1   Power and democracy in social movements: an introduction

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1.1   The problem

When we talk about democracy, we are talking about power. Etymologically, the term recalls the power (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*). Generally speaking, democracy is a particular way to exercise and control power. The ultimate locus of power is the people as the sovereign. Because, at least in complex societies, the people cannot exercise power directly and on a daily basis, power is delegated by a general and recurring vote to those who are supposed to act on behalf of and in the interest of the people. As a safeguard, the power of the rulers should be limited, divided among multiple institutions and kept under control.

While this general normative concept of democracy is widely acknowledged, there is a wide range of more specific normative prescriptions for a 'good' or 'workable' democracy, as well as descriptions of existing democracies. Scholars in the pluralist tradition have emphasized that existing democracies, with their multiple interests and fragmented powers, come relatively close to the democratic ideal. According to one variant, liberal democracies can be described as polyarchies based on the separation of the various sources and carriers of power, and therefore the relative autonomy of *political* power (Dahl 1971). Other scholars have pointed to the concentration of power in the hands of a relatively small group of economic and/or political elites (Hunter 1953; Mills 1956; Bachrach and Baratz 1970). This perception has held both for nation-states and at the local level. As for the latter, social science literature on community power written in the 1950s and 1960s focused mainly on the impact of *economic* power on politics and policies. More recently, the *cultural* dimension of power as expressed in hegemonic discourses has become a subject of much reflection, often linking Gramsci and Foucault to Bourdieu's research on cultural capital. The most recent focus in political theory on the discursive quality of democratic decision-making has allowed discussion of the combination of 'hard' and 'soft' forms of power that might intervene in democratic communication and deliberation.

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Although occasionally referring to these debates (for example, Lipsky's (1968) work on urban conflicts, which builds upon analyses of community power), social movement studies have generally been quite oblivious to the issue of power. When power is mentioned, it is mainly conceptualized as being in the hands of the institutions that movements target as counter-powers (or challengers or counter-hegemonic actors). In many cases, social movements are described as groups that, unlike political parties, do not want to seize power but rather to influence powerholders, pressuring them to legitimize and potentially revise their decisions (Habermas 1996). The movements themselves, however, are often idealized as being open, participatory and decentralized, and therefore relatively free from considerations and problems of internal power.

Not by chance, Sidney Tarrow's highly influential *Power in Movement* (1998) addresses the role played by social movements and power struggles in the public arena but does not refer to aspects of power *within* social movements. In addition, the only two entries on 'power' in the index of the *Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004) refer to state powers as well as sets of institutional opponents and allies, but remain silent on power structures in movements. If this latter topic is dealt with at all, it is mainly in the context of movement leadership (Barker, Johnson and Lavalette 2001; Morris and Staggenborg 2004), focusing on the formal aspects and resources of the larger and more structured movement organizations. Yet what is actually happening 'on the ground' is rarely studied – namely, what the internal and mostly unspectacular life of social movements looks like, what movement groups do in their routine meetings, what they discuss and how, and the ways in which they take decisions. At best, social movement scholars point to internal struggles for and problems of power with regard to authoritarian movements.

With a few laudable exceptions, a large gap remains in the study of how power operates inside social movements, as well as the various attempts at controlling it. This gap is in part linked to another we have addressed in other parts of our research: social movement studies have devoted little attention to democracy within social movements themselves (but see Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002; Leach 2006; della Porta 2009a, 2009b). Social movements have been considered in the street, as actors that protest, not so much as arenas for discussion: social movements' protest has been focused upon, not social movement meetings. In social movement studies, as in other social science fields of interest, meetings have been only rarely addressed as an object of research (Haug 2010). This is even more surprising given that many social movement organizations are reflexive actors that often explicitly address the issue of democracy. The

'progressive' movements in particular – including the global justice movements – not only criticize representative democracies and advocate participatory and direct democratic visions, but also aim to prefigure various models of democracy within their own organizations.[1]

