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## **‘The real power must be in the base’ – Decentralised collective intellectual leadership in the *European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City***

### **Introduction**

The financial crisis of 2008 sparked a crisis of housing in multiple European countries, leading to the formation and growth of numerous housing activist networks. In Southern Europe, housing activists largely struggled against the forced dispossession of indebted homeowners (Romanos, 2014) while in Central and Northern Europe they tended to mobilize against the exploitation of renters, privatization of urban space, and disenfranchisement of marginalised communities (Wijkström and Domaradzka, 2018; Lima, 2019). While these are nominally separate struggles fought in different politico-economic contexts, there has been a growing effort to unite them within a common political framework at the European level in the form of the ‘European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City’ (EAC). This coalition brings together housing activists from over 20 countries through mutual political exchange, practical solidarity, and collective campaigns, thus connecting the diverse struggles of homeowners, tenants, and marginalized communities in order to collectively oppose the commodification and deregulation of living space (EAC, 2019e). The EAC thus acts not only as an international representative for domestic activists, but as a consolidated organisational framework intent on fighting a collective anti-neoliberal struggle across Europe.

This article argues that in doing so the EAC adopts characteristics of as ‘collective intellectual’ that aims to unite the diverse and variegated forms of housing activism through a common counter-hegemonic perspective and generates mutual solidarity across different activist communities. The concept of collective intellectual draws on Antonio Gramsci’s work (1992) and describes a party-like political organisation capable of integrating different social struggles into a collective transformative force. As various authors have argued, transnational activist coalitions are also able to perform this function by transcending single-issue claims and campaigns in favour of a more holistic struggle against capitalism, but due to their diverse composition and horizontal structure they do so in a more pluralistic and decentralised fashion than in Gramsci’s vision (Gill, 2000; Carroll, 2013). Drawing on qualitative analyses of documents, interviews, and field notes, this article demonstrates that the EAC exhibits such a decentralised approach to collective intellectual leadership, yet also engages in partial convergence around political manifestos and institutional demands to facilitate long-term strategic consolidation. These findings contribute to a more fluid understanding of collective intellectual leadership as it pertains

to transnational activism, which may aid in studying the various new transnational movements that have emerged over the past years.

The article begins by introducing the concept of collective intellectual leadership and discussing its application to transnational activist coalitions. It then explains the methods used to conduct the analysis, which is presented in the section thereafter. The conclusions summarise the findings and argument and tease out various ways in which the concept of collective intellectual can be useful in studying other transnational coalitions and movements.

### **Leadership in Activist Movements – the Role of Collective Intellectuals**

Historical materialist scholars regard social movements as embedded in struggles against the conditions of exploitation, domination and dispossession under capitalism (Barker *et al.*, 2013). Scholars drawing on Antonio Gramsci's work in particular consider movements to be engaged in struggles for hegemony, meaning they are not only locked in material class struggle, but also contest social power relations on the terrains of ideology, culture and institutional politics (Cox and Nilsen, 2014). The application of Gramscian concepts to the study of social movements not primarily based on organised labour was largely introduced by scholars of post-colonial studies, who analysed movements struggling against imperialist domination and dispossession in the global South (Landry and MacLean, 1996). In part inspired by their contribution, many Gramscian scholars adopt a 'methodology of the subaltern' to account for the unique subject position and constitutive agency of activist movements (Morton, 2007; Las Heras, 2018). Employing this perspective, authors investigate the struggle over hegemony from the viewpoint of a (broadly defined) working class, whose contentious politics are considered a driving force for social transformation.

#### *Collective intellectual leadership*

The agency of social movements is strongly tied to the political leadership of activists. According to Gramsci, a mass of individuals within civil society 'does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders' (Gramsci, 1992, p. 334). Social groups can certainly engage in spontaneous 'subversive' mobilizations against their immediate exploiters, but they require the 'conscious leadership' of 'organic intellectuals' to elevate their political consciousness to a radical transformative level capable of challenging hegemony (Gramsci, 1992, p. 196ff.). The concept of

organic intellectuals refers to politically influential individuals within any social group, who support that group's struggle for hegemony, by developing and diffusing its ideological narratives, educating the mass of (potential) supporters and forging social alliances (Gramsci, 1992, pp. 5–14). Their role as 'intellectuals' does not necessarily convey an academic status but rather indicates the politico-ideological leadership they provide. In that sense, they are not a detached stratum of elites giving directions to followers, but emerge 'organically' from the popular masses, and their function is not only to write manifestos and hold speeches, but to actively engage in the everyday life and struggles of the groups they represent (Gramsci, 1992, p. 9f.). Organic intellectuals are crucial in both reproducing and challenging systems of hegemony, by enabling powerful and dominated forces alike to establish alliances and gain political influence (Morton, 2007, p. 97).

