

GULBENKIAN IDEAS

# Let's talk about the Future of the New Social Movements

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**FUTURE FORUM**

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## **New social movements: a definition**

Once seen as responses to problems in the functioning of society, social movements are more and more considered as instead normal actors in democracies. Especially since the 1970s, research in this areas pointed at their important role in socializing to various forms of social and political participation. *New social movement* have been considered as main actors of innovation. Opening the scientific debate on the emergence of new conflicts, the French sociologist Alain Touraine has seen social movements as constituting the opposition to dominant powers within different types of societies. Considering the 'old' social movements (mainly the labour movement) as co-opted and the class conflict as pacified, he defined 'new' social movements as struggling for control in the emerging *programmed* societies, in which knowledge is especially relevant. Within a resonant approach, the Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci looked at new social movements as producers of alternative norms in contemporary societies that he defined as increasingly investing in the creation of individual autonomous centres of action, but also extending control over the very motives for human action. In this perspective, rather than limiting themselves to seeking material gains, new social movements promote 'other codes' in order to resist the intrusion of the state and of the market in the everyday life of the citizens. Conflicts have therefore been seen as oriented toward the production of meanings, the circulation of information, the use of scientific knowledge, the creation of cultural models that affect individual and collective identities.

At the same time, research on political participation in Western democracy pointed at the expansion of unconventional, but peaceful, forms through which citizens put forward their claims. In what have been dubbed as 'social movement society', these actors have been defined as part and parcel of the political process. Critical citizens have been then considered as important resources for the development of democracy. American scholars such as the historian Charles Tilly and the political scientist Sidney Tarrow have in fact looked at the interactions between contentious politics and the endowment of those citizens' rights that have been fundamental for the legitimation of democratic regimes. As political parties or interest groups, also social movements

have different attitudes towards democracy, in some cases supporting and in others challenging democratic institutions. While clearly not all social movements promote democracy, there has been however a reciprocal relations between democratic institutions and social movements. If democratisation favoured social movements, the majority of these supported the democratic reforms that promoted their development. In particular, the reflections on new social movements addresses progressive social movements as characterized by a combined attention to social justice and positive freedom and an orientation to the empowerment of underprivileged groups and their inclusion in society and politics.

Social science research has in general stressed that, as highly reflexive actors, far from limiting themselves to presenting demands to decision-makers, social movements address what the German sociologist Claus Offe has called a meta-political critique to representative institution in the name of participatory democracy. At least since the 1960s, new social movements have criticized delegation as well as oligarchic and centralized power, and instead supported forms of direct participation and grassroots, horizontal, egalitarian organizational models. With an emphasis on direct democracy and self-organization, new social movement organizations have valued the prefigurative role of participation as a “school of democracy.” Triggered by dissatisfaction with centralized and bureaucratic representative democracy, since the 1970s, new social movements’ have called for various forms of participation in decision-making, spreading through a sort of ‘contagion from below’. The mainstream conceptions and practices of democracy have been in particular contested in the name of other conceptions and practices, which political theorists have addressed through concepts such as participatory democracy, strong democracy, discursive democracy, communicative democracy, welfare democracy or associative democracy.

Participation is also a value in conceptions of deliberative democracy that acquired support in new social movements. Although representative procedural democracy is mainly based on principles of delegation and majority vote, democratic theorists have always balanced such principles with respect for high-quality debate oriented toward the public good. With some different emphasis, in normative political theory, deliberative democracy refers to decisional processes in which, under conditions of equality, inclusiveness, and transparency, a communicative process based on reason (the strength of the best argument) is able to transform individual preferences, leading to decisions oriented to the public good. In the conception of deliberative democracy, particular attention is given to the discursive quality of democracy with an emphasis on the transformation of preferences, the orientation to the public good, the use of arguments, and the development of consensus.

While representative democracy is based upon the aggregation (through vote or negotiation) of exogenously generated preferences, deliberative democracy is defined as oriented to preference (trans)formation. In deliberative processes, initial preferences are expected to be transformed during a confrontation with the points of view of others in order to reach a common understanding of the public good. This requires the deliberative process to take place under conditions of plurality of values, where people have different perspectives but face common problems.

In particular, as postulated by Jurgen Habermas, deliberation should be facilitated by horizontal flows of communication, multiple contributors to discussion, wide opportunities for interactivity, confrontation on the basis of rational argumentation, and an attitude of reciprocal listening.

In this perspective, democracy develops outside of public institutions in voluntary groups and social movement organizations. New social movements have often aimed at achieving more greater transparency and social justice, but also to reconstituting social relations by “democratising democracy”. Sometimes explicitly but more often not, many social movement organizations have adopted deliberative norms, considering that, given a complex reality, no easy solution is at hand or can be derived from big ideologies. The value of discussion among “free and equal” citizens is mirrored in the positive emphasis on diversity and inclusion, but also in the attention paid to the development of structured arenas for the exchange of ideas, with the experimentation with some rules that should allow for horizontal flows of communication and reciprocal listening. In particular, consensus is increasingly mentioned as a general value as well as an organizational principle in internal decision-making.