1.1.1 Our interest and approach

There are obvious reasons for this gap in our knowledge about the internal life of social movements. First, for many people the internal processes of movements are not worth studying in much detail. Why should one care about all the chats, discussions and conflicts that presumably occur in similar ways in any social group, familiar to all of us from personal experience? Isn't the one and only aspect that really matters the outcome of these internal processes, especially the public appearances of these movements and their ultimate impact on society and politics? Second, many social movement groups do not welcome 'detached' observers within their meetings, or simply close their doors because they want to meet privately; they may distrust the value of scientific observation, or fear undercover agents sent by control agencies. Third, even when access is granted, participant observation is very time-consuming, particularly given that the researcher has no influence on the agenda but must wait and see what happens. Therefore, researchers generally prefer other methods, which allow data to be collected more proactively and economically. Finally, the constant stream of words, gestures and other activities occurring in real-time group processes produces an abundance of potentially usable data that are at the same time very difficult to capture and analyse in an intersubjectively controllable way. Even when group sessions can be recorded, it remains time-consuming as the researcher must listen repeatedly to the recording and probably even transcribe it before analysing this raw material.

Yet, for the researchers involved in the project on which this volume draws, the 'ordinary' life of social movements is worth an additional research effort. Although social movement activists do protest in the street, most of their political life is spent in meetings: they act a lot, but they talk even more. The *theoretical* interest comes from the largely unanswered question of whether and under what circumstances social movement groups, particularly those embracing democratic principles of either a liberal-representative or a more participatory type, are able to minimize

[1] There are remarkable exceptions. For example, many democratically oriented people admire Greenpeace for its brave activities without knowing of its rigid hierarchical, though not non-democratic, structure (Rucht 1995a).

inequality and the abuse of power among themselves. We are especially curious about the possibility of a deliberative praxis that, ideally, allows a group to reach a consensus whatever the underlying conflict may be. These are aspects that, beyond abstract theories, are hardly theorized at the level of concrete interactions in small groups. The *normative* interest stems, on the one hand, from our appreciation of democratic values and belief in the necessity of peaceful, respectful, participatory and deliberative conflict resolution and, on the other hand, from our experience of how difficult these aims are to achieve even at the level of small groups, let alone in society at large.

Our interest in *empirical analysis* is driven by the fact that, so far, little systematic research has been done in the area under study and, second, no widely established and recognized research instruments are available to investigate power, discourse and decision-making at the level of social movement groups. While some observers claim that all existing social groups are inherently characterized by power structures that make strict equality and deliberation impossible, others challenge this assumption, pointing, for instance, to the practices of political grassroots groups (Epstein 1991) or religious congregations such as the Quakers (Leach 1998).

We chose to study aspects of power and democracy in the global justice movements because we believe that their internal practices are an ideal research ground for our purpose. While it is obvious that many other groups – for example, right-wing extremists – do not value internal democracy, most GJM groups do. These groups tend to be extremely sensitive to violations of norms of equality and democracy not only in society at large, and indeed around the globe, but also within their own ranks. What does that mean in practice? And how could this practice be studied in accordance with basic methodological standards of the social sciences?

In this volume, we first aim to fill a gap in social movement studies by looking at the interplay of power and democracy within groups and organizations of the global justice movements. In addition, we will address the most recent developments in both the normative and the empirical social science literature on power and democracy, focusing on the ways in which hard and soft forms of power intervene in the communicative arenas that social movements build and inhabit. Even as we recognize broad differences within social movements with reference to their approach to power, as well as the frequent failures of their attempts at constructing power-free spaces, we believe that research on social movements is especially interesting for mapping and investigating those attempts. Small groups with a high normative commitment to specific conceptions of democracy provide an ideal space for experimenting with various ways to minimize power or, at least, keep it under control.

1.1.2 Efforts and problems in controlling internal power

Social movements differ widely in their attitudes towards democracy at large and in their internal practices of deliberation and democratic decision-making. Broadly speaking, they fall into two categories. On the one hand, there are movements that disregard and sometimes even oppose democratic values and practices. Naturally, these movements tend towards hierarchical structures and firm, even authoritative leadership, as exemplified in many right-wing extremist and fundamentalist religious movements. For them, the use of power in a top-down direction is an asset rather than a problem. Power is supposed to create internal unity, solve intragroup conflicts and drive outwardly oriented collective action.