Just as individuals can perform the function of organic intellectuals, larger organisations can take on the role of 'collective intellectuals'. In Gramsci's conception, political parties represent the primary organisational form capable of performing this function, as they provide collective leadership over masses of followers, while in turn educating and training them to become organic intellectuals in their own right (Coutinho, 2012, p. 110ff.). He specifies that a revolutionary party in particular needs to act as a 'modern prince' that can integrate and articulate the interests of different social groups in the form of a 'collective popular will' capable of challenging the existing hegemonic order (Gramsci, 1992, p. 130ff.). In that sense, Gramsci ascribes a more democratic and integrative quality to progressive leadership than he does to the hegemony of capitalist forces (Anderson, 2017, p. 22f.), prompting subsequent scholars to characterise such progressive leadership as seeking a 'counter-hegemonic' transition rather than instituting its own hegemony (Carroll, 2009).

### *Leadership in (transnational) activism*

Applying Gramsci's conception of leadership to transnational social movements has been a source of scholarly contention over the years. The introduction of hegemony into International Relations (Cox, 1983) and the subsequent development of a 'neo-Gramscian' school of International Political Economy (Gill, 1991; Van Der Pijl, 2005) has been criticised for transposing Gramsci's historically contingent ideas too far beyond their original context of national civil society and the nation state (Germain and Kenny, 1998). In regard to social resistance, authors of the 'autonomist Marxist' tradition argued that Gramsci's theory was too in line with the Leninist idea of an elitist party vanguard to offer any insights into contemporary movements against neoliberal capitalism, whose rejection of political representation and institutional power made them anti- or post-hegemonic rather than counter-hegemonic (Hardt and

Negri, 2001; Day, 2005; Kioupkiolis, 2017). Without wanting to reproduce this entire debate (for a good overview, see Worth, 2011; Las Heras, 2018), a few key points need to be addressed to specify the application of concepts in this piece.

First, ascribing collective intellectual leadership to horizontal activist structures is not a fundamental departure from Gramsci's original conception, since he explicitly sought to subvert the hierarchies and bureaucracy of traditional parties. While he envisioned a revolutionary party to be a 'democratic centralist' organisation with a clear leadership and strategy, it would also need to facilitate 'organic cohesion' between leaders and popular masses by facilitating a 'continual adaptation of the organisation to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above' (Gramsci, 1992, p. 188). By educating followers to become organic intellectuals themselves, the objective of such an organisation was 'to create the conditions in which this division [between leaders and followers] is no longer necessary' (Gramsci, 1992, p. 144). Hence, as Morton (2007, p. 210) argues: 'Gramsci favoured forms of organic and democratic political organisation based on movement from below rather than authoritarian and bureaucratic control from above'. This is further evidenced by his characterisation of the radical democratic workers' council movement as 'precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, insofar as it is mass politics and not a mere adventure by groups that appeal to the masses' (Gramsci, 2011, p. 50f.). A collective intellectual according to Gramsci would thus resemble a contemporary movement-party that combines central leadership with bottom-up democratic participation (Kitschelt, 2006), but an activist organisation could conceivably qualify as well, in so far as it manages to develop an integrative counter-hegemonic strategy and cohesive organisational structure. Consequently, various authors and political actors draw on Gramsci's concept to characterise recent far left movement-parties like Podemos as prospective modern princes (Iglesias, 2015; Briziarelli, 2018). Others highlight the counter-hegemonic potential of the social and solidarity economy, whose initiatives and networks create radical democratic and non-profit oriented forms of economic and social reproduction, thereby offering prefigurative alternatives to capitalism that can expand from the local scale (Wigger, 2016; Bailey et al. 2017; Bieler and Jordan, 2017; Arampatzi, 2018).

