

# Conference Report: Democracy and Dissent

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From Madrid to Cairo, Tel Aviv, Rome and New York, protests have erupted across the globe against economic instability, political unaccountability and corruption. Characterized by a prevailing sense of disillusionment, these movements are calling for a rethinking of representative democracy and greater citizen involvement in public governance. As part of the La Pietra Dialogues<sup>1</sup> – a long-running series of events in which some of world's foremost scholars, policy makers, practitioners, business leaders, public intellectuals and artists discuss publicly relevant issues – a day-long international round table was organized by New York University Florence on April 17, 2012 to discuss these issues. Among the main questions that the event aimed at debating were the defining characteristics of contemporary dissenting movements, the sources and modes of expression of their ideas, their potential direction, outcomes, and impact on national and transnational policy agendas, the influence of social media in their structure and philosophy, and whether these movements are developing new models of horizontal organization and democratic engagement. The setting of the event was designed to promote open, lively and continuous discussion among all participants, both speakers and audience, and clearly succeeded in this goal, as enlightening conversations and exchanges between different viewpoints took place throughout the whole conference.

The event featured three closely interrelated sessions: the first was titled «Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy» and was moderated by Professor Bill Klein of NYU Florence; the second, «New Forms of Democracy: Old Wine in New Bottles?», was chaired by Professor Claudius Wagemann of NYU Florence, and the third, which focused on «Mass Media, Social Media and Dissenting Movements», was directed by Dr. Cristian Vaccari of NYU Florence.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.lapietradialogues.org/>.

In the first panel, Alessandro Pizzorno, Emeritus Professor at the European University Institute, and Nadia Urbinati, Kyriakos Tsakopoulos Professor of Political Theory and Hellenic Studies at Columbia University, discussed how the dissenting ideas advocated by contemporary social movements are affected by, and contribute to, the current debate on the limits, benefits and future of democracy. Professor Pizzorno opened his talk by noting that secular democracy, which was by and large unchallenged during the past two decades, must now compete in the marketplace of ideas with alternative conceptions of how to govern complex and pluralistic polities. In other words, world populations are no longer prepared to take for granted the moral legitimacy of democracy and the superiority of the policy and societal outcomes it guarantees. In particular, many thinkers are reassessing and challenging the notion that free, fair, periodic and consequential elections are in and of themselves sufficient to guarantee competent government through political competition (Schumpeter 1942). As Pizzorno articulates in a recently published essay (Pizzorno 2012), functioning democracies require three elements that must fruitfully interact with one another: offices, which mostly require competence and must be primarily accessed through exams and other mechanisms to prove individuals' skills and knowledge; representation, which requires intermediate bodies such as political parties to transfer citizens' preferences into policy inputs on a mass scale; and public opinion, which must be able to freely advocate both interests (usually articulated by interest groups) and values (usually articulated by social movements) in order to guarantee elite responsiveness.

From this perspective, the crisis of contemporary democracies is rooted in two phenomena. First, trust in political parties has declined dramatically, which threatens to diminish the legitimacy and functionality of the process of political representation. Secondly, public opinion is increasingly autonomous and diverse due to the deepening of the process of individualization and the pluralism and diversity that is afforded by electronic communication (Castells 2007). This dynamism of public opinion produces political demands that cannot be easily channeled through the party-based institutional system of representation and, thus, spawns new social movements that challenge the ways in which governments make decisions through the representative institutions of democracy. Seen in this light, dissenting movements can be deemed "extra-representative" because they first and foremost challenge representative government, although with different degrees of intensity. From Pizzorno's analysis follows the need to devise new arenas and methods for institutional participation which allow the new demands stemming from dynamic sectors of public opinion to be fruitfully channeled through institutional mechanisms that can turn these inputs into satisfying policy outputs. Democracies thus have to prove once again that they can effectively and peacefully adapt to

societal changes without challenging the legitimacy of their whole system of governance, a point that Alexis de Tocqueville had made in arguing for the superiority of democracy vis-à-vis autocratic regimes of government.

Professor Urbinati moved the discussion forward by thoroughly reconstructing contemporary debates on representative government, which is thought by many political philosophers to be in disarray (Winters 2011). One of the main reasons is that the one-person-one-vote assumption that is at the basis of democratic representation is often ineffective because voters do not have an equal impact on the political system, thus violating the premise of isonomy, of laws being affected by and applying to all citizens in the same way. Citizens participate unequally to the political process, with poorer and less educated citizens abstaining from voting in greater percentages than more affluent and educated groups. Moreover, political elites often weigh the interests and preferences of powerful economic elites more than those of ordinary citizens. Globalization of commerce and the passage from an industrial to a service-based economy have shifted the balance of power between capital and labor in a direction that is more favorable to the former than was the case in the second half of the Twentieth century, which, not coincidentally, has also been characterized by an expansion of democracy throughout the world.

