European citizens in times of crisis

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INTRODUCTION

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More than ten years after the start of one of the deepest economic crises in Europe, the Great Recession, citizens are still struggling to cope with the effects of the crisis. This raises a number of questions about how European citizens have experienced and continue to experience the repercussions of the crisis. How are the experiences of the crisis felt across different social groups? How does deprivation impact on social attitudes and policy preferences? How has the crisis impacted on support for redistribution, tolerance and choices with respect to one’s personal life such as for example the decision to have children? How do citizens’ experiences of and responses to the crisis vary depending on the intensity with which different European countries experienced the crisis?

The social and political repercussions of the Great Recession are still strongly felt among the population across European countries, especially in those countries that were most hardly hit. The papers in this special issue all look at different facets of the soci-political repercussions of the crisis. They deal more specifically with three main aspects. A first important aspect pertains to hardship and deprivation as well as to their consequences. During periods of economic challenges, individuals are more likely to experience deprivation and dissatisfaction. Deprivation, in turn, can have a number of consequences, including sometimes quite dramatic ones. As scholarship on social movements has shown, for example, feelings of deprivation are likely to produce grievances which, in turn, might translate into protest actions depending on various factors including a conducive political environment for protest (Kriesi 2004). We know that particularly in those countries worst hit by the crisis, large protests took place as European governments and institutions were blamed for the negative economic context (Giugni and Grasso 2015; Grasso and...
Giugni 2016). In several countries the economic crisis was linked in with pre-existing challenges and political crises, for example the crisis of responsibility of democratic politics (della Porta 2015).

Economic hardship, however, is not homogeneously felt among the population. Quite on the contrary, there exist important variations in both objective and subjective deprivation across different social groups and different strata of society. We have recently documented this for the Great Recession in an edited book devoted to experiences, perceptions and responses to it (Giugni and Grasso 2018), which shows that Europeans have variously experienced the extent of the economic crisis. In this regard, some have stressed that people belonging to the middle class have suffered much from the consequences of the crisis (Whelan et al. 2016), in many cases causing a shift from a comfortable living situation to one of hardship, deprivation, and sometimes, poverty. Furthermore, the more vulnerable and the poor are likely to be more strongly affected by the recession than other groups. At the same time, the social sectors who are most deeply affected also vary from one country to the other, in part depending on the strength of the welfare state in given contexts. The article by Maria Grasso, Sotirios Karampampas, Luke Temple and Barbara Yoxon in this special issue looks precisely at such an interaction between the severity of the economic crisis, the presence of welfare provisions, and levels of reported deprivation. They look at data from five different types of welfare regimes to show that there are important cross-national and cross-class inequalities in levels of deprivation as reported by individuals in different social classes. They show that deprivation patterns cross-nationally reflect the welfare regimes of the nine countries as well as the severity of the economic crisis. They also find that working class individuals in countries that were not so deeply affected by the crisis were generally worse off than middle class individuals in countries that were more deeply affected. Those in semi/unskilled manual occupations were found to be the most deprived. At the macro-level, they showed that higher inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient was associated with higher levels of reported deprivation but they did not find evidence that being in semi/unskilled manual occupations has a further heightened effect on reported deprivation in contexts of higher inequality or lower social spending.

Indeed, far from being an ‘objective’ fact, deprivation has a strong subjective component (Grasso et al. 2017). As relative deprivation theory has stressed (Gurr 1970; Runciman 1966), for example, what really matters are feelings of deprivation, which are in turn related to individuals’
evaluations of their own position with respect to a reference group, or to one’s own situation as retrospectively compared to a previous moment in time or prospectively to an imagined future situation. The article by Christian Lahusen and Johannes Kiess in this special issue follows a similar approach by investigating how Europeans are comparing living conditions in European countries and whether these comparisons affect the way they assess their personal situation. They test whether assessments of other countries are significantly interrelated with reported levels of life satisfaction. They also measure the extent to which these effects hold when other reference groups – such as friends, neighbors, own country - as well as a variety of individual socio-demographic traits are included in the analysis. They show that assessing living conditions in other European countries attests to a marked ‘cognitive Europeanization’. However, relative to the assessment of the own national economy and the own household situation, comparisons with other countries played a less relevant role for reported life satisfaction. Moreover, they find that Switzerland as a non-EU-member was a more significant target than most other EU-members, suggesting a European, rather than EU, frame of reference.