### **New social movements in the new millennium**

In order to assess the future of new social movements, it is important to evaluate their main developments in four waves of protests that have developed at the turn of the millennium. In the last few decades, face to a variety of social and political crises, social movements have experimented with as well as proposed alternative visions of democracy.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the Global Justice Movement has been interpreted as a sign of globalization of contentious politics. As decisions moved at the international level, new social movements seemed to adapt, targeting international organizations. Acting globally, various transnational campaigns were seen as reflecting but also fueling the spreading of cosmopolitan values. The Global Justice Movement has seen the convergence of various streams of progressive movements in broad and fluid networks, calling for justice against increasing inequalities as well as for participatory and deliberative forms of democracy. Global and macroregional forums represented arenas for encounters for thousands of groups and tens of thousands of activists, massive demonstrations took citizens back to the streets in contestation of the summits of international organizations. This was all the more the case in Europe where, since 2002, periodic encounters of the European Social Forums offered an important public space for the reflection on social problems and their potential solutions.

About a decade later, a new transnational cycle of protests developed, still targeting increasing inequalities and calling for another democracy. Antiausterity protest waves have been most visible in Spain, Greece, and the United States in 2011, and later on in Turkey and Brazil, up to the French Nuit Debut, were considered as belonging to a common wave of protests. While all of them were triggered by a global financial crisis,

they seemed however to be rooted at the national level, mainly targeting domestic institutions. In the geographical areas that have been most hit by the economic recession, particularly in the European periphery, massive waves of protest have challenged the austerity policies adopted by national governments under pressure from international institutions including the European Union (EU) European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These protest waves – known as *Indignados* or Occupy movements – reflected but also strengthened a political crisis, triggered by discontent with the management of the so-called Great Recession. Protests took different forms in different countries, influenced by the different timing and characteristics of the financial crisis as well as by domestic opportunities and threats for social movements. Involving at times massive participation by the citizens, the *acampadas* (protest camps) represented an innovative form of, at the same time, organization and action as in the occupied squares activists prefigured different forms of relations, aiming at participation and deliberation. With their emphasis on consensus, the *acampadas* privileged the participation of the lay persons – the citizens, the members of the community – mobilized as individuals rather than members of associations of various types, and building on their personal experience and knowledge.

Towards the end of the years 2010s, the discontent with austerity measure still mobilizes strong wave of protests with various intensity in various countries, addressing the widespread malaise with the functioning of political institutions. While keeping attention on social justice, new social movements singled out some of the specific consequences of social inequalities in terms of violence on women, the peripheral economies, global warming, precarious youth, self-determination. Several social movements quickly spread at international level, through global days of action pointing at the need to develop a global view of the problems and global solutions to them. Focusing on violence against women understood in a broad sense and linked to social conditions, the Ni Una Menos collectives spread from Latin America to Southern Europe, mobilizing a new generation of young feminists. At the same time, the Fridays for Future protests grew fast and massive all over the globe, bridging the contentious politics against climate change of the youngest generations with the experiences of those already active. Fluid networks connected groups active on the territory, often mobilizing citizens for the first time. What is more, the Autumn of 2019 surprised the mass media and the public opinion with the convergence in time but spread in space of massive waves of protest against increasing inequalities as well as the corruption of the political and economic elites. Notwithstanding the weakness of direct organizational connections among protestors in different countries, the frequent expression of reciprocal solidarity triggered then a new reflection on transnationalization through learning and emulation at the distance. The struggles against extreme inequalities and corrupt elites resonated with the anti-austerity protests of the beginning of the decade, but within more global waves. Protests, including so-called “millions’ marches” and civil disobedience, erupted contemporaneously in Lebanon and Iraq, Chile and Ecuador, Barcelona and London, with protestors often referring to each other, through the showing of each other banners and flags.

More recently, the pandemic has brought about many challenges for the activists of social movements as measure to contain contagion reduced freedom of movement as well as constraining the very use of public spaces. Nevertheless, new social movements did mobilize, as they often do in moments of high emergency, such as (more or less natural) calamities and war, as it happened during the pandemic. Confirming that in times of deep crisis can (even if not automatically) in fact generate the invention of alternative forms of protest, during the Covid 19 pandemic, through innovative forms, protests put pressure on those in government and control their actions. So, new technologies have allowed for online protests – including, but not limited to, e-petitions that have multiplied in this period. Car marches have been called for citizens' rights; workers have claimed more security through flashmobs, racism has been denounced through sit-ins with protestors sitting at a safe distance one from the other, public transport drivers have refused to monitor tickets. All over Europe, collective messages of contestation or solidarity were sent from balconies and windows. Faced with the glaring need for radical and complex transformation, social movements also acted in various ways. Through collective organizing, new social movements have created and recreated social ties: they built upon existing networks but also, in action, they connect and multiply them. In order to provide much needed help, social movement organizations have formed mutual support groups, promoting direct social action. In this way, they produced resilience through increasing solidarity.

