HOW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS CAN SAVE DEMOCRACY

Donatella della Porta
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Democratic Innovations from Below
Donatella della Porta
To Alessandro Pizzorno, amico e maestro, in memoria
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This volume is based on the assumption that democratic conceptions and practices need constant innovation. In a moment in which various crises converge in challenging existing institutions, it is all the more important to reflect on what can be done in order to save democracy. Progressive social movements have historically been carriers of democratic deepening, elaborating and prefiguring alternative visions that have often then been constitutionalized in democratic institutions. In a period in which attacks on democracy come from the populist Right, research on attempts to improve democratic institutions through increased participatory and deliberative qualities is most important.

Looking at some of these attempts, with a critical view aimed also at singling out existing limits and conditions for improvement, is my purpose. In this sense, this volume can be seen as building upon and developing some of my previous contributions on related issues: first and foremost in *Can Democracy Be Saved?* (Polity 2013) and *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis* (Polity 2015), but also in *Movement Parties against Austerity* (Polity 2017), *Late Neoliberalism and its Discontents in the Economic Crisis: Comparing Social Movements in the European Periphery* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016) and *Social Movements and Referendums from Below: Direct Democracy in the Neoliberal Crisis* (Policy 2017).

In addressing this task, I rely on a long-lasting research programme on institutional involvement by progressive social movements, carried out
at the Center on Social Movement Studies (Cosmos) that I direct at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence. In particular, on crowd-sourced constitutionalism, referendums from below and movement parties, I have collaborated especially with my colleagues at Cosmos Lorenzo Cini, Andrea Felicetti, Francis O’Connor, Martin Portos, Anna Subirats, Hara Kouki, Lorenzo Mosca, Joseba Fernandez, Daniela Chironi and Jonas Draege, as well as with Colin Crouch, Michael Keating, Ken Roberts and Sidney Tarrow, who have been our most welcome visitors. I am also grateful for the support I received from the Hertie School of Governance and for the conversations I had during some visits to Berlin with colleagues there, among them Helmut Anheier, Christian Joerges and Claus Offe. At Hertie, I also wish to thank Stefanie Jost, who helped me in developing the project for this book. Some important stimuli also came from presentation of parts of my work at seminars and conferences, in particular at the Stein Rokkan Lecture at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research in Mons in 2019. Herbert Reiter has helped me greatly, improving the text through his critical but constructive reading (as well as through his patience and support while I was writing this book).
The Great Recession that hit the world in 2008 worked as a critical juncture, nurturing socioeconomic but also political transformations. Some of the political developments during the crisis have challenged civil, political and social rights, triggering a Great Regression (Geiselberger 2017). Increasing social inequalities have spiralled, with growing mistrust in established institutions fuelling a sense of insecurity and xenophobic reaction (Streeck 2017; Bauman 2017a). While scholars are debating how much inequality democracy can withstand without breaking down (della Porta, Keating et al. 2018), resistance to the backlash is also developing, with citizens mobilizing for social justice and ‘real democracy’ (Meyer and Tarrow 2018).

This volume will focus on some innovative proposals, emerging from progressive social movements, that aim at increasing participation and deliberation in order to save democracy. Exploiting windows of opportunity offered by institutions of direct democracy, social movements have promoted referendums or infiltrated ‘from below’ referendums promoted by other actors in a more top-down fashion (della Porta, O’Connor et al. 2017a). Party systems have been dramatically shaken, with the breakdown of mainstream parties and, in some cases, an unexpected rise of
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movement parties on the left (della Porta, Fernández et al. 2017a), as well as right-wing populist ones. Similarly unexpected success has come to candidates that appeal to social justice and citizens’ participation within old-Left parties, among them Labour in the United Kingdom and the Democratic Party in the United States. In addressing these developments, I suggest that times of crisis are times of rapid change, presenting challenges to existing institutions but also, potentially, opening opportunities for a deepening of democracy.