Second, as numerous scholars demonstrate, collective intellectual leadership can be found among transnational activist coalitions as well. Looking to the alterglobalisation movement of the late 1990s, authors highlight the ability of transnational networks and policy groups like the World Social Forum or the People's Global Action to forge counter-hegemonic alliances against neoliberal capitalism in an effort to organise 'globalisation from below' (see for instance Carroll, 2013 and the contributions in Gills, 2000). Gill (2000) famously likens these coalitions to a 'postmodern prince' whose 'plural and differentiated'

(ibid. p. ) subjectivities and horizontal democratic structures can offer an alternative foundation for counter-hegemony to a democratic centralist party. Such decentralised political projects could conceivably perform the function of collective intellectuals by integrating single-issue struggles into more holistic anti-neoliberal strategies (Humphrys, 2013, p. 370ff.) and generating relations of solidarity on a global scale (Waterman, 2000). At the same time, local activism continues to play a constitutive role in such coalitions by empowering grassroots struggles to strengthen movements from the bottom up (Pieterse, 2000). Hence, in addition to providing collective intellectual leadership, transnational activist coalitions can create decentralised infrastructures for consolidating counter-hegemonic struggles transnationally (Smith and Duncan, 2012).

To what extent these considerations apply to the recent European anti-austerity movement is not immediately obvious, since that movement has been characterised more by separate struggles against country-specific governance regimes rather than a cohesive overarching strategy (Wigger and Horn, 2013; Della Porta, 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2017). However, this did not stop activists from establishing new transnational coalitions, such as Alter Summit, Bockupy (Chatzopoulou and Bourne, 2016) or indeed the EAC, making it all the more necessary to investigate to what extent these new projects contribute to transnational counter-hegemony and provide collective intellectual leadership.

### *Application*

Applying the notion of collective intellectual leadership analytically can present some tensions as it offers not only a framework to examine political projects, such as activist coalitions, on their own terms but also a normative-prescriptive account of what their strategies ‘should’ look like from a counter-hegemonic perspective. This need not be a problem however, as it enables the concept to be used as a benchmark to distinguish coalitions that maintain the system of capitalist hegemony and power relations (intentionally or not) from those that work towards a substantial rupture with capitalism and hegemony. As such, the extent to which a coalition ‘lives up’ to the Gramscian conception of leadership can help us assess its political trajectory and potential position within the larger context of social mobilisations. Moreover, analysing coalitions empirically does not only tell us *if* they function as collective intellectuals but also *how* they manage it, *who* they involve, and *what* the results are, which allows us to characterise the constantly shifting nature and constellations of hegemony struggles. It is therefore crucial to identify collective intellectual leadership not only in the actions a coalition performs itself, but in the extent to which it contributes to the counter-hegemonic development of its members. This holistic perspective ultimately represents the major benefit of applying a Gramscian framework over the more disruption-

oriented approach of regular social movement studies, as it allows us to characterise a movement coalition in terms of its strategic contribution to long-term hegemony struggle.

For the purpose of this article, a coalition can be considered a counter-hegemonic collective intellectual to the extent that it accomplishes a number of tasks: First, it needs to develop an integrative strategy that envelops the diverse grievances, claims, and tactics of its members' struggles and guides them towards a common counter-hegemonic alternative. This alternative must go beyond a minimal consensus and entail a conception of a new political and economic order that transcends individual interests (Morton, 2000, p. 261). Second, to be truly integrative, a coalition must not be controlled by a central leadership alone but has to be driven by the needs and capacities of its members. It thus needs to establish a democratically and socially inclusive organisational structure capable of facilitating mutual exchange among leaders and followers, as well as develop a praxis that empowers those followers to lead themselves. Both of these tasks, finally, depend on the coalition's ability to develop a collective identity and generate mutual solidarity across social groups and scales that expresses itself not only through cognitive identification and affinity, but also through practical and material support (Featherstone, 2012).

## **On Methods**

The analysis is based on empirical findings of a PhD project (2017 and 2020) on transnational anti-austerity activism. Research was conducted through a qualitative analysis of documents, expert interviews and field notes.

