

# Another Europe

Conceptions and practices of  
democracy in the European social  
forums

*Edited by*

**Donatella della Porta**



Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science

# Another Europe

Given the recent focus on the challenges to representative democracy, and the search for new institutions and procedures that can help to channel increasing participation, this book offers empirical insights on alternative conceptions of democracy and the actors that promote them.

With a focus on the conceptions and practices of democracy within contemporary social movements in Europe, this volume contributes to the debate on the different dimensions of democracy, especially on representation and participation. The book explores the transnational dimension of democracy and addresses a relevant, and little analysed aspect of Europeanization: the Europeanization of social movements. From a methodological point of view, the research innovates by covering a group of individuals traditionally neglected in previous studies: social movement activists. The various chapters combine analysis of the individuals' attitudes and behaviour with that of the organizational characteristics, procedures and practices of democracy.

Providing a cross-national comparison on the global justice movement, the theoretical challenges of the new wave of protest and the rich empirical data this book will appeal to students and scholars of sociology, political sociology, social movement studies, and transnational as well as comparative politics.

**Donatella della Porta** is professor of sociology in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute, Italy.

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# Series editor's preface

As the financial crisis is shaking the foundations of the global economy and pushing states to the edge of bankruptcy, much of the criticism and protest of the variegated alter-globalist movement(s) suddenly sounds a lot more realistic and plausible. Anyone who has still doubted the seriousness of the crisis might finally have become convinced of the opposite when listening to statements by the chairmen of multinational banks advocating regulation and a stronger role of the state. As a matter of fact, global leaders are taking refuge in policy measures which are bordering on state socialism. To be sure, suggesting the partial nationalization of banks, as it happened in the heartland of neo-liberalism, would have been regarded as a complete and utter sign of political extremism merely 12 months ago.

However, the aspirations of these movements reach beyond policy change. Reminiscent of previous waves of mobilization of extra-parliamentary protest action, there is much talk about unity of form and substance. In other words, many believe that policies can only be changed if the way politics is done is also radically transformed. Global politics in its present form is not just criticized for its undesirable outcomes in terms of social justice, the failure to move sufficiently fast on measures to slow down climate change or to guarantee human rights, to mention but a few of the central goals. It is also the representative, delegatory and essentially elitist nature of global (and domestic) politics which is seen with considerable disaffection and criticism.

Openness to participation, deliberation and respect of diversity are regarded not only as instrumental for achieving better policies; they are also seen as ends in themselves. From this perspective, these movements present a formidable challenge to established politics around the globe. But do they live what they preach? How much internal democracy is to be found in the movements which, after all, cannot function without some degree of internal functional differentiation and elite building? And what do movement activists themselves think about these democratic ideals? How widely are they shared in a movement which is essentially a movement of movements, a broad coalition of very diverse actors, some of which are highly formalized, even elitist while other are more grassroots oriented and loosely structured?

These are some of the questions which are addressed in the current volume that concentrates on data collected during the Athens European Social Forum

(EFS) of May 2006 but draws comparisons to earlier meetings elsewhere. Using participant observation, document analysis and a mass survey of movement activists, a team coordinated by Donatella della Porta sheds important light on the internal dynamics of the EFS. This includes processes of internal organization and coordination, external alliances and linkages with parties of the Left and, above all, the nature of democratic practices inside the movement. To be sure, the latter is methodologically challenging as sample representativeness is a major problem when polling a population (i.e. a movement) that has neither clearly defined boundaries nor a high degree of organizational stability.

As was to be expected, the results show that there is considerable diversity. Document analyses reveal, for example, that different modes of internal democracy can be found, and delegation and the majority principle are quite widespread despite a sometimes more idealistic rhetoric. Also, normative aspirations are not always realized in practice yet there is a high degree of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy within the movement. When it comes to contacts with parties of the traditional Left, relationships were difficult, particularly when these parties were in government even though the ESF often received important organizational support from these parties.