On the other hand, in both past and present there exists a wide range of movements that embrace democratic values in principle. Consequently, they also seek to establish, at least to some degree, transparent and democratic methods of internal organization and communication. To these movements, power, unless under strict democratic control, is a nuisance: 'Organizational hierarchies and differences in the social power and material resources that participants bring to a group are familiar sources of problems for social movements' (Ferree, Sperling and Risman 2005: 137).

One problematic aspect is the possibility that even formal democratic rules, when applied by clever individuals or subgroups, can be become a tool of manipulation within a group. For example, an elected chair may present selected options among which group members are supposed to choose, thus strongly manipulating the outcome. Another tactic is to move potentially divisive problems to the end of a long agenda, when most participants are already exhausted and ready to agree on positions that would otherwise be subject to critical examination. In addition, experienced chairs or moderators may use bylaws to marginalize dissenting voices.

A second and more problematic aspect is the implementation of informal power structures alongside, or even in place of, formal rules. Quite often, such informal power serves to maintain the subtle but firm leadership of one or several individuals in a group, to domesticate dissenters, to ignore unwanted remarks and so on. Feminists, in particular, have pointed to such informal practices of power exerted by men in mixed groups at the cost of female members (Doerr 2007). Even in groups that explicitly denied wanting or having leaders, manifest power structures could be observed, though they were constantly downplayed by rhetorical and symbolic means. Jo Freeman (1974), for example, has pointed to the 'tyranny of structurelessness', highlighting the influence of subtle power structures in feminist consciousness-raising groups. In addition, research in two local citizen groups in Germany has shown that these are marked by

an informal hierarchy (Schenk 1982). In a similar vein, Wolfgang Sofsky
and Rainer Paris (1991: esp. 54–9; 85–96), by observing meetings of a
formally horizontal and collectively managed firm that allegedly was run
'without a boss', observed the existence of (personalized) authority.

One may argue that in a firm, even one based on collective ownership
and the rejection of formal hierarchy, a structure of power is almost
inevitable because of the pressure for economic survival. Yet no such
pressure exists for most social movement groups in which the functional
need for an internal power structure may appear much weaker, if it exists
at all. Therefore, such groups may not only highly value but can also
'afford' practices of internal democracy. In fact, many employ such prac-
tices, although in different forms and to different degrees.

For some movement groups that embrace democratic values in princi-
ple, democratic practices must be limited, particularly when these seem to
be in conflict with organizational efficacy.[2] Accordingly, the right balance
must be struck between internal democracy and organizational effective-
ness. Typically, these groups favour the principles of (controlled) leader-
ship, clear division of labour, interest representation by delegation,
and decision-making via majority rule. They seem to be guided by the
'conventional wisdom', as Francesca Polletta put it, 'that participatory
democracy is worthy in principle but unwieldy in practice' (2002: 1).

By contrast, other movement organizations put a far greater weight on
democratic values and practices, and may even consider these as the
movements' raison d'être. One guide written for movement activists
presents a model for organizing social movements entitled 'doing democ-
racy' (Moyer *et al.* 2001). Accordingly, these groups strive for a high
degree of equality among all participants, horizontal and decentralized
forms of organization, and decisions based on consensus rather than
compromise or majority rule. These principles are usually associated
with the idea of grassroots democracy.

While participatory democracy has long been a central component of
the meta-political discourse of the left-libertarian social movement family
(Offe 1985; della Porta and Rucht 1995), a more recent development
is the attention paid to communication processes, not only in political
theory, but also within social movement groups (della Porta 2005).
However, some observers express concern that the strong emphasis on
direct democracy in progressive movements may obscure the actual
power of movement or group leaders over the rank-and-file, as the exam-
ples above illustrate. Moreover, the scant literature on leadership in social

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[2] The tension between democracy and efficacy is a widely discussed matter in political
sociology. See, for example, Dahl 1994.

movement organizations has identified various leadership styles and their varying degrees of compliance with democratic norms. In addressing some of these challenges of egalitarian and democratic practices, a recent trend is the emphasis on consensual decision-making, involving both a normative concern for 'good' communication, and corresponding procedures and practices.

