how SMOs can coordinate or establish better links with the non-aligned protestors, who are the massive support and the critical agents spreading the protests. This research does not provide significant information about this problem, but it draws a line about how the competing interests of vanguards reduced the possibilities to build that coordination. The political efforts that were reduced by competition and criticism in SMOs would be better spent on coordinating with local groups rather than boycotting other leading organisations. Future research and reflection on how this dynamics of cooperating can keep growing during crucial conjunctures of anti-austerity struggle.

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About the author

Héctor Ríos-Jara is a social scientist, PhD Student of Social Science at University College of London, MSc in Social Research Methods from Bristol University, and a sponsored student of the Centre for Cohesion and Conflict studies (COES) Chile. He has been involved as a left activist in the student movement in Chile and the UK. Contact: hector.rios.18 AT ucl.ac.uk