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EDITORIAL

Inequalities, territorial politics, nationalism

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ABSTRACT

Since the Global Financial Crisis, European countries have faced economic stagnation, rising inequalities, worsening social conditions and strains on public services. The capacity of nation-states to combine economic growth with social cohesion has declined and domestic social compromises have been undermined. Attachments to the nation-state have in many places weakened, while in other places there is a return to the interventionist nation-state and a search for new modes of regulation. The crisis has also called into question the shape of the European project, as austerity has provoked hostility to European integration itself, but also calls for a different form of Europe. This special issue focuses on the impact on substate territories of economic crisis, spatial inequalities and the responses of different levels of government to the new challenges to social cohesion.

KEYWORDS

economic crisis; regions; nations; states; territory

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Since the Global Financial Crisis, European countries have variously faced economic stagnation, rising inequalities, worsening social conditions and strains on public services. These developments have major political consequences and challenge the ability of political institutions to ensure integration and cohesion. In particular, the capacity of nation-states to combine economic growth with social cohesion has declined and domestic social compromises have been undermined. Attachments to the nation-state have in many places weakened, while in other places there is return to the interventionist nation-state and a search for new modes of regulation. The crisis has also called into question the shape of the European project, as austerity has provoked hostility to European integration itself, but also calls for a different form of Europe.

This special issue focuses on the impact on substate territories. European states have been through three phases of territorial management since the Second World War. During the *trente glorieuses années*, as they are known in France, there was a focus on extending welfare provision across national territories, combined with Keynesian strategies of macro-economic management focused on growth and full employment. The territorial dimension of this, sometimes called 'spatial Keynesianism', involved active regional policies aimed at integrating underdeveloped

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and declining regions into national, and then European, economic space. Since the 1970s, this has given way to a second phase, focused less on diversionary policies and more on local and regional strategies aimed at competitiveness. The outcome has been a form of competitive regionalism, although by definition all regions cannot compete equally successfully (Bristow, 2010). From the 1980s, the European Union entered the field, with its focus on spatial management policies. The Global Financial Crisis from 2008 was met by austerity policies at both state and European levels, with a highly uneven territorial impact across and within states. In the aftermath of Covid-19, there appears to have been a return to an active state and a rejection of further austerity. The pandemic itself impacted unevenly across and within states and there have been different responses both at state and regional levels.

These successive phases have affected inequality in two dimensions. The first is interregional as some regions secured a better place in the European and international division of labour than others. Such inequalities are often difficult to measure since so much depends on the unit of analysis. They have been defined and calculated between large regions, or smaller districts, or even at the neighbourhood level within cities. There are also arguments about the best way to address them. However these analytical issues are resolved, the issue of territorial equity has returned to the political agenda; the European Union now has 'territorial cohesion' among its aims, alongside economic and social cohesion. In the UK, the idea of 'levelling-up' has been adopted on both right and left, although the implication that some places can do better without other places doing worse is perhaps a politically expedient piece of wishful thinking. The second dimension of inequality is intra-regional as social groups are selectively integrated into European and global economic circuits, with some of them more favoured than others. Faced with the need to attract mobile capital, regions may cut taxes and public services, provoking a 'race to the bottom'. Greater inequality may have wide-ranging effects, including social and territorial conflicts, changes in electoral behaviour, a reshaping of political systems. Policies may also be affected; competitive regionalism raises a fear of a 'race' for regions and cities to cut taxes and social overheads in order to attract mobile capital. This has brought back on the agenda the idea that inequalities might usefully be analysed and addressed through a spatial focus.

These trends have been addressed by studies within various disciplines. Economic studies of inequality have explored the drivers of income disparities looking at the role of globalization, technology, finance, precarization and individualization (Franzini & Pianta, 2015; Piketty, 2013, 2019), but have often disregarded the territorial dimension and have only started to investigate its political consequences. In fact, there are serious issues of distribution at stake, which are reshaping politics and policy responses. These responses are similarly territorialized. In some cases, there has been a 'revolt of the poor' as political and social movements in 'losing' territories mobilize for change. Elsewhere, there is a 'revolt of the rich' as movements within wealthy regions complain about transfers to their compatriots which, they argue, are holding back their own competitive potential. There are anti-globalization responses, looking for more protection at the national or regional level, and pro-globalization forces seeking to take advantage of new opportunities. In this context, new forms of territorial politics have emerged, some seeking more assistance from the state, some looking to Europe, some demanding regional autonomy and others pushing for secession. For some movements, the region or city is conceptualized as a space for market competition in a global or European context, while for others it is seen as a new space for social solidarity (Keating, 2017).