Moreover, during the pandemic, social movements acted as channels for the elaboration of proposals for change. They made use of alternative specialist knowledge but also bridged this with a practical knowledge arising from the direct experiences of citizens. The multiplication of public spaces allowed for cross-fertilization, contrasting the over-specialization of academic knowledge and facilitating the connection between abstract knowledge and concrete practices. This cross-fertilization also allowed to discursively connect the various crises – stressing the linkages between the spread and lethality of the corona virus and climate change, wars, violence against women, the expropriations of rights (first of all the right to health).

### **Social movements and institutional changes**

In the past, as in the present new social movements have been at times capable of influencing and transforming institutions. Beside mobilizing the public opinion, their organizations and activists have interacted with public institutions at various territorial levels. In many cases, especially but not only at the local level, they collaborate with public institutions, both on specific problems and in broader campaigns. Not limiting themselves to put pressure from the outside, they have entered institutions by promoting innovative forms of participation through direct democracy. Besides engaging in internal practices of democratic innovation, social movements have been also carriers of innovation in institutions, performing this role in a variety of ways and with different results.

New social movements have often obtained decentralization of political power, channels of consultation of citizens on particular decisions; appeals procedures against decisions of the public administration; possibility to be allowed to testify before representative institutions and the judiciary, to be listened to as counter-experts, to receive legal recognition and material incentives. Repertoires of collective action, which were once stigmatized and dealt with as public order problems, have slowly become legal and legitimate while direct democracy has been developed as a supplementary channel of access to those opened within representative democracy. Social movements also contribute to the creation of new arenas for the development of public policy, such as expert commissions or specific administrative and political branches, such as state ministries or local bureaus on women's and ecological issues in many countries. At international organizations, as in the European Union, movement activists have been co-opted by specific public bodies as members of their staff and opportunities for conflictual cooperation develop within regulatory agencies through consultation, to incorporation in committees, to delegation of power. These institutions mediate social movement claims and even ally themselves with movement activists they might have frequent contacts with.

Some of the innovative ideas about democracy promoted by old and new social movements have been at the bases of institutional experiments that were indeed inspired by the same principles of participation and deliberation. In their concrete evolution, existing democratic states and societies have mitigated the ideal-typical principles of representative democracy, mixing them with other principles that are linked to alternative conceptions of democracy. In implicit recognition of the limits of delegation and majoritarian decision-making, what Robert Dahl dubbed "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 principles of constrained delegation, including representatives chosen by lot, as well as consensual decision making.

Democratic innovations have spread attempts to restore citizens' trust in democracy as well as bringing in their expertise and knowledge. In recent times, experiments with different forms of democracy than the representative ones have included the creation of arenas open to the participation of normal citizens in public debates on relevant (and often divisive) issues. Especially at the local level, there have been various attempts at increasing the participation of citizens, through the creation of high-quality communicative arenas. In order to fight social inequality, citizens are in fact invited to decide about the distribution of some public funds through a quite structured process of involvement in assemblies and committees. The objectives of these institutions include effective problem-solving and equitable solutions as well as broad, deep, and sustained participation. The participatory budget has been credited with creating a positive context for association, fostering greater activism, networking associations, and working from a citywide orientation. Even though the

intensity of participation, its duration and influence, varies greatly between the various participatory devices, they all aim at overcoming the limits of a merely representative conception of democracy. The aim of improving managerial capacities, through greater transparency and the circulation of information, is linked with the transformation of social relations, by reconstructing social ties, fostering solidarity and eventually 'democratising democracy'. Such instruments have been analysed as improving the capacity to address problems created by local opposition to the construction of big infrastructure.

Developing in times of instability and challenges, the interrelated waves of protest that I have just mentioned, also affected institutions. The crisis of institutional trust fuelled calls for constitutional reforms that could help refounding the political community. Exploiting windows of opportunity offered by institutions of direct democracy, social movements have promoted referendums or infiltrated 'from below' referendums that had been promoted by other actors in more top-down fashion. Party systems were dramatically shaken, with the breakdown of mainstream parties and, in some cases, an unexpected rise of left-wing movement parties on the left, as well as right-wing populist ones. Similarly, unexpected success had candidates that appeal to social justice and citizens' participation within old-Left parties, among which Labour in the United Kingdom or the Democratic Party in the United States. Electoral earthquakes were noticed at different territorial levels.