A second aspect, and line of investigation, which informs the present special issue has to do with how the economic crisis may lead people make certain choices concerning their own life. People make their everyday decisions based on a number of factors and taking into account the amount of resources which are available to them. When resources shrink, some important decisions, such as getting married or having children, may be postponed or even abandoned altogether. As such, hardship and deprivation produced by economic downturns may well limit the range of options available concerning some key aspects of one’s life choices. Such an effect of the crisis on life-course choices may result, for example, from the sudden reduction of individual or family resources due to a job loss or, perhaps less dramatically, by a reduction in one’s salary and therefore income. Research has, for example, extensively documented the negative effects of falling into unemployment, from marginalization (Gallie 2004) to the destructuring of everyday life (Jahoda et al. 1933). Similarly, deprivation may also stem from moving from a stable job position into precarity. In all these cases, a deteriorated economic situation and a grim outlook for the future can have serious repercussions not only on consumption patterns, but also on fundamental decisions concerning one’s own life. The article by Anna Kurowska in this special issue looks at one specific such life-course decisions, namely the intention of childless women to become mothers, and examines how this depends
on both positive and negative changes to the household’s economic situation. Her study differentiates between past experiences of change and anticipated changes in the future. It applies multinomial logistic regressions to analyse a sample of childless women based on pooled data from nine European countries. It shows that regardless of the changes to the household’s economic situation in the five years preceding the survey, the anticipated improvement in its economic situation over the following five years decreased the chances of childless women experiencing childbearing uncertainty or negative short-term fertility intentions.

A third and final aspect examined in this special issue relates to the impact of the economic crisis on citizens’ social attitudes and policy preferences. Scholarship has examined attitudes and preferences with respect to redistribution (Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Rueda and Stegmueller 2016) and immigration (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). The article by Jordi Garcia Muniesa in this special issue looks at the impact of the economic crisis on attitudes towards tax progressivity. The analysis of data about the economic crisis at the household level and citizens’ preferences for tax progressivity allows to show that although citizens affected by the crisis were generally more likely to support progressive taxation, the impact of worsening economic circumstances was limited and not homogeneous across the population. Those citizens on the left suffering the economic setback did not show higher support for progressive taxation whereas those on the centre and on the right did. Moreover, it was found that citizens who perceived their financial setbacks to be temporary and were optimistic about their economic prospects did not show increased support for tax progressivity whereas those who were less optimistic about their future economic situation did.

Negative attitudes towards immigrants and immigration may be seen as part of a more general pattern of prejudice, whereby negative attitudes towards migrants and minorities reflect a more general underlying hostility or intolerance towards diversity (Raden 1989). The article by Barbara Yoxon, Maria Grasso, Sotirios Karampampas and Luke Temple in this special issue deals with such a broader pattern of prejudice by examining how it relates to the economic crisis. In their paper, they employ measures of both subjective and objective micro-level deprivation and apply multilevel models including macro-level measures of economic context deterioration in terms of unemployment levels and GDP growth to examine this. They show that individuals experiencing deteriorating living standards are less likely to express prejudice. By borrowing novel insights from the
literature in political psychology they suggest an explanation for these results through lower self-esteem. Their findings thus open novel avenues for future research particularly in terms of further examining the relationship between objective and subjective deprivation and prejudice.

Dealing with the cultural domain of public attitudes and policy preferences, the article by Steven Van Hauwaert, Christian Schimpf and Régis Dandoy focuses on populist demands. They examine in particular populism as a regional-level phenomenon. They aim to explain regional patterns of variation in the populist demand. They argue that higher levels of regional populism demand are associated with economic hardship, strong institutional autonomy, strong territorial identity, and greater distance from elites. For their analysis, they construct a populist index for each region and combine this with regional data to show that populism holds distinct regional patterns and there is support for classic predictors like economic hardship. They also look at the predictive power of regional identity and distance to elites.

In a context marked by diverse potential sources of deprivation and tension amongst social groups, it appeared particularly important to understand how the crisis has affected the experiences of different sections of the public in different countries and the diverse types of responses on the part of citizens. Exploring these dynamics across Europe is one of the key contributions of this special issue. Despite the central importance of investigating these questions in the current historical juncture, there is still more work to be done in terms of developing current research. In this way, the papers in this special issue aim to provide evidence on a number of key questions affecting European citizens in times of crisis.

The papers in this special issue all employ the same dataset from nine European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and UK) collected as part of a cross-national survey we fielded in 2015 (N ~18,000) with a questionnaire tailor-made to answer our research questions. This survey was conducted in the context of the collaborative project ‘Living with Hard Times: How Citizens React to Economic Crises and Their Social and Political Consequences’ (LIVEWHAT). This project was funded by the European Commission under the auspices of the 7th Framework Programme (Grant Agreement No. 613237) and was coordinated by Marco Giugni at the University of Geneva. Maria Grasso at the University of Sheffield provided the scientific supervision for the survey. Draft papers for this special issue were presented at a research project workshop at the University of Warsaw, in May 2016. We would like to thank all the participants at the LIVEWHAT paper
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