Above all, the book shows that the ESF is a unique political 'actor' in that it represents an open space for discussion, deliberation and participation, marked by a considerable degree of respect for diversity and high scepticism towards vertical power. At the same time, multiple memberships are widespread and many who get involved in the ESF are also active in far more traditional forms of collective action. It remains to be seen how strong possible 'contamination effects' will be in the long run. However, who would have predicted a year ago that the Gordon Brown would partially nationalize banks...

Thomas Poguntke, Series Editor  
Florence, November 2008



# Part I



# 1 Another Europe

## An introduction

*Donatella della Porta*

We, women and men from social movements across Europe, came to Athens after years of common experiences, fighting against war, neoliberalism, all forms of imperialism, colonialism, racism, discrimination and exploitation, against all the risks of an ecological catastrophe.

(Assembly of the Movements 2006)

With these words, the activists participating in the Assembly of the Movements of the European Social Forum (ESF) in Athens presented themselves, remembering ‘years of common experiences’. The ESF in Athens is the fourth social forum held on a European scale, with the aim of providing a space for the encounter of thousands of social movement organizations and tens of thousands of activists. In their document, the activists claim to have been part of a successful fight against neoliberalism: ‘This year’ – they state – ‘has been significant in that a number of social struggles and campaigns have been successful in stopping neoliberal projects such as the proposed European Constitution Treaty, the EU Ports Directive, and the CPE in France’ (ibid.).

The targets of this struggle are identified in a number of international governmental organizations (IGOs), including the EU:

Movements of opposition to neoliberalism are growing and are clashing against the power of trans-national corporations, the G8 and organizations such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, as well the neoliberal policies of the States and the European Union.

(Ibid.)

In fact, at the first ESF in Florence (in 2002), the activists already rooted their movement in a history of struggles targeting IGOs. As the Call of the European Social Movements stated:

We have come together from the social and citizens movements from all the regions of Europe, East and West, North and South. We have come together through a long process: the demonstrations of Amsterdam, Seattle, Prague,



Nice, Gothenburg, Genoa, Brussels, Barcelona, the big mobilisations against neoliberalism as well as the general strikes for the defence of social rights and all the mobilisations against war, show the will to build another Europe. (ESF 2002)

In a similar way, stressing the internal diversity as an enriching characteristic of their movement, the Declaration of the Assembly of the Movements at the third ESF, held in London in 2004, claimed:

We come from all the campaigns and social movements, ‘no vox’ organisations, trade unions, human rights organisations, international solidarity organisations, anti-war and peace and feminist movements. We come from every region in Europe to gather in London for the third European Social Forum. We are many, and our strength is our diversity.

‘Coming together’, ‘diversity’, ‘another Europe’: these are all expressions repeated over and over in the documents of the European Social Forum. In this introductory chapter, I will discuss, first, why and how the issue of democracy is relevant in research on contemporary social movements. Second, I will explain why the European Social Forum is a significant (and ‘critical’) case study. I will then present the research methods, focusing in particular on the survey of activists at the fourth European Social Forum.

### **Democracy and/in contemporary social movements: where is the challenge?**

The basic assumption of our research is that the consideration of democracy plays an important role in social movement organizations and, conversely, social movements are important actors in contemporary democracies. Although their activities are not limited to the political system, social movement organizations often interact with it: by protesting, they present claims to various levels of governance; they encounter ‘street level bureaucrats’ such as police officers; they lobby various branches of the public administration; and they are increasingly contracted to provide public services addressed to specific constituencies (women, migrants, and others).

Beyond addressing demands to decision makers, however, social movements also express a fundamental critique of conventional politics, thus shifting their endeavours from politics itself to meta-politics (Offe 1985). Since the 1970s, the ‘new social movements’ have also been said to present important innovations vis-à-vis dominant conceptions in the workers’ movement: among them are decentralized and participatory organizational structures; defence of interpersonal solidarity against state and corporate bureaucracies; and the reclamation of autonomous spaces, rather than material advantages (*ibid.*). In doing so, social movement organizations develop proposals – ranging from limited reforms to ambitious utopias – for alternative democratic practices.