This chapter will introduce the theoretical discussion on the potential innovative contributions by civic society that have indeed been addressed in democratic theory, as well as in various approaches within social movement studies. While movements have been studied mainly as contentious actors, fighting in the streets to resist or promote political change, social movement studies have also pointed at their capacity to nurture innovative ideas, as movements are constantly engaged in generating and spreading counter-expertise and new forms of knowledge. In doing so, social movements are endowed with specific ontological, epistemological and methodological preferences. This chapter therefore addresses the channels through which social movements’ ideas enter institutions, singling out conditions that favour (or thwart) the development of innovative ideas and plural knowledge. It suggests that, by providing for alternative knowledge, progressive movements might contribute to the deepening of democracy through increasing the plurality of ideas.

Democratic challenges in the Great Recession

In the countries that have been most hit by the financial crisis, particularly in the European periphery, waves of protest have challenged the austerity policies adopted by national governments under heavy pressure from international institutions including the European Union (EU), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These protest waves – known as Indignados or Occupy movements – reflected but also strengthened a legitimacy crisis, caused by what protesters saw as a lack of concern by political institutions for the suffering of their citizens (della Porta 2015b). Protests took different forms in different countries, influenced by the different timing and characteristics of the financial crisis, as well as by the domestic opportunities and threats facing social movements (della Porta, Andretta et al. 2016).

The Great Recession had immediate and often dramatic political effects on what Robert Dahl (2000) dubbed ‘really existing’ democracies, especially on representative institutions. The crisis of institutional trust fuelled calls for constitutional reforms that could help refound the political
community. Really existing democracies have certainly been under stress, but there is also potential for innovation. The multiple (financial, social, political) crises have in particular increased the tensions between those scholars and politicians who have considered citizens as too emotional and ignorant to make sensible choices, stressing the need for technical expertise, and those who have instead blamed an ‘econocracy’ that has taken over political decisions while pretending they are not political (Earle et al. 2017), as well as the idea of an ‘epistocracy’ in which only the most knowledgeable people can vote (Brennan 2016). Siding with a participatory and deliberative vision, I will suggest that what we need is more, rather than less, citizen participation in democracy, and look at some democratic innovations that could contribute to it.

The challenges to representative democracies during the Great Recession bring about a need to reflect on democratic qualities. Democracy has in fact a contested meaning, with different qualities stressed in different understandings of the concept of democracy itself and the evaluation of democratic practices. A concept with a long history, democracy ‘has meant different things to different people at different times and places’ (Dahl 2000, 3). In time, a minimalist definition of democracy as electoral accountability has emerged, and democracy has been identified with the current characteristics of Western polities (Held 2006, 166).

The widespread democratic malaise has, however, challenged the identification of the meaning of democracy with its minimalist vision or currently existing institutions. While electoral accountability has been considered as the main democratic mechanism in the historical evolution of the discourse on really existing democracy, today’s challenges to representative democracy focus attention on other democratic qualities (Rosanvallon 2006). The mainstream conceptions and practices of democracy are in particular contested in the name of other conceptions and practices, which political theorists have addressed under labels such as participatory democracy, strong democracy, discursive democracy, communicative democracy, welfare democracy or associative democracy (see della Porta 2013, ch. 1).

In particular, debates have emerged around two main characteristics often considered as at the basis of really existing democracies: delegation of power, and majoritarian decision-making (even if with different degrees of protection of minorities through constitutionalization of rights and institutional checks and balances). These two elements have in fact been in tension with other democratic qualities that constitute the building blocks of other conceptions of democracy.

First of all, participatory democratic theorists have long pointed towards the importance of creating multiple opportunities for participation by involving citizens beyond elections (Arnstein 1969; Pateman
1970; Barber 1984). While elections are seen as too rare, offer only limited choices, and can be manipulated in various ways, participation is praised as capable of constructing good citizens through empowering interactions. Participation in different forms and in different moments of the democratic process is considered as essential in socializing citizens to visions of the public good, also potentially increasing trust in and support for political institutions. Expanding the semantic meaning of politics, participatory approaches call for democracy not only within parliaments and governments, but also in societal institutions, from workplaces to neighbourhoods, from schools to hospitals, from the local to transnational institutions.

