How progressive social movements can save democracy in pandemic times
Donatella della Porta (19th May 2020)

Against all odds, the first stages in the Covid19 pandemic have been met by what media and activists can see is a new wave of protest. While the fear of contagion and the lockdown measures, heavily constrained physical movements, and seemed to jeopardize collective actions; activists invented new forms of expressing their increasing grievances, but also spread new tactics Car caravans, pot banging, collective performance of protest songs from balconies, live-streamed actions, digital rallies, virtual marches, walk outs, boycotts, and rent-strikes have multiplied as forms of denouncing what the pandemic made all the more evident and all the less tolerable: the depth of inequalities and their dramatic consequences in terms of human lives.

In most of the countries that have been harder hit by the pandemic, the workers of the health care sector called for immediate provision of live-saving devices as well as resources to be invested in the public health system. In Italy, 100,000 doctors signed a petition calling for territorially decentralized organization of healthcare provision. In Milan, the health care personnel of private hospitals staged stay-ins (keeping social distance) to protest the deterioration of their working conditions. In the US, nurses staged peaceful rallies, and were attacked by radical right activists calling for the end of the lockdown. In Spain, as in many other countries, citizens express support for the health workers by collectively clapping their hands on their balconies.

All over the world, workers of the so-called gig economy, including bike delivery people, Amazon drivers, and call center workers; mobilized in wildcat strikes, walking out of workplaces, calling in sick and staging flashmobs asking for protection against the contagion as well as for broader labour rights. They also often denounced their companies' attempts to discourage collective action by firing those who stood up to denounce the poor conditions. Inequalities have also been challenged by students calling for reductions of fees and grants, and by those who are suffering from unemployment and drastic drops in income, promoting rent strikes.

Protests also address the increasing deterioration of environmental conditions. A main example of a digital strike is the fifth Global Strike Against Climate Change carried out on 24 April 2020 by *Fridays for Future* with activists geolocalizing themselves in front of highly symbolic places (such as the Italian Parliament). Digital assemblies allowed activists to discuss perspectives and to build proposals. This happened with the Back to the Future program, which focused on building a socially equitable and environmentally just response to the pandemic. Posters have been left in squares and on buildings to call for changes in environmental policies.

As with contentious politics in non-pandemic times, disruptive street politics by other means mixed a logic of numbers showing support for their proposals (as in digital strikes or petitions); a logic of damage, creating costs for their targets (as in the workers' strike but also on the citizens ' rent strikes), as well as a logic of testimony, by proving the extent of their commitment displaying the sacrifice, risks and costs of collective action (as in the vigil of the nurses standing in front of abusive rightwing militants).

The activities of progressive social movements in the pandemic are not limited to the visible protests. Activists called for political and economic power to be accountable through a careful work of collection, elaboration and transmission of information on the effects of the pandemic on the poorest and more disadvantaged groups of citizens—such as prisoners, migrant workers, homeless—but also on the unequal distribution of activities of care within the family and the violence against women. In fact, activists have produced a lay knowledge that is at least as much needed as the specialized knowledge of the expert. Using digital resources for information sharing as well as online teach-ins, they contributed to connect the different fields of knowledge that the hyperspecialization of science tends to fragment. Intertwining theoretical knowledge with practical , experimenting with different ideas, building on past experiences, they also prefigure a different future.

Besides protesting and constructing alternative knowledge, progressive movements have also contributed to a much needed task in a tragic moment: the production and distribution of services of a different type. Faced by the limited capacity of public institutions (weakened by long lasting neoliberal policies) to intervene and to bring support to those in need, activists have built upon experiences of new mutualism, that had already been nurtured to address the social crisis triggered by the financial crisis and especially the austerity responses to it at the beginning of the years 2010. So progressive civil society organizations and grass-roots neighborhood groups distributed food and medicines, produced masks and medical instruments, given shelter to the homeless and protected women from domestic violence. The principle of food sovereignty and the solidarity economy spreads through these practical examples.

In doing this, activists are challenging a top down conception of charity or humanitarianism, by spreading norms of solidarity that contrast with the extreme individualism of neoliberal capitalism. Through social interventions, they reconstitute social relations that have been broken well before the pandemic but they also also politicize claims, shifting them from immediate relief to proposals for radical social change. In performing these activities, progressive social movements constitute public spheres in which participation is praised in a vision of solidarity as born out of a recreated sense of shared destiny.

In action, different (pre-existing and emerging) groups are building ties and bridging frames. In fact, these energies are connecting around a series of central challenges for the construction of post pandemic alternatives. First and

foremost, progressive movements are elaborating innovative ideas about how to contrast ever-growing inequalities, in labour conditions and income, but also among generations, genders, racialized groups, and different territories. Here the struggles are for not only a return of the labour rights that neoliberal capitalism had already taken away, with consequences that become all the more dramatic during the pandemic, developing claims for a basic incomes for those who are expelled or never entered the labour market, as well as rights to education, housing, public health. The pandemic demonstrates the killing consequences of differential access to public health care in countries that (like the US) have historically had a weak welfare state, or countries where neoliberal policies by right-wing governments have been more widespread (as the UK). In other countries (including European ones) the consequences of commodification of health services, cuts of resources to public institutions, the savings on the number and the salary of the public workers have been visible in the spread and lethality of the virus. Besides the immediate challenges, the pandemic has made evident the dramatic long term effects of inequalities by hitting ethnic minorities, old people in overcrowded shelters, and poor neighborhoods especially hard. Highlighting the importance addressing climate change, the contagion was particularly intense and the mortality higher in the most polluted areas. Besides the increase in the episodes of violence against women, the pandemic also made blatantly clear both the importance of care activities and their unequal gender distribution with heavy burdens on women.

Besides claiming social and environmental justice, progressive social movements mobilized in the pandemic are also suggesting that the path to achieve it is not through the centralization of political decision making and even less through technocratic moves but rather by increasing the participation of the citizens. Pandemic times have been times of scapegoating on the others, the poor, the migrants, accused by right wing politicians of spreading the virus. These have been times of a lack of transparency and of low accountability, with the proclamations of state of emergencies used, in different forms and degrees, to curb dissent. Xenophobic governments have increased forced repatriation and closed the borders even to refugees. Through car caravans (as in Israel) or bike marches (as in Slovenia), progressive groups have protested government attempts to exploit the crisis to limit political participation and citizens' rights.   In this direction, they can build upon the democratic innovations that were developed as responses to the financial crisis in the last decade. Through deliberative experiments, direct democracy, crowd-sourced constitutional processes as well as the building of movement parties, the ideas of the commons develop, pointing at public goods that need to be managed through the active participation of the citizens, the users and the workers.

Times of deep crisis can therefore (admittedly not automatically) trigger the invention of alternative but possible futures. As the pandemic changes everyday life, progressive social movements create needed spaces for reflections about a post-pandemic world, one that cannot be conceived as if it were in continuity with the pre-pandemic one.

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