Documents include around 50 primary publications of the EAC, including online posts, manifestos, brochures, and published interviews, as well as additional publications by some of the EAC's members. Expert interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion with five activists from the PAH (Spain), Stop Auctions (Greece), Bond Precaire Woonvormen (Netherlands), Living Rent (Scotland), and CADTM (international), all of whom acted as dedicated representatives of their respective organisations while also taking responsibility within the coalition's working groups or as transnational facilitators. Questions revolved around the context, goals and practices of their own domestic projects, their motivation for and perception of transnational collaboration, as well as their assessment of the EAC's development and ambitions for its future. Field notes were taken over the course of a week-long coalition retreat in Lisbon in September 2018, which included participation and observation in collective assemblies, working group meetings, social activities, and a demonstration. Notes focused primarily on the discussions and interchange with and among activists, noting the political stance of different members, trajectory of arguments, existence and potential resolution of internal disputes, and practical operations

of working groups. All sources were analysed using a qualitative open coding procedure, capturing the content of statements and then assessing their meaning in relation to the EAC's political claims and strategy, organisational praxis, internal diversity, and encountered challenges.

### **The European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City**

The EAC is a transnational coalition of housing activists founded in 2013. It consists of over 30 right to the city networks, anti-eviction groups and housing unions, who share the ambition to contest the financialization, commodification and deregulation of housing in Europe, in order to fight for people's self-determination in their living space (EAC, 2019e, 2019f). Many of these organisations emerged not long before the coalition itself, forming in response to the rapid deterioration of housing security due to the 2008 financial crash, economic crisis, and austerity measures, whose impact was particularly severe in Southern Europe (Romanos, 2014; Soederberg, 2017). Other members formed before the crisis, in response to the gradual neoliberalisation of housing markets since the 1980s and the associated effects of increased property speculation, mortgage debt, flexibilised rental contracts, and the privatization of social housing (Harvey, 2013; Aalbers and Christophers, 2014). The EAC exerts various functions of a collective intellectual at the transnational level, including developing a counter-hegemonic perspective and a democratically integrative praxis, as well as generating mutual solidarity. Its ambition to develop a cohesive long-term strategy is still largely aspirational however.

#### *Counter-Hegemonic Perspective*

The EAC gradually unites diverse housing struggles around a common counter-hegemonic framework that seeks to effect pan-European social change. It describes itself as a 'convergence process between movements' (EAC, 2019e) and one of its core priorities lies in facilitating the cognitive and practical exchange between members, in order to develop a shared understanding of their transnational struggle and cultivate a common counter-hegemonic identity and strategy.

In political terms, the EAC exhibits a holistic and far-reaching counter-hegemonic perspective based on rejecting the neoliberal marketization and deregulation of housing and urban space across Europe. It explicitly identifies 'contemporary global capitalism' and 'neo-liberal policies' as the sources of a universal 'housing crisis' and cites 'market fundamentalism' and the influence of financial capital as the driving forces behind that crisis (EAC, 2019d). In addition to fighting for affordable homes, the coalition seeks to increase democratic control over living space to protect precarianised and vulnerable social



groups from gentrification, ghettoization, or deportation (EAC, 2019a). The coalition's mission statement expresses a radical democratic and redistributive ambition, declaring: 'Cities and homes are for the people that live in them, and it is us that must control our houses, our neighbourhoods, and our cities' (EAC, 2017d). Moreover, when formulating recent policy demands, the EAC focused not only on the housing question but on fiscal austerity and capitalist exploitation as a whole, condemning 'a society that organises itself solely around profits' (EAC, 2020a). This perspective is not merely a common denominator between the EAC's members, many of whom are more single-issue oriented, but points towards a more holistic counter-hegemonic struggle against capitalism that represents more than the sum of its parts. Though largely aspirational, by articulating and working towards this goal the EAC offers political guidance to its members, some of whom have since adopted a more holistic counter-hegemonic approach themselves and begun mobilising around both housing and labour conditions on May 1st (Blocul Pentru Locuire, 2020).