Majoritarian decision-making has also been criticized on several grounds. The power of the majority might jeopardize the rights of minorities, bringing about the need for the constitutionalization of some rights. In addition, there is no logical assumption that grants that the preferences that are more supported in terms of numbers are also the best for the collectivity. Considering these limits of majoritarian decision-making, deliberative normative theories have stressed the importance of creating high-quality discursive spaces, in which participants can exchange reasons and construct shared definitions of the public good (Cohen 1989; Habermas 1996; Elster 1998; Dryzek 2000). In this vision, the more the definition of interests and collective identities emerges, at least in part, through a high-quality discursive process, the more legitimate and efficient the outcome is expected to be. Legitimacy does not arise in fact from the number of pre-existing preferences, but rather from a decision-making process in which citizens can relate to each other, recognizing others and being recognized by them. Decisions are democratic not (so much) when they have the support of the majority, but rather when opinions are formed through a deliberative process in which reasons are freely exchanged. In high-quality discursive spaces, citizens, treated as equal, can understand the reasons of others, assessing them against emerging standards of fairness. In addition, public arenas with high discursive quality should help participants to find better solutions, not only by allowing for carriers of different knowledge and expertise (rather than just self-appointed ‘experts’) to interact, but also by changing the perception of one’s own preferences, making participants less concerned with individual, material interests and more with collective goods. While the extent to which deliberation implies the actual building of consensus or the transformation of preferences is debated (Dryzek 2010), discursive quality requires a recognition of others as equal, with an open-minded assessment of their reasons.

Bridging participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy, some scholars have pointed towards the importance of building enclaves
free from institutional power (Mansbridge 1996) and developing ‘processes of engaged and responsible democratic participation [which] include street demonstrations and sit-ins, musical works and cartoons, as much as parliamentary speeches and letters to the editor’ (Young 2003, 119). In particular, subaltern counter-publics (including workers, women, ethnic minorities and so on) form parallel discursive arenas, where counter-discourses develop, allowing for the formation and redefinition of identities, interests and needs (Fraser 1990).

Participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy challenge some of the main assumptions not only of really existing democracies, but also of technocratic alternatives to them. Supporters of what Colin Crouch (2003) has defined as the ‘post-democratic’ view the democratic malaise as related to too much participation. As neoliberal approaches stigmatize what they see as unreasonably high expectations about state responsibilities, in a rehearsal of the analysis already developed in the 1970s by the so-called trilateral report (Crozier et al. 1975), technocratic solutions are suggested to reduce the ‘overload’ of demands on the state. Building upon arguments that citizens are unable to understand political complexities and formulate sound opinions (e.g. Schumpeter 1943), the assumption is that electoral accountability puts elected representatives under the pressure of selfish individuals. The suggested solutions are therefore to reduce the competences of the state (freeing the market from state control), and to give power to electorally unaccountable institutions. Considering citizens as selfish, but also ignorant and therefore unable to pursue even their own private good, technocratic solutions are based on a fear of the brutal instincts of the masses. Lack of pressure from below is seen as favouring bipartisan agreements and reducing inequalities, movement pressures are considered as fuelling polarization and increasing inequalities (McAdam and Kloos 2016).

Contrasting the assumption that deciding on public issues is too complex a task to be left to the mass of citizens, participatory and deliberative conceptions on which the democratic innovations I am going to analyse are based trust citizens, their knowledge and their reasons. Public debates are considered as formative and, therefore, participation produces better citizens as ‘people may become more competent and responsible if they are allowed to participate in public deliberation and actual decision-making’ (Setälä 2009, 3). Direct forms of democracy might stimulate citizens by empowering them, increasing their sense of civic duty as well as their political efficacy (Smith and Tolbert 2004): they provide for ‘education in democratic citizenship’ (Dyck 2009, 540). While, in minimalist conceptions of democracy, ideas, interests, preferences and/or identities are assumed to develop outside of the democratic process, participatory and deliberative conceptions emphasize instead the capacity of democratic
arenas to stimulate the development of inclusive collective identities. As the competence of experts is challenged by processes of politicization of science (della Porta, Keating et al. 2018), econocracy is not a solution to democratic stress; instead, it risks reducing not only the legitimacy of decision-makers but also the efficacy of their decisions. It does not help individuals to learn to be good citizens, but instead pushes them to the margins and makes them more responsive to populist leaders.