However, as any informed and attentive observer knows, even among democratically oriented movement groups the actual practices can be far removed from the activists' ideals. This gap has led some commentators to believe that 'true' democracy within social movements necessarily remains a utopian dream, especially if confronted with the ideal of participatory and deliberative conceptions. In this line of thought, representative, delegated and majoritarian democratic decision-making is considered, if not better, at least easier to implement.

Maybe these observers are right: certainly, normative ideals of democracy have never been put fully into practice, as research on the 'qualities' of liberal democracies has shown (Diamond and Morlino 2004). With regard to social movements, even within the same ideological tendency or specific group, different understandings of democracy and corresponding strategies are discussed. Whatever their democratic ideals may be, some social movement groups come closer than others. Many groups struggle more or less constantly to implement democratic procedures and behaviours to the fullest extent possible. They attentively watch and criticize their practices in light of their democratic values, and they experiment with corresponding rules and behaviours.

As stated above, such a search for internal democracy is characteristic of large segments of the so-called global justice movement or, in the plural, global justice movements. By this term we mean the networks of groups and individuals that mobilize internationally for global justice; in different countries, the movements are labelled variously alter-global, no global, new global, global justice, *Globalisierungskritiker*, *altermondialistes*, globalizers from below and so on (della Porta 2007).[3] Whatever their more specific thematic focus (e.g. fair trade, poverty, environmental protection or peace), ideological leaning (anti-capitalist or anti-neoliberal) and strategic posture (reformist vs antagonist), these groups embrace democracy as a desirable political order in general and as a concept and practice to be

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[3] We have defined the global justice movement as the loose network of groups and organizations (with varying degrees of formality and even including political parties) engaged in collective action of various kinds, on the basis of the shared goal of advancing the cause of justice (economic, social, political and environmental) among and between peoples around the globe (della Porta 2007).

respected within their own ranks. This is not to say that all groups belonging to this spectrum of movements have such a strong aspiration towards democracy. As the internal debate between the 'horizontals' and 'verticals' among the GJMs shows (see Juris 2004; Smith *et al*. 2007; Routledge and Cumbers 2009: ch. 3), some groups seem only to pay 'lip service' to the idea of democracy; or they may apply democratic rules especially when this strengthens their own group within the framework of the wider network, while on other occasions readily downplaying, distorting or violating such rules. At any rate, the GJMs are a fascinating case for studying the role of democratic aspirations and practices because of their explicit democratic stances and their aim to achieve democracy, both at the global level and within their own ranks.

For a long time, organizational, interactionist and political sociology has dealt with the problems of leadership, power, communication and decision-making in face-to-face groups and meetings (see, for example, Goffman 1961; Mansbridge 1973; Schwartzman 1989; Boden 1994). In social movement studies as well as in political sociology and political science in general, the discussion of democracy and power in organizations of various types has been stimulated both by normative concerns and by empirical observations. From the normative point of view, there has been more attention to democracy as a process in which preferences are not only weighted but also changed, potentially in the direction of the common good (Elster 1998). Also, a related concern with the quality of communication (Habermas 1996) has raised interest in the conditions for egalitarian and inclusive public spheres, and therefore, in our language, in the roles of hard and soft power and the influence of various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1977) in political struggles.

In fact, the debate over whether politics is the realm of power struggles or of control over (social) power inequality (Poggi 1998) has been recently revived in political theory. The normative standard of democratic deliberation resting on the 'forceless power of the better argument' (Habermas 1996) has been criticized as at best illusionary, at worst manipulative. Some of Habermas' critics, especially feminist theorists, have pointed to the limits of deliberative democracy as disregarding essential dimensions of power and conflict. Chantal Mouffe (2000) has insisted on the centrality and productive role of 'agonistic' battles in democratic public spheres.[4]

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[4] Chantal Mouffe dissociates her concept of 'agonistic pluralism' from the models of deliberative democracy by authors such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. According to Mouffe, democratic societies are also characterized by antagonistic interests that cannot be reconciled. In her perspective, the acknowledgement of these diverging interests can help to mobilize forces and passions in favour of democratic principles.