The EAC develops its counter-hegemonic perspective primarily through mutual exchange, thereby enabling activists to develop a collective identity and formulate counter-hegemonic claims based on their shared opposition against financial capital interests. Activists organise biannual meetings and mutual visits, conduct research on the commodification of housing and share information and practical skills. Since members have distinct experiences and strengths – stopping evictions, organizing tenants, fighting legal battles, creating alternative media – they are able to learn from each other through teaching and observation, slowly expanding their action repertoires and gaining experience interacting with other communities (Interview Bond Precaire Woonvormen, 24.04.2018; Interview Living Rent, 25.09.2018). Additionally, specific members such as tenants unions organise their own separate transnational meetings besides the biannual assemblies to facilitate a more in-depth exchange around their specific needs (EAC, 2019b). The coalition also performs the collective intellectual function of generating and diffusing political knowledge within civil society, as a dedicated working group gathers members' research and creates publications (EAC, 2016a, 2019c). The main benefit of this exchange is internal however, as it allows members to identify common social and political grievances, expand their tactical repertoires and recognize the interconnectedness of their struggles. An activist of the PAH recalls:

Certainly myself, I have learned things which I would not otherwise have learned, about what is happening in other countries and can be applied to the situation in Spain. There's an interchange that's very important. The coalition achieves that and also it bonds us because we are all from different nationalities and different situations but nevertheless we have a common viewpoint and a common aim (Interview PAH, 25.09.2018).

By revealing parallels and connections between domestic housing struggles (EAC, 2016), the EAC raises awareness of underlying financial and political dynamics affecting people's living situations across Europe. In doing so, it facilitates a process of cognitive convergence between members towards an overarching consciousness of being embedded in the same counter-hegemonic struggle (EAC, 2019e). In that sense, the EAC exercises the collective intellectual function of offering political and tactical education to its members, thereby enabling them to develop more holistic strategies and potentially act as organic intellectuals in their own domestic contexts.

### *Democratic Praxis and Mutual Solidarity*

The EAC has a horizontal democratic organisational structure and engages primarily in mutual exchange and decentralised actions, thereby connecting its members' domestic struggles across Europe. It is not democratically centralist in a Gramscian sense, since it lacks a central leadership with top-down decision-making competencies. Instead, members engage in horizontal coordination akin to Gill's notion of a postmodern prince, albeit with assigned responsibilities and an ambition to converge. Each member organisation sends a small group of activists to the coalition's biannual meetings, to engage in political exchange and vote on collective decisions. While these are not elected delegates and their numbers are not specified, member organisations tend to send the same individuals each time to act as consistent liaisons. These activists take part in the coalition's various working groups, specialising on research, skill exchange, or mobilization, which operate continuously between meetings. Additionally, a small circle of appointed activists are responsible for facilitating the coalition's meetings and supervising the budget (Field Notes 21.09.2018). Unlike many other European coalitions, which mainly attract activists from Central and Northern Europe, meet in Germany or Brussels, and communicate in English (Blockupy, 2013; Change Finance, 2019; Alter Summit, 2020), the EAC displays a relatively even representation of activists from all over Europe (EAC, 2019f), meets in rotating locations and provides simultaneous translation in multiple languages to integrate local constituents (Field Notes, 23.09.2018). In addition to decision-making and workshops activists use their meetings as an opportunity to organize symbolic actions or protests together, thereby involving their international comrades in their own local mobilizations. In the past such actions took the form of public discussions in Belgrade (EAC, 2017b), confrontations of politicians in Cyprus (EAC, 2017c), or a large demonstration and blockades of home evictions in Lisbon (EAC, 2018). Through these events, the EAC enables its members to directly engage with and support one another's local communities rather than only encounter specialised representatives,

thus forging multiple intersecting connections across scales and attaining a higher degree of organic cohesion between transnational and grassroots activists.