Within political science, studies have explored the determinants of secessionist support, considering in particular the role played by national identity, cultural heterogeneity, partisanship and economic motivations, sometimes seeking to measure the relative contribution of each. Less attention has perhaps been paid to the interaction of these in the construction of social and political coalitions within political places. The crises in capitalism and in the state have contributed to reopen the many historical cleavages that had appeared to have attenuated. The economic

crisis has given a new prominence to the class divide, focusing attention on the social questions. From the Global South to the North and the West of the world, conflicts emerged concerning the decline of social protection, the retrenchment of welfare, the policies of privatization and deregulation, the increase in unemployment and precariousness, but also the worsening of union rights and labour protection. In fact, all Rokkanian cleavages seemed to de-freeze (della Porta, 2015, 2020). There are increasing fractures along the church–state divide (often expressed as social conservatism versus social liberalism), the urban versus rural one as well as the centre–periphery cleavage.

The conventional wisdom in studies of federalism has been that the higher – federal or nation-state – level is the best one at which to address redistribution (Oates, 1999). This is because the state possesses the resources and the nation the sense of solidarity, and because state borders prevent the wealthy from escaping taxation by relocating. In practice, however, distributive issues arise at all levels, from the global, through the European, to the state and the local dimensions. There is a growing interest in the way that local and regional governments have engaged in redistributive politics in opposition to 'austerity' at state and European levels.

Economic inequalities, class divides, collective identification, political transformations and social activism are combined in shaping new territorial imaginations and constructions of collective interests. This means that there is no determinate outcome but different outcomes depending on local conditions. Current political developments that reflect such dynamics include Brexit, the Italian 2018 election results, the French protest of the 'yellow vests', and secessionist tendencies, such as those in both Scotland and Catalonia.

In many European countries, regionalism and peripheral nationalism were long regarded as relics of the past, anti-modernist protests against change. Since the 1970s, at least, they have also included popular movements on the left. Even in cases of relatively rich regions (such as Catalonia), the call for independence has been, for a part of the coalition, justified as a way to ensure social protection within inclusively defined national communities (della Porta et al., 2017a, 2017b). Especially in these situations, the constituency for secessionist campaigns has reached beyond the traditional supporters, with the spread of left-wing narratives resonant with progressive and leftist movements' frames. Progressive social movement organizations have acted as promoters of frames that bridge claims for independence and claims for social justice, becoming brokers between independentism and other social movements on the Left. Often, through the involvement of social movements, a participatory democratic vision becomes widespread. The right to decide is advocated for in the name of the people living in these would-be states. Elites in the central state are accused of depriving the peripheries of their democratic rights, relying on prevailing institutional power rather than any form of ongoing democratic legitimacy.

This special issue of *Territory, Politics, Governance* aims to investigate these interactions, bridging different fields of study, with an interdisciplinary perspective. The common focus of the articles is the political framing, social dynamics and economic drivers of recent transformations in the territorial bases of politics. The articles explore in particular the following aspects:

- The patterns of territorial, economic, social and political inequalities within states; and their interaction in shaping political developments, social protest and territorial divides.
- The rescaling of political entities – including the European, state, national and regional levels – and the role played by economic and political processes and by specific policy issues.

Keating (2021, in this issue) argues that the European welfare state was essentially predicated on the ideal of the nation-state, within stable boundaries. The nation provided the sense of collective identity and affective solidarity to mobilize support for redistribution and social welfare. The state provided the institutional capacity for public services and taxation. It also 'caged' national territory within fixed borders, preventing actors from exiting and encouraging social

compromise between the state, capital and labour. Coterminous boundaries for economic regulation (market-making) and welfare (market compensation) facilitated the mixed-economy welfare state and a series of positive-sum policies. In recent decades, we have witnessed a process of spatial rescaling, whereby economic regulation, welfare provision and political identities have migrated to new levels (Keating, 2013). Competitive regionalism may lead to the 'race to the bottom' but also a 'race to the top' as regions experiment with new forms of social provision, and new forms of solidarity may emerge at new scales. There is evidence of differing policy choices in regions and cities. It is not possible to make a summary judgement as to which sets of policy are more socially equitable, as that involves value judgements. The argument is illustrated by the case of Scotland. Since devolution in 1999, it has been governed by social democratic governments, which have chosen different priorities from those followed in England by both Labour and Conservative UK governments. There are no undergraduate fees for home-based students and no charges for prescription drugs. Income tax is slightly more progressive and there are supplementary benefits for families. This is accompanied by an effort to cast the Scottish nation as more solidary at a time when the UK government insists that the welfare state is essentially British.