Iris Young (1996) has pointed at the social power that can prevent people from being equal participants. Such power may derive from economic dependence or political domination but also from an internalized sense of speaking privileges and the devaluation of some people's style of speech. Nancy Fraser (2005) summarized her criticism of a liberal conception of the public sphere as follows:

First, I argued, contra that model, that it was not in fact possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status differentials and to deliberate 'as if' they were social equals, when they were not; and so I concluded that societal equality is a necessary condition for political democracy. Second, I argued, contra the bourgeois model, that a single comprehensive public sphere is not always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics; and I showed that in stratified societies, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics could be a step toward greater democracy. Third, I rebutted the bourgeois-liberal view that discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation about the common good, and that the appearance of 'private interests' and 'private issues' is always undesirable. Fourth and finally, I contested the bourgeois view that a functioning democratic public sphere always necessarily requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state.

Other theorists are sceptical about the practicability of deliberation in all social spheres. Among them, Jane Mansbridge (1996) has suggested that deliberation can take place only in a number of enclaves, free from institutional power, with social movements being among them.

In empirical research, attention to power and democracy increased with broader trends towards postmaterialist values (Inglehart 1990), citizens' growing dissatisfaction with representative democracy (Dalton 2004), the state's declining control of the market (Crouch 2004) and the lack of transparency and accountability in international politics (Roth and Rucht 2009). Whereas many social movements in the 1980s and 1990s have been described as oriented towards single-issue politics and pursuing a pragmatic course, today's GJMs put much emphasis on matters of democracy, fairness and justice. The promotion and implementation of principles of global democracy are key for actors who criticize the lack of democratic accountability of international governmental organizations and seek to develop global identities and global solidarity. Additionally, the very heterogeneity of the individual and collective actors that converge in these movements emphasizes the need to develop adequate forms of internal democracy that are conducive to co-ordinating the many and different social and political groups (della Porta 2009b). In addition, recent mobilizations have addressed, in various ways, criticism of and demands on political powerholders, developing specific proposals for a 'democracy from

below' (Juris 2004; Smith *et al.* 2007). Parallel to these claims for structural reform, there are calls for individual transformation and 'prefigurative politics'.[5]

As observed in organizational sociology, these trends were complemented by a shift from hierarchical models of communication and organization to network models (Castells 1996; Diani and McAdam 2003; Clemens 2005). In social movement studies, where organizations have been analysed specifically in terms of their instrumental role in mobilizing resources, more attention has been paid recently to organizations as sources for forging collective identities and as arenas for putting normative ideals into experimental praxis (Clemens 1996; Eliasoph 1998; Clemens and Minkoff 2004). Focusing on the GJMs, previous parts of the DEMOS (Democracy in Europe and the Mobilization of Society) project helped in conceptualizing specific democratic dimensions (or 'qualities'). These aspects are not only of scientific interest but are also intensely debated among political activists.

Looking at visions of democracy based on documents and interviews with speakers and activists, we identified two basic dimensions. The first addresses *participation versus delegation*. It distinguishes norms and actors that attribute a central role in decision-making to open assemblies from all other types of organizations that tend to accept the delegation of power. The second dimension refers to *deliberation versus majority vote*. It distinguishes conceptions that assign a special role to public discussion, common good, rational arguments and transformation of preferences (in particular through the method of consensus) from all other forms of decision-making, of which the majority rule is most common (della Porta 2009a, 2009b). Crossing the two dimensions, we have typified an *associational model* (delegation and decisions taken by majority vote); a model of *deliberative representation* (delegation but on a consensual basis); an *assembleary* model (absence of delegation combined with decision by majority rule); and *deliberative participation* (absence of delegation combined with the consensus principle). While these models allow us to identify the types of organization of power and decision-making essentially based on explicit rules, we have also developed a fourfold typology of forms of communication that is meant to capture the mostly informal *patterns of interaction* during controversies (see Chapter 2).

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[5] 'Prefigurative politics', a term usually used in new left and anarchist circles, denotes forms of organization and practices already containing elements of a group or social movement's broader vision for a future society. For an early use of this term, see Breines 1982.