Even within really existing democracies, the suggestion that participation and deliberation must (at least) supplement representative and majoritarian institutions has been implemented through various democratic innovations (Barber 1984; Fishkin 1997). In their concrete evolution, existing democratic states and societies have mitigated the ideal-typical principles of representative democracy, mixing them with others that are linked to different conceptions of democracy (della Porta 2013). In implicit recognition of the limits of delegation and majoritarian decision-making, the really existing democracies have combined institutions privileging different democratic qualities. Participatory conceptions have penetrated the democratic state through reforms that have introduced channels of citizen participation in schools, in factories and in neighbourhoods, but also through the political recognition of movement organizations and of the ‘right to dissent’. Referendums, once considered as a residual vestige of direct democratic procedures, are increasingly used, as are institutions in which the principle of delegation is limited, including in institutions based on representatives chosen by lot, as well as consensual decision-making. Democratic innovations – from participatory budgeting to deliberative mini-publics (Font et al. 2014) – have spread attempts to restore citizens’ trust in democracy, as well as bringing in their expertise and knowledge.

As I have suggested elsewhere (della Porta 2013), the legitimation of really existing democracies required certain specific conditions that are less and less present nowadays. First of all, mass political parties allowed for linking delegation with some form of participation by citizens, contributing towards making representatives accountable in a long-term perspective (Pizzorno 1993). In addition, the majoritarian assumption needed a nation state, defining the border of the demos in whose name (and interest) decisions were made. Finally, even though representative democracy did not call for social equality, it still relied upon the assumption that political equality would reduce social inequality, which otherwise risks challenging the very principle of free access to political rights. The representative form of democracy developed, that is, in contexts characterized by party democracies, national sovereignty and well-established welfare states.

The weakening of political parties, nation states and welfare pro-
visions has altered the functioning of representative democracies, but it may also have produced some opportunities for experimenting with other conceptions of democracies. In particular, it stresses the importance of involving citizens in the democratic process. As Pierre Rosanvallon (2006, 12–18) has suggested, in the evolution of democracy a circuit of oversight anchored outside of state institutions has developed, along with the institutions of electoral accountability. Growing societal powers of sanction and prevention have been reflected in an increasing organization of distrust.

In sum, the democratic innovations analysed here are justified by the belief that, in times of economic, social and political crises, more rather than less citizens’ participation is needed. As a democratic malaise is fuelled by an increasingly elitist development within really existing democracies – particularly in their post-democratic version – what we need to restore democratic legitimacy and efficacy (on the input and the output side) is more involvement of citizens. Participation is not only essential to restoring trust in institutions, but is also a way to develop good citizenship. Crises require, and at the same time open opportunities for, change. Prefiguration of democratic participation is therefore even more important in and outside public institutions.

The backlash against democracy that is fuelled by right-wing populism cannot be addressed by declaring the people unfit for civic life and calling for technocratic solutions. Rather, an ‘age of mistrust’ requires an institutional adaptation that can transform challenges into resources. Social movements (along with judges and independent authorities), as instruments of external control and permanent contestation, act in what Pierre Rosanvallon (2006, 20) calls counter-democracy – that is, a set of formal and informal checks and balances, as well as counterpowers, that make sure that ‘society has a voice, that collective sentiments can be articulated, that judgments of the government can be formulated, and that demands can be issued’.