The EAC's praxis of translocal exchange also provides a way for activists to forge bonds of solidarity across different communities. Members are engaged in a wide range of struggles and represent a variety of social groups and national backgrounds, reflective of the uneven housing situation across Europe. Most groups from Southern Europe are primarily invested in the situation of indebted homeowners facing eviction, which due to the high owner-occupancy rate affects large portions of the working and lower middle class. These groups thus mainly engage in stopping housing auctions, renegotiating mortgages, seeking reforms to property law, and preventing touristification (Habita, 2020; PAH, 2020b; Stop Auctions, 2020). By contrast, groups in Northern and Western Europe tend to represent (social) renters, usually from lower working class and precarious backgrounds, by providing legal advice and support, as well as engaging in direct actions to stop evictions (Bond Precaire Woonvormen, 2020; Bündnis Zwangsäumung verhindern, 2020; Living Rent, 2020). Some groups are fighting more generally against the commercialisation of urban space, thus representing both local communities threatened by gentrification, as well as organised labour suffering under privatization (Pravo na grad, 2020). Many member organizations additionally engage in solidarity work for marginalized communities, such as refugees, migrants, and Roma (EAC, 2019d). The EAC's primary focus on mutual exchange is thus explicitly intended to connect and integrate these diverse struggles to 'create solidarity bonds between movements which would enable each to strengthen itself' (EAC, 2015). One of the goals is to counteract the fragmentation and distrust between different social groups affected by the deterioration of housing, in order to build a more inclusive counter-hegemonic force. A Dutch activist summarizes the overall ambition:

My dream is [...] that there is not this pinpointing going on so much, like the middle class against the social renters and the social renters against foreigners and I think that creates a lot of division. Obviously there are a lot of differences between the groups, but at the moment neoliberalism has successfully divided people (Interview Bond Precaire Woonvormen, 24.04.2018).

By highlighting how the commodification of housing creates shared problems for home owners, tenants and marginalized communities alike, activists educate each other about the inherent connections between their various struggles and develop a more cohesive political identity. A Greek activist summarizes the situation succinctly:

The small owner in Greece and the tenant in Germany have almost the same problems. [...] The problem is the cost of the living, of housing. [...] So it's not a matter of where exactly you are in this picture, but that all of the

people from middle lower classes are facing now a big pressure on the context of housing (Interview Stop Auctions, 24.09.2018).

During guided visits to marginalized neighbourhoods, activists are also informed about the specific grievances of local communities (Field Notes 23.09.2018), thus strengthening their understanding of the needs and implications of transnational solidarity. On a more day-to-day basis, the EAC reports about the struggles of its members, as well as urges them to support each other directly, by distributing calls for mobilizations and donations (EAC, 2016c, 2017a). Members evidently internalise this need for everyday mutual solidarity, as activists have begun organising spontaneous symbolic protests in direct response to local evictions taking place elsewhere on the continent (Bündnis Zwangsäumung verhindern, 2019).

Beyond mutual exchange and solidarity, the EAC organises decentralised political campaigns in which member organisations coordinate different local actions around a common political theme, most often their shared antagonism towards financial investors (EAC, 2014, 2016b, 2017b). This again highlights the coalition's horizontal nature and the constitutive agency of its members, who are free to adjust their tactics in response to their own specific context conditions. Earlier campaigns were relatively loosely connected, but the EAC managed to achieve a higher degree of political and tactical cohesion in recent years. During the 'Hands Off Our Homes!' campaign from 2017 to 2019 the coalition formulated common European demands for the first time and symbolically delivered them to EU representatives in Milan (*Common Space*, 2018). This was followed by the drafting and circulation of the EAC's first official manifesto (EAC, 2019a). Even as the Coronavirus pandemic made public mobilizations largely impossible, the EAC still managed to organise a collective 'Housing Action Day' on the 28th of March 2020, as members from over 50 European cities coordinated symbolic protests on their balconies and articulated common demands for a new crisis management (EAC, 2020c). This development highlights that the EAC does indeed facilitate a gradual process of strategic convergence, albeit rather slowly and without developing a democratic centralist structure or praxis.

At the same time, despite the EAC's democratic horizontalism its dynamics of exchange vary across the coalition, reflecting the uneven capacities and need for solidarity between members. The main responsibilities are largely held by activists from the PAH (Spain), Habita (Portugal), Stop Auctions (Greece), and Droit au Logement (France), thereby giving special weight to members whose countries were more severely affected by the financial crisis and austerity (Field Notes 21.09.2018). At the same time, resourceful and prolific organisations like the PAH are also unlikely to use their affiliation with the

EAC as a resource in their own struggles, whereas relatively new and small organisations need to draw on it for support. As one activist explains:

Some countries have used the brand name of the coalition a little more. Others, they're not using it at all. PAH is so strong that it has no need to refer to the coalition. But in other countries where the movements are less strong it's important to say that we're part of a bigger movement (Interview, Stop Auctions, 24.09.2018).