Based upon these considerations, many thinkers have suggested that the Athenian model of democracy should be abandoned in favor of the Roman model. In the latter, elites speak to the masses in public settings, but masses cannot actively intervene on an equal footing with elites; rather, they can make noise and observe what elites do and say on the stage. «Machiavellian democracy», as one author has named it (McCormick 2011), prioritizes “vision” (citizens’ ability to see how their leaders perform) over “voice” (the ability of the ruled to intervene in public discourse, see Green 2011). This theatrical conception of democracy has many affinities with the type of representative government that Bernard Manin has termed «audience democracy» (1997), in which the mass media constitute the main channel through which the rulers and the ruled interact and citizens mostly participate as spectators and passive objects of public opinion measurements (elite-initiated polls and focus groups) rather than as active subjects operating through mass organizations. From this standpoint, the increasing relevance that transparency is acquiring as a source of legitimacy of public processes and decisions is simply the logical consequence of a democracy based on vision: since all that citizens can do is watch elites’ performances, then it becomes imperative that everything be visible, that there is no hiatus between the stage and the backstage. Urbinati noted that these revisionist theories are remarkably similar to those that became popular after World War I and during the Great Depression, which on the one hand pretended to «unveil» the flaws of democracy (in particular,

its elitism and the illusory nature of citizen participation) and, on the other hand, proposed new decision-making models that shifted the balance from representative assemblies to executive bodies. Ultimately, they led to a weakening of the ideal of democracy and representative government and ushered in a retreat of democratic regimes from many countries (see also Sartori 1987).

In order to move beyond these revisionist views, Professor Urbinati suggested that representative democracy be understood as a diarchic system that comprises both will and opinion. The simple notion of representation as the transfer of will from people to representatives is not democratic in and of itself and is not sufficient to achieve a democratic outcome (indeed, its roots lie in the arrangements that ensured power relationships between the Church and its bishops and between Kings and their courts). In contemporary democracies, the will of the people is transferred to representatives through institutional mechanisms such as free elections where political parties compete for votes. The second requirement of representative democracy is much more complex and involves an informal system of influence formation and opinion shaping, which is part of the domain of free speech as an individual prerogative against the State and as an active right to change people's minds that must be equally available to all citizens. Herein lies the problem with contemporary representation, as institutional mechanisms (such as the vote) and organizations (such as parties) no longer effectively channel societies' opinions and, most importantly, do not sufficiently foster citizen participation so as to ensure a lively domain of opinion. As a result, some opinions are more likely to be advocated than others, which goes a long way towards explaining the neo-liberal hegemony that has pervaded the West over the past two decades.

That the crisis of representative democracy is located within the domain of opinion is signaled by the fact that many contemporary thinkers are engaging in utopian institutionalism – the attempt to imagine new institutional arrangements that can restore equality in citizens' ability to influence one another or shift the balance between elite and mass opinion. Some have suggested developing and implementing mechanisms of deliberative democracy, while others have proposed the creation of specific offices, modeled on the tribunate in ancient Rome, tasked with representing the preferences of the masses vis-à-vis those of elites. More broadly, the issue of equality among citizens should receive the same attention in the domain of opinion as it does in that of will (with the one-person-one-vote axiom) and this in turn requires focusing on how public discourse is structured and organized, which involves issues of media ownership and regulation, the financing of political discourse, and politicians' ability to control or shape media coverage in a favorable light (see e.g. Habermas 2006).

The second panel focused on the organizational characteristics, mobilization processes and policy demands of dissenting movements and involved Donatella della Porta, Professor at the European University Institute, Rocco Polin, Ph.D. candidate at the Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane (SUM), Daniel Ritter, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the EUI, and Alexander Trechsel, Professor at the EUI. Professor della Porta opened her talk by cautioning against the syndrome of “immaculate conception” that often pervades public debates about social movements: when a new movement emerges, citizens, journalists and some scholars tend to forget that it carries with it not only new ideas, organizations and adherents, but also the legacy of previous organizations and mobilizations. For instance, “veterans” from previous social movements and long-term political activists are clearly relevant to the “Occupy Wall Street” movement and some of the issues it articulates – such as social justice and the fight against increasing inequality – were first addressed by movements that took center stage in the past two decades. After such cautionary notes, Professor della Porta argued that contemporary dissenting movements are particularly focused on democracy because they articulate the detachment between populations and the institutions that should represent them. This is in part rooted in the sclerosis of traditional institutional arrangements and mechanisms, as discussed in the previous panel, but is also caused by the retreat of the State from many societal domains, which has coincided with dramatic surges in income inequality (Hacker and Pierson 2010). Combined with the increasing dominance of technocracy over politics and the decline in the power of (national) elective institutions in favor of (supranational) unelected bodies, these developments have legitimized the idea that decisions are made away from representative institutions and in isolation from popular demands and pressures, ultimately making decision-makers unaccountable, or less accountable than democratic ideals demand they be. One final aspect that della Porta highlighted is the role of digital media: on the one hand, they foster a culture of direct engagement that dovetails well with the participatory ethos of these movements and allows their adherents to use internet tools to prefigure the type of (direct) democracy and equal, constant and dynamic representation they envision as an antidote to the institutional atrophy they denounce; on the other hand, web-based participation has yet to be proven capable of establishing the continuity that is necessary in moments of latency, the organizational and emotional pauses that social movements always experience between phases of widespread participation and collective arousal.