Against this background, as I am going to argue in the next section of this introduction, progressive social movements are to be considered as promoters of democratic innovations that can improve participation and deliberative qualities. In this direction, the volume focuses on the involvement of progressive social movements in the ideation and implementation of innovations in institutional politics, addressing their potential but also the limitations on their capacity to improve democracy. As with political parties or interest groups, so too social movements may have different attitudes towards democracy, in some cases supporting and in others challenging democratic institutions. In a moment in which concerns are increasing regarding the potential disruption of a Great Regression led by xenophobic movements and parties, I address instead the potential for
alternative politics and policy that progressive social movements might contribute in the direction of a deepening of democracy.

Bridging social movement studies and democratic theory, I analyse some democratic innovations promoted by progressive social movements, especially in the direction of participatory and deliberative practices. Focusing on recent cases, the analysis will thus highlight the role that progressive social movements can play in times that are characterized by crises, but also by transformation.

Progressive social movements as sites for innovation

While social movements have been studied especially as contentious actors, mainly taking to the streets to resist or promote political changes, some research has pointed towards their innovative capacity in terms of nurturing and spreading new ideas – about, among other things, democratic institutions. Traditionally considered as actors ‘at the gate’ of the institutional system, social movements instead enter institutional arenas in various forms and through various channels.

Social movements have been considered as important actors in terms of their capacity to ‘take the floor’, building public spheres and participating in them. Clearly, not all social movements promoted democracy: some movements (particularly right-wing movements) have openly declared themselves anti-democratic; others (including left-wing movements) have produced authoritarian turns. There is, however, as Charles Tilly (2004, 125) has pointed out:

> a wide correspondence between democratisation and social movements. The roots of social movements are found in the partial democratisation that moved British subjects and the North-American colonies against those that governed them in the 18th century. Throughout the nineteenth century, social movements generally blossomed and developed wherever further democratisation took place, decreasing when authoritarian regimes impeded democracy. This path continued during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; the maps of the development of institutions and social movements widely overlap.

If democratization favoured social movements, the majority of these supported the democratic reforms that promoted their development.

In this volume, I am primarily concerned with what we might call progressive social movements. Even though progress is a contested term (Allen 2016), I would retain it to define actors that struggle for an inclusive vision of a just society and for deepening democracy. In doing
so, I do consider that progress has a dialectical nature. It has been used to stress human emancipation as opposed to social domination, but also criticized as justifying domination by implying ‘a universalist teleological form of thinking according to which some societies or groups have reached that telos earlier than others and thus have the authority, and maybe even the mission, to pull the less progressed people out of their “self-incurred immaturity” into the light of reason and freedom, possibly even overcoming their ignorant or indolent reluctance by force’ (Forst 2019, 1).

While acknowledging the tension between a normative meaning and its historical use, I follow Forst’s call for the development of a de-reified, non-teleological, non-dominating and emancipatory conception of progress. As he notes, differentiating between a technological vision of progress and moral–political progress:

the decisive question raised by the concept of moral–political progress remains how the power to define such progress and the paths leading to it is structured. . . . Technological progress cannot count as social progress in life conditions without social evaluations of what it is good for, who benefits from it, and what costs it generates. Nor can true social progress as moral–political progress exist where the changes in question are enforced and experienced as colonization. Technological progress must be socially accepted, and socially accepted progress is progress which is determined and brought about by the members of the society in question. (Forst 2019, 1)

In this direction, I define as progressive those social movements that share with the so-called left-libertarian movement family of the past a combined attention to social justice and positive freedom (della Porta and Rucht 1996). Progress is thus understood as:

the liberation (or ‘emancipation’) of collectivities (for example: citizens, classes, nations, minorities, income categories, even mankind), be it the liberation from want, ignorance, exploitative relations, or the freedom of such collectives to govern themselves autonomously, that is, without being dependent upon or controlled by others. Furthermore, the freedom that results from liberation applies equally to all, with equality serving as a criterion to make sure that liberation does not in fact become a mere privilege of particular social categories. (Offe 2011, 79-80)

As Forst noted (2019), ‘If our critique of false notions of progress is situated and not merely abstract and empty, we also argue for progress, both in theory and in practice, because overcoming false progress is true progress. Being against progress, because one is motivated by an account of non-domination or emancipation, is also to be for it.’