Italy's regional inequalities – deeper and more persistent than in any other European country – are the focus of Asso (2021, in this issue). Economic factors and the socio-institutional environment (the quality of institutions, education attainments, government and bureaucratic efficiency) are at the root of such divides, which have become dramatic in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. The collapse of capital accumulation, demographic decline because of migration and a 'brain drain', and widespread impoverishment have worsened the dynamics of regional disparities. Moreover, new 'within-south inequalities' have emerged, which are explored in their patterns and determinants. The evidence from surveys and case studies sheds a light on the importance of human capital and cooperative networks that support firms in their capacity to exploit comparative advantages and opportunities for local development.

The political impact of Italy's inequality is investigated by Bloise et al. (2021, in this issue), focusing on the country's regions since the start of the 'Second Republic' in 1994. The political outcomes investigated include the shares – in the total number of electors – of non-voters, of votes for mainstream parties (the centre-right and centre-left parties that have taken turns in governing the country, considered together), of votes for the Lega, and the Five Star Movement (M5S), which have emerged as major 'challenger' parties. The results of quantitative analyses show that inequality, lack of wealth and precarization are closely associated with the regional patterns of Italy's electoral change. However, Italy is far from facing a general 'populist wave'; each 'protest' choice – abstention, vote for the Lega and vote for the M5S – is driven by specific economic factors, relevant for different social groups in different regions. Higher abstention is associated with greater overall income inequality; the vote for Lega is linked to the downward pressure on the income of the middle classes in Northern and Central regions; the rise of the M5S has roots in youth's precarious employment and in the poverty of the South. While political, ideological and cultural variables are important factors for explaining Italy's political upheavals, a key role in indeed played by inequality and economic conditions.

Catalonia is the region where the combination of nationalist and social divides has had the most dramatic political effects. Della Porta and Portos (2021, in this issue) investigate the social bases of support for Catalan independentism. While upper-class and bourgeois sectors of the population have been traditionally considered dominant within Catalan nationalism, the analysis of the social background of supporters indicates instead an interclass constituency behind the *procés* that unfolded during the Great Recession. As the movement for Catalan self-determination and independence became a mass phenomenon, it broadened the traditional constituency of Catalan nationalism and encompassed large sectors of the population, including the working classes. Looking at the intersection of positions on nation and class, the authors suggest that the

ability of pro-independence actors to build cross-class alliances was crucial in accounting for the surge of support for independence observed in Catalonia since 2010.

Cairney et al. (2021, in this issue) address policymaking on gender equality and the opportunity for experiment and policy-learning across territorial levels. Inequalities policy is particularly contested and is a multilevel phenomenon in two senses, concerning causes and available policy instruments. Its causes lie at many levels, from the local to the global; and the policy instruments are divided among different tiers of government. This requires an elaborate framework of analysis. The first element is about defining the nature of policy learning in political systems, including the interaction between politics, in the form of demands, and the availability and feasibility of solutions. This takes place under conditions of bounded rationality, so that policymakers necessarily take cognitive shortcuts to gather and use evidence. All these are compounded in multilevel policymaking systems that limit a single central government's control over choices and outcomes. Available policy instruments may or may not be suited to the task and are also divided among levels of government. The challenge is further enhanced in the case the authors choose to analyse, which is about gender equality and, specifically, the effort to 'mainstream' it in the policy process rather than treating it as a discrete task, with its own dedicated policy community and instruments. These dynamics play out in different ways in each territory, giving rise to policy differentiation. There is a potential for learning here, with different cases acting as live experiments, but the contextual differences are such that this is notoriously difficult. Drawing on experience from the UK, Canada and Sweden, the authors confirm that there are strict limits to policy learning in multilevel systems, especially when the problem is as multidimensional as this one. There is also a disjuncture between analysis and policy advice, which inhibits practical learning around the reproduction of inequalities and formulating effective policy. These are familiar problems in research on public policy, especially in considering 'wicked issues' such as inequality, but they are compounded under conditions of rescaling. On the other hand, the multiscalar approach adopted by the authors provides a more realistic framework for appreciating the dynamics of the issue and of proposed solutions.

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