The dimension of internal democracy is all the more important for collective actors that have few material incentives to distribute and must therefore gain and keep the commitment of their members on the basis of shared beliefs. This is especially challenging for a base of activists that appear as very demanding, critical, and auto-critical when issues of internal democracy are at stake. Social movement organizations are in fact self-reflexive actors that tend to debate the issue of democracy as it applies to their internal lives (Melucci 1989). Recent research has confirmed the high degree of critical discussion on the implementation of internal democracy present in social movements (della Porta 2005c). Past experiences are reflected upon, showing important learning processes. Although no satisfactory solution has yet emerged to address the main organizational dilemmas – between, among others, participation versus efficacy, equality versus specialization, and so on – experiments develop, innovating on the old, and unsatisfactory, models.

On both the external and the internal dimensions of democracy, social movements have been said to affirm the legitimacy (if not the primacy) of alternatives to representative democracy, criticizing both liberal democracy and the ‘organized democracy’ of political parties. Their ideas resonate with

An ancient element of democratic theory that calls for an organization of collective decision making referred to in varying ways as classical, populist, communitarian, strong, grass-roots, or direct democracy against a democratic practice in contemporary democracies labelled as realist, liberal, elite, republican, or representative democracy.

(Kitschelt 1993: 15)

To these (more traditional) participatory values, some emerging ones have been linked, such as attention to communication, practices of consensus building, emphasis on the inclusion of diverse groups and, especially, respect for such diversity (della Porta 2005b; della Porta and Reiter 2006a). Contemporary social movement organizations experiment with consensual methods of decision making, and values such as plurality, diversity, and inclusivity are mentioned in their fundamental documents (della Porta 2009). Investigating recent movements, Francesca Polletta stressed that activists:

Expected each other to provide legitimate reasons for preferring one option to another. They strove to recognize the merits of each other’s reasons for favouring a particular option ... the goal was not unanimity, so much as discourse. But it was a particular kind of discourse, governed by norms of openness and mutual respect.

(Polletta 2002: 7)

These aspects resonate with the emerging debate in political theory and the social sciences in general on so-called discursive or deliberative democracy, especially with the approaches locating democratic deliberation in voluntary groups (Cohen

1989), social movements (Dryzek 2000), protest arenas (Young 2003: 119) or, more in general, enclaves free from institutional power (Mansbridge 1996).

In our research, we address in particular the conceptions and practices of democracy that have developed in the global justice movement (GJM), mobilizing transnationally and demanding social justice and participatory and/or deliberative democracy. We have defined the GJM as the loose network of organizations (with varying degrees of formality, and even including political parties) and other actors, engaged in collective action of various kinds, based on the shared goal of advancing the cause of justice (economic, social, political, and environmental) among and between peoples around the globe (della Porta 2007a). This means that we focus on an empirical form of transnational activism, without claiming to cover all the existing manifestations of that abstract concept. We operationalized our definition by looking at collective identities, non-conventional action repertoires, and organizational networks (see della Porta 2007a). While we focus here on surveys of movement activists, the comparative research project Democracy in Europe and the Mobilisation of the Society (Demos) (covering France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Switzerland, and the transnational level), upon which this volume draws, includes an analysis of documents and websites of organizations of the GJM (della Porta and Mosca 2005; della Porta and Reiter 2006a), semi-structured interviews with nongovernmental organizations (della Porta and Mosca 2006), and participant observation of movement groups and their experiences with participatory and/or deliberative decision making.

We assume that the issue of democracy is particularly relevant for the GJM given its external and internal challenges. First of all, the GJM reacts to deep transformations in representative systems that include power shifts from the national to the international level as well as from the state to the market (della Porta 2005c). Additionally, internal democracy is particularly relevant for a multifaceted, heterogeneous movement (which has significantly defined itself as a 'movement of movements') that incorporates many social, generational, and ideological groups as well as movement organizations from various countries. As the first studies on this subject are pointing out, this movement has a more pluralistic identity, a more loosely connected organizational structure, and a more multiform action repertoire than those characteristic of previous movements (Andretta *et al.* 2002, 2003; della Porta and Mosca 2003; della Porta 2007a). Moreover, the global justice activists develop 'tolerant' identities as opposed to the 'totalitarian', or at least organizational, identities of the past (della Porta 2005b).