As a consequence, some new groups directly adopt the EAC's moniker for themselves, such as the Cypriot 'Action Network for the Housing and the City' (EAC, 2020b) or are founded explicitly for the purpose of partaking in one of the EAC's campaigns, like the Irish 'Housing Action Now' (Housing Action Now, 2020). Conversely, the PAH has been able to shift its legal battle against the Spanish housing law to the European courts entirely on its own (PAH, 2017) while its logo has been copied by many of the EAC's members (BPW, 2018; Bündnis Zwangsräumung verhindern, 2020; Comitato Abitanti San Siro, 2020; PAH, 2020a).

This demonstrates that the EAC is unevenly embedded among its members, as the extent and direction of their transnational exchange and solidarity differs depending on their respective development and needs. The coalition thus provides an important resource for certain members, allowing them to attach their activities to a wider transnational struggle and draw on the experiences and support of more well-established organisations, whereas others are less dependent on it and participate more for the purpose of sharing their capacities and expanding their own ambitions. A number of activists have suggested expanding this praxis further by introducing mechanisms for mutual financial support and tutorship:

I think the Coalition could be a platform to not just share research and knowledge, but actually for some of the bigger organizations to take the smaller organizations on and maybe give them some resources, maybe give them some capacity, because I think that's how we can help these organizations get off the ground (Interview Living Rent 25.09.2018).

How far the EAC can develop this equalising exchange remains to be seen, but its praxis already underlines that it does not act as a distant representative but supports members within their own domestic contexts, hence there is certainly potential for more advanced integration. In that sense, the EAC's approach to counter-hegemony is not that of a singular political leader but of a platform that gradually facilitates strategic convergence and mutual solidarity among members, thus resembling the 'plural and differentiated' collective intellectual described by Gill more than Gramsci's original concept, albeit with a more cohesive conception of class struggle.

### *Institutional struggle?*

As mentioned above, the EAC's ambition to develop a common European strategy is still mostly aspirational, but it has made some headway recently. In 2019, the coalition released a catalogue of demands for the European elections, imploring the EU to institute a universal right to housing, prohibit evictions, guarantee social housing by re-appropriating privatized housing stock, and dispense with fiscal austerity to provide sufficient non-profit, democratically controlled public housing (EAC, 2019d). In an open letter members explicitly called on the EU to 'socialise housing across Europe' by enabling 'broad strata of the population' to acquire housing 'outside EU competition rules and financial capital flows' (BPW, 2019). These demands to repeal austerity and remove housing from the capitalist market at the European level showcase the coalition's ability to turn its counter-hegemonic perspective into concrete policy claims. Many EAC members also helped run the European Citizens Initiative 'Housing For All', aiming to gather a million votes to push for new legislation improving access to affordable housing in the EU<sup>1</sup> (Housing For All, 2019). However, the coalition itself did not officially back the initiative and the formulation of institutional demands for the European elections only came after a protracted internal conflict. This reflects political dissent within the EAC concerning the question of institutional struggle in the EU. Some members articulate serious concerns about the ineffectiveness and political illegitimacy of the European democratic process (Interview CADTM, 23.09.2018) and even members that do seek the institutionalisation of a European housing law are often unconvinced of its short-term feasibility (Interview PAH, 25.09.2018). The decision to formulate legislative demands after all was ultimately not a 'victory' of one faction over another but a tactical compromise, as members figured that even ineffective institutional advocacy could at least further consolidate the EAC as a collective counter-hegemonic force. As one activist tells it: 'I have got no faith in the European institutions to deliver those demands, but I think the process of uniting around a manifesto could be quite unifying and constructive for the organization' (Interview Living Rent, 25.09.2018). Another activist emphasises the continued primacy of the domestic level: 'I think we have to work on an institutional level, that is to say try and get some politicians or political institutes to react. But also I think the real power must be in the base. If we have a really powerful movement in the base, then things will change (Interview PAH, 25.09.2018).

These positions are consistent with the EAC's decentralised approach to collective intellectual leadership and underline its closer proximity to Gill's rather than Gramsci's conception, yet they also highlight the continuous difficulties it faces in reconciling the underlying tension between plurality and convergence.