### **Social movements in the crisis**

In sum, in the new millennium the widespread democratic malaise has challenged the identification of the meaning of democracy with its minimalistic vision of the actually existing institutions. While electoral accountability has been considered as the main democratic mechanisms in the historical evolution of the discourse on really existing democracy, today's challenges to representative democracy focus attention to other democratic qualities.

In the most dramatic way, the crisis demonstrates that deep changes from politics to the economy, from society to culture are needed in order to break with the problematic conditions that have created deep crises. If in normal times, social movements grow with the opportunities for gradual transformation, in times of deep crisis movements are spread instead by the perception of a drastic and deep threat, contributing to cognitive openings. While everyday life changes drastically, spaces for reflection about a future that cannot be thought as in continuity with the past also open up. The pandemic crisis also opens up opportunities for change by making evident the need for public responsibility and civic sense, for rules and solidarity. If crises have the immediate effect of concentrating power, up to and including its militarization, they however demonstrate the incapacity of governments to act merely through force. The need for sharing and widespread support in order to address the pandemic might bring with it the recognition of the positive potential of civil society mobilization. What is more, crises show the value of fundamental public goods and their complex management through institutional networks but also through



the participation of the citizens, the workers, the users. In many mobilizations during the pandemic, the value of a universal system of public health emerged in fact as not only just, but also vital.

In sum, new social movements have engaged and can be expected in the future to engage in democratic innovation. They experiment with new ideas in their internal life, prefiguring alternative forms of democratic politics and they spread these ideas within institutions. They not only transform democratic states through struggles for policy changes, but also express a fundamental critique of conventional politics, thus addressing meta-political issues and experimenting with participatory and deliberative ideas. Historically, progressive social movements have been the carriers of participatory and deliberative democratic qualities, calling for innovation in democratic institutions. In these struggles, they have produced innovative ideas and alternative knowledge. This has been and is more important in times of crises in which the old institutions appear as unable to address. Rather than gradual changes, these critical junctures require new ideas, even new paradigms, that new social movements as innovative actors have helped developing and implementing.

The outcomes of the intervention by new social movements is, however, open. As past experiences reminds us, while developing normative ideals, new social movements show unequal capacity to implement them. In fact, activists are often most self-critical in assessing previous mistakes and try to learn from them. Especially, in order to achieve their proposals, new social movements interact with institutions, that they criticize but also strongly need. Democratic deepening is therefore an always unfinished aim, that requires the collaboration of various players in more and more complex arenas.



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In 2011, she was awarded the Mattei Dogan Prize for distinguished achievements in the field of political sociology; in 2021, she received the Research Awards of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung in recognition of her lifetime's research activities. She is Honorary Doctor of the universities of Lausanne, Bucharest, Goteborg, Jyvaskyla and the University of Peloponnese.

She is the author or editor of 90 books, 150 journal articles and 150 contributions in edited volumes. Among her very recent publications are: *Social Movements: An introduction*, 3rd edition (Blackwell, 2020); *Can Social Movements Save Democracy?* (Polity, 2020); *Die schoene neue Demokratie. Ueber das potentiale soziale Bewegungen* (Campus Verlag, 2020), with Lorenzo Cini and Cesar Guzman; *Contesting Higher Education* (Bristol University Press, 2020), with Pietro Castelli Gattinara, Andrea Felicetti, Konstantinos Eleftheriadis; *Discursive Turns and Critical Junctures*, Oxford University Press, 2020); *Legacies and Memories in Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2018); *Sessantotto. Passato e presente dell'anno ribelle* (Fertrinelli, 2018); *Contentious moves* (Palgrave 2017); *Global Diffusion of Protest* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017); *Late Neoliberalism and its Discontents* (Palgrave, 2017); *Movement Parties in Times of Austerity* (Polity 2017); *Where did the Revolution go?* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); *Social Movements in Times of Austerity* (Polity 2015); *Methodological practices in social movement research* (Oxford University Press, 2014); *Spreading Protest* (ECPR Press 2014, with Alice Mattoni); *Participatory Democracy in Southern Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014, with Joan Font and Yves Sintomer); *Mobilizing for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2014); *Can Democracy be Saved?*, Polity Press, 2013; *Clandestine Political Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2013 (with D. Snow, B. Klandermans and D. McAdam (eds.)); *Blackwell Encyclopedia on Social and Political Movements*, Blackwell, 2013; *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right* (with M. Caiani and C. Wagemann), Oxford University Press, 2012; *Meeting Democracy* (ed. With D. Rucht), Cambridge University Press, 2012; *The Hidden Order of Corruption* (with A. Vannucci), Ashgate 2012.

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