Other parts of the Demos project confirmed that the issue of democracy continues to be a very relevant one for social movements. To give just one example, our analysis of the documents of 244 social movement organizations showed that most mention democratic values in their main documents (see della Porta and Reiter 2006a). Looking at the values concerning internal democracy (Table 1.1), participation is still a main point of reference in social movement organizations' (SMOs) visions of democracy, mentioned by one-third of the organizations as an internal value. It is a founding principle not only for the 'purest' forms of SMOs,

*Table 1.1* Internal and general democratic values explicitly mentioned in the selected documents<sup>1</sup>

<i>Internal democratic values</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>General democratic values</i>	<i>%</i>
Autonomy of the territorial levels***	38.5	Participation	51.2
Autonomy of member organizations**	33.1	Difference/plurality/heterogeneity	47.1
Participatory democracy	27.9	Equality	34.0
Inclusiveness	20.9	Dialogue/communication	31.6
Consensual method	17.2	Inclusiveness	25.8
Non-hierarchical decision-making	16.0	Transparency	23.8
Criticism of delegation and/or representation	11.1	Individual liberty/autonomy	21.7
Deliberative democracy	7.0	Autonomy (group; cultural)	18.9
Limitation of delegation	6.6	Representation	6.1
Rotation principle	6.6		
Mandate delegation	6.1		

Source: della Porta and Reiter 2006.

#### Notes

- 1 N = 244, with the exception of \*\* not applicable for 114 (46.7%) groups, because they do not mention organizations as members; and \*\*\* not applicable for 62 (25.4%) groups, because they do not mention territorial levels of organization.

but also for trade unions and left-wing political parties. However, additional values emerge specifying (and differentiating) the conceptions of participatory democracy. Appeals to the limits of delegation, the rotation principle, mandated delegation, criticism of delegation, or deliberative democracy as internal organizational values are present, although not widespread (between 6 and 11 per cent). References to consensual and non-hierarchical decision making are more significant (17 and 16 per cent, respectively), and even more frequent references are made to inclusiveness and the autonomy of local chapters or member organizations (between 21 and 29 per cent). Looking at general democratic values, it is remarkable that the documents in as much as half of the sample refer to plurality, diversity, and heterogeneity as important democratic values, at a level very near to that of (more traditional) participation. Equality is mentioned in the analysed documents in about one-third of our sample and values such as transparency, inclusiveness, and individual freedom in about one-fourth. Significantly, representative values are mentioned by only 6 per cent of our organizations.

### ***Research on democracy and movements***

Although recognizing the importance of social movements in and for democracy, social movement research has traditionally focused more on the external than on the internal dimension, and more on the effects of representative democracy on social movement characteristics than vice versa. Especially since the

1980s, with the increasing interest in social movements by political scientists, European scholars have used the concept of political opportunities, developed by American scholars, in cross-national research projects. Alexis de Tocqueville's famous contrast between a 'weak' American government and a 'strong' French one is usually an implicit or explicit starting point for analyses linking institutional factors – or 'regimes' in Tilly's definition (1978) – with social movement development (Kriesi 2004: 71). The idea that states' strength or weakness influences social movement strategies remains central to the literature on collective action in general, and on revolutions in particular.

Especially in the 1990s, large comparative research projects explored the effects on social movements of some main dimensions of comparison among European countries such as centralization versus decentralization of power (Rucht 1994: 303–12; Kriesi *et al.* 1995); the characteristics of national political cultures (Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi *et al.* 1995); the influence of a country's democratic history (Flam 1994; della Porta and Reiter 1998); the prevailing model of industrial relations (Joppke 1993; Tarrow 1989; della Porta 1996); and the alliance with parties of the Left (della Porta *et al.* forthcoming). In contrast, only a few attempts were made to address the effects of social movements on representative democracies, and these attempts mainly focused on macro-dimensions (see Giugni *et al.* 1998, 1999; Giugni 2004).

