

## **Mobilizing against the crisis, mobilizing for “another democracy”: comparing two global waves of protest**

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Just about ten years after the emergence of the Global Justice Movement, the new wave of protest that swept Europe in reaction to the financial crisis and the austerity measures chosen to address it has for sure continuities with the past. But there are also, as this special section shows, discontinuities. In this intervention I want to stress especially one diversity (in the forms of transnationalization of the protest) and one similarity (in the focus on “another democracy”).

Starting from the latter, while both waves of protest talk a cosmopolitan language, claiming global rights and blaming global financial capital, the global justice movement moved from the transnational to the national (and the local), while the new wave took the reverse root. In fact, protests followed the geography of the emergence of the economic crisis, which hit with different strength and in different times European countries. First, between the end of 2008 and the beginning of the following year, self-convened citizens in Iceland—the first country hit by the crisis--demanded the resignation of the government and its delegates in the Central Bank and financial authority. Protests in the traditional forms of general strikes and trade union demonstrations contesting the drastic cuts to social and labour rights followed in Ireland, until shortly before considered as a showcase for the economic miracles of neoliberal economy, and then as an illustration of quick economic deterioration. Next, in Portugal, a demonstration arranged via Facebook in March 2011 against the growing economic difficulties, brought more than 200,000 young Portuguese people to the streets.

Gaining global visibility, the *Indignados* movement developed in Spain, a country which was quickly moving from the 8<sup>th</sup> (maybe 7<sup>th</sup>) position in terms of economic development down to the 20<sup>th</sup> (according to some estimates). They occupied the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona and hundreds of squares in the rest of the country from 15 May, calling for different social and economic policies and indeed greater citizen participation in their formulation and implementation. The *indignados* protests in turn inspired similar mobilisations in Greece, where opposition to austerity measures had already been expressed in occasionally violent forms. It moved then to the US, and beyond.

Research has already singled out numerous examples of cross-national diffusion of frames and repertoires of action from one country to the next. Both direct, face-to-face contacts and mediated ones have contributed to bridge the protest in various parts of the world, in a sort of upward scale shift. On October 15th a Global Day of Action launched by the Spanish *Indignados* produced

demonstrations worldwide: protest events were registered in 951 cities in 82 countries.

The degree of transnational coordination of the protest seems, however, lower than for the Global Justice Movement at the turn of the millennium, for which the world Social Forums and then the macro-regional Social Forum, had represented a source of inspiration and offered arenas for networking. At the same time, surveys carried out in various European countries, indicated a growing importance given to the national level of government. The forms of transnational brokerage in the newest social movements emerged as, if not weaker, at least different: more grassroots and mediated through new media. Faced with different timing and depth of the financial crisis, mobilizations were also more sensitive than the global justice movements—that mobilized on common transnational events--to national political opportunities (or the lack thereof).

This (important) difference notwithstanding, there are also continuities with the previous wave of protest. A main one is the attention to democracy: to its deterioration and the potential for a renewal through change. A "*Democracia real ya!*" was called for by the Spanish *indignados* protesters, and democracy was indeed a central concern also in Iceland, Greece and, later on, in the Occupying movement. The contemporary crisis is in fact a crisis of democracy even more and before than a financial crisis. Neo-liberalism was and, in fact, is, a political doctrine that brings with it a deteriorated vision of the public and democracy. It implied not only the less political interventions to balance social inequalities produced by the market (with policies of liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation), but also a very elitist (mainly electoral) conception of citizen participation, as well as an increased level of influence for lobbies and strong interests, through forms of direct and indirect (read high fees to politicians for participation in administrative boards) corruption.

The new wave of protest in fact took up some of the principal criticisms of the ever-decreasing quality of representative democracies, that were already presented in the global justice movement. Starting with the Arab Spring, the movements of 2011 and 2012 criticized corruption in the political class and of political parties (of the right but also of the center-left). To this corruption – that is the corruption of democracy – is attributed much of the responsibility for the economic crisis, and the inability to manage it. Additionally, the slogan "they don't represent us" is also linked to a deeper criticism of the degeneration of representative democracy, to elected politicians' failure to 'do politics', giving up important choice to the belief in the magic capacity of the market to regulate itself, and that no alternatives are available. Representative democracy is also criticised for having allowed the abduction of democracy, not only by financial powers, but also by international organisations, above all the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. Pacts for the Euro and stability, imposed in exchange for loans, are considered as anti-constitutional forms of blackmail, depriving citizens of their sovereignty.

In a line of continuity with the previous wave of protest is, however, also the search for another democracy, based on different democratic qualities beyond representation. The proposals and practices of the *indignados* and occupying movement—as well as those spread in and by the Arab Spring—resonate in fact with (more traditional) participatory visions, but also with new deliberative conceptions that underline the importance of creating multiple public spaces, egalitarian but plural. Another conception of democracy is prefigured by the very camps built in squares, transforming them into public spheres made up of “normal citizens”. The attention given to the respect for different opinions aims at creating high quality discursive democracy. Highly inclusive, these spaces recognize the rights of all citizens to speak and be heard, as well as their competences and skills in the search for solutions to complex problems.

This prefiguration of deliberative democracy follows a vision profoundly different to that which legitimates representative democracy based on the principle of majority decisions. Democratic quality here is in fact measured by the possibility to elaborate ideas within discursive, open and public arenas, where citizens play an active role in identifying problems, but also in elaborating possible solutions. It is the opposite of a certain acceptance of democracy of the prince, where the professionals elected to govern must not be disturbed—at least until fresh elections are held. It is a search worth continuing.

### **About the author**

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Among her very recent publications are: *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; *Los movimientos sociales* (with M. Diani), Madrid, CIS, 2011; *Democrazie*, Il Mulino, 2011; *L'intervista qualitativa*, Laterza 2011; (with M. Caiani), *Social Movements and Europeanization*, Oxford University Press, 2009; (ed.) *Another Europe*, Routledge, 2009; (ed.) *Democracy in Social Movements*, Palgrave, 2009;

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