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<sup>1</sup>The initiative was eventually withdrawn after the EU's decision to discount all signature by UK citizens due to Brexit (Housing For All, 2020)

While the coalition strives towards greater strategic cohesion in the long-term its prioritisation of domestic struggles and ambiguous stance on EU politics are insufficient to facilitate this transition thus far and may indeed prevent it from adopting a more prominent leadership role. Not coincidentally, members of the EAC have been most politically impactful ‘at home’. The PAH for instance managed to change Catalonia’s housing law to safeguard indebted homeowners from evictions (PAH, 2017b) and through its close ties to the Barcelona government and Podemos saw many of its demands included into municipal governance (Barcelona en Comú, 2017), as well as far-reaching tenant protection measures across Spain in response to the Covid-crisis (RHJ Editorial Collective, 2020). Similarly, tenant evictions in Scotland were banned during the pandemic following a quickly organised petition campaign by Living Rent (Glasgow Times, 2020). Whether the EAC will eventually become a more singular leader of European housing struggles is difficult to say, since its decentralised approach to counter-hegemony through partial and selective convergence may actually be more effective to face the current conjuncture, given the highly uneven development of the pandemic and economic crisis. Its approach to collective intellectual leadership is thus unlikely to change in the short-term, although the current lack of transnational mobility has forced it to shift its mutual exchange online and may further increase the significance of tactical EU claims-making and coordinated actions in the future.

## **Conclusions**

This article has demonstrated that the EAC has adopted many characteristics of a transnational collective intellectual, as it diffuses a collective counter-hegemonic consciousness among members based on their shared affliction by housing commodification and connects the diverse struggles of homeowners, tenants, and marginalized communities through mutual solidarity and collective campaigns. Through its horizontal and decentralised praxis the coalition manages to directly connect local activist struggles with one another across Europe, thereby gradually cultivating a collective political identity and strategy. On the other hand, this convergence process has been characterised as highly uneven and limited, as members prioritise their own domestic struggles over consolidating a cohesive European project and subsequently contribute to and benefit from the coalition in very different ways. Individual activists in the EAC therefore do not act as transnational organic intellectuals, as they lack a consistent strategy to engage with political and civil society at the EU level. Instead, through mutual exchange and capacity building members are trained to facilitate organic intellectual leadership within their own domestic contexts. On the whole, the EAC differs substantially from Gramsci’s conception of a party-like collective intellectual due to its lack of democratic centralist leadership, yet it is not completely identical

to Gill's notion of a 'postmodern prince' either, since it seeks to develop a common counter-hegemonic subjectivity and strategy based in large parts on class struggle.

By assessing the EAC's capacity to perform the core functions of a collective intellectual, while also demonstrating its transcendence of the concept's ideal-typical forms, this article underlines the value of applying Gramsci's concept to the study of contemporary transnational activist coalitions, yet it also cautions us to conceptualise it in a relatively open fashion to account for the fluid nature of political activism. While this article was only able to examine one transnational coalition, the European anti-austerity movement brought forth various others as well, including 'Blockupy' and the 'Alter Summit', whose ambitions towards 'building democracy from below' (Blockupy, 2014) and creating a 'united movement for a democratic, social, ecological and feminist Europe' (Alter Summit, 2013) speak to their own aspirations for transnational counter-hegemonic leadership. At the same time, the emergence of DiEM25 has shown that it is possible for a more cohesive and centralised activist organisation to facilitate transnational democratic participation and even compete in the European elections (Fanoulis and Guerra, 2020), hinting at the possibility of transnational counter-hegemonic leadership more in line with Gramsci's democratic centralist 'modern prince'. These projects offer a wide selection of empirical cases whose contributions to hegemony struggles merit investigation and whose variety underlines again why we should apply the concept of collective intellectual in a more open fashion to capture their innovative strategies and assess how they differ from what we have seen in the past.

Given the recent mobilisation of a transnational climate movement that is heavily dependent on recognisable leaders (Featherstone, 2019) and the global Coronavirus pandemic which is fuelling new decentralised approaches to solidarity (Interface Journal, 2020), the role of integrative transnational projects is likely to only grow more significant in the future. Scholars studying social movements through a historical materialist lens are therefore well-advised to embrace the concept of transnational collective intellectual, as it can prove very valuable to keep up with the dynamics of contemporary social struggles.



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