With few remarkable exceptions (in particular, Lichterman 1996; Polletta 2002), the conceptions of democracy in social movements were not often investigated, and when they were it was mainly with a focus on the debate on their organizational forms, often returning to the traditional cleavage between those who praised organizations as effective instruments of mobilization (Gamson 1990; McCarthy and Zald 1987) and those who feared an iron law of bureaucratization (Piven and Cloward 1977). Although some researchers have singled out various forms and trends of organizational structures and developments (for instance, Kriesi 1996; Rucht 1996; della Porta 2003b) and stressed the typical network forms of movements (Gerlach and Hine 1970; Diani 1995; see della Porta and Diani 2006a for a review), an instrumental vision tended to prevail. As Clemens and Minkoff (2003: 156) have recently noted, with the development of a resource mobilization perspective, 'Attention to organisation appeared antithetical to the analysis of culture and interaction. As organisations were understood instrumentally, the cultural content of organising and the meanings signalled by organisational forms were marginalised as topic for inquiry'. Moreover, empirical research pointed out the limits of direct forms of democracy, in particular the 'tyranny of the structureless', the closed nature of small groups to newcomers, and the risks of a 'hidden' leadership (among others, Freeman 1974; Breines 1989).

The main (although not the only) questions asked in the last decades have therefore focused on macro-causes for the development of social movements, and the instrumental role of social movement organizations in mobilizing environmental resources. These are relevant questions that will also remain central for contemporary movements. However, the emerging conflicts have also raised

the need to refocus our attention from social movements as dependent variables, to social movements as (to a certain extent) 'independent' and conscious actors, producing changes not only on the outside, but also on the inside. Internal communication and democratic practices are relevant angles for the analysis of movements that are both innovative and pluralistic. In our analysis of the GJM, in fact, we want to shift attention towards what we can define as the emergent properties of protest.

In his conceptualization of an 'eventful temporality', Sewell (1996) suggests considering the capacity of some events to interrupt or challenge existing structures. In fact, research on the GJM started to pay attention to a sort of cross-fertilization in action ('contamination', to use the Italian neologism), recognizing some of the emerging characteristics of protest. Action campaigns and the networking structure of the global movement produce a situation of intense interaction among various individuals and organizations. This creates a process of 'contamination in action' through mechanisms of multiplication of individual belonging and organizational networking, which in turn facilitates frame-bridging, the transformation of identities and the creation of informal links (della Porta and Mosca 2006). As we will see in this volume, transnational protests such as the ESFs are especially 'eventful'.

### ***Research on individual activists***

With its focus on conceptions and practices of democracy within social movements, our research aims at an innovative contribution to a long-lasting and important debate. Summarizing, we look at social movements as spaces for the elaboration of conceptions of democracy and initial experimentation with them, focusing attention especially, but not only, on the micro-dimension of individual conceptions and experiences.

Research on activists has addressed both their social background and their political attitudes and behaviour. Social science research on political participation has traditionally stressed a class divide: participation emerges as limited and selective, increasing with social status (Lagroye 1993: 312). Higher levels of participation were identified, *ceteris paribus*, among the better educated, the middle classes, men, the medium age cohort, married people, city residents, the ethnic majority group, and citizens' involved in voluntary associations (Milbrath and Goel 1977). Usually, higher social status implies more material resources (but also more free time) to invest in political participation, but also a higher probability of being successful (via personal relationships with powerful individuals) and especially a higher sense of personal achievement. Psychological disadvantages overlap with social disadvantages, reducing the perception of one's own 'droit de parole' (Bourdieu 1979: 180).

Research on social movements has looked at the social characteristics of activists, reaching some similar conclusions. First, it has often been observed that the new social movements recruit from a specific social base, mainly comprising components of the middle class (Kriesi 1993). Second, in order to