In this context, Rocco Polin provided a valuable eye-witness account of the unfolding of the Egyptian revolution in August 2011, when he spent some time in Cairo as part of his doctoral research. Polin highlighted the fact that protesters in Tahrir Square strove to physically build a microcosm that resem-

bled the type of society that the movement envisioned. These attempts to turn vision into practice, to prefigure social reality within small-scale organizational arrangements, is one of the key characteristics of contemporary movements, as can be seen, for instance, in the community infrastructures (libraries, sanitation, sheltering and so forth) that the Occupy Wall Street participants maintained in Zuccotti Park. In Tahrir Square, this involved the defense of basic civil rights, particularly with respect to equality between men and women, and the enforcement of rules of religious tolerance and pluralism. In this context, an illuminating anecdote recounted by Polin involved lively discussions among protesters as to whether beer should be allowed in Tahrir Square, which some claimed would offend Muslim religious sentiments, while others insisted would be an important sign that the movement was walking the walk as well as talking the talk of democracy, secularism and civil rights.

Alexander Trechsel, a worldwide expert on direct democracy, highlighted the fact that institutional arrangements such as participatory budgeting, which originated in Brazil as a way to engage citizens in local government's fiscal decisions, are being spread locally in many corners of the world and can usefully complement elections as means of transmitting citizens' input to policymakers and governments. Trechsel also addressed the transformations of representative government and argued that, particularly due to Information and Communication Technologies, we are moving beyond the era of "audience democracy" into what he terms "paparazzi democracy". Paparazzi democracy is characterized by changes in the notion of accountability that citizens demand from their representatives: the media now allow us – or make us so believe – to constantly and directly observe every action politicians take in every moment of both their public and private lives, which results in an increasing amount of unfolding scandals that involve politicians and ever more frequent instances in which politicians are caught lying or not being truthful enough regarding their conduct. This constant scrutiny of politicians – which was already highlighted in Urbinati's talk with respect to vision and transparency – may elicit a transformation of the role of the representative from trustee (whom voters entrust with making decisions as he/she believes) to delegate (who is bounded by clear and specific instructions from the voters he/she represents). From a normative standpoint, there are many reasons why paparazzi democracy may not be particularly desirable: excessive transparency may hinder the functioning of government, the constant stream of scandals and politicians' wrongdoings may exacerbate voter cynicism at a time in which it has already reached record high levels, and the impression that every important action of public officials and institutions is visible may be illusory to the extent that the media prioritize scrutinizing, and finding faults in, politicians' private conducts over their public decisions, or lack thereof.

Finally, Daniel Ritter presented the main results of his research on non-violent revolutions (Ritter forthcoming) and began by recognizing that it is almost impossible to predict under what conditions a revolution may occur. However, once a nonviolent revolution has taken place, some conditions may help or hinder its success. In particular, the nonviolent revolutions in North Africa took place in two countries – Egypt and Tunisia – that had been longtime friends of Western democracies (the United States for Egypt, France and the European Union for Tunisia). In this context, the fact that protesters refrained from violent methods while the autocratic leaderships of their countries quickly resorted to ruthless violence in the attempt to repress the revolution was crucial because it highlighted the fact that these regimes did not respect basic human rights. Usually, autocratic leaders praise human rights without really enforcing them and democratic governments demand that their autocratic allies pay homage to them without really demanding that they do good on that promises. When, however, massive repressive violence is employed by autocratic governments, they can no longer claim legitimacy in the international arena and their democratic allies can no longer afford to support them without angering their own citizens. Ritter calls this mechanism «the iron cage of liberalism»: once political leaders adopt the rhetoric of human rights, nonviolent revolutions force them to either forgo repression, thus allowing revolutions to develop, or to lose their legitimacy in the face of State violence that violates these basic principles. As a key component of contemporary dissenting movements, nonviolence has thus achieved important results in alliance with democratic values, which speaks to their continuing relevance and practical outcomes even in the face of increasing challenges to the institutional arrangements through which they have historically been implemented.

The final panel presented innovative empirical research that usefully contextualized an issue that was often raised during the previous panels and discussion: the role of the media, and particularly digital and social media, in the birth, organization, and external projection of contemporary dissenting movements. These issues were addressed by Camilo Cristancho, Ph.D. candidate at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and Augusto Valeriani, Research fellow at the University of Bologna, who are both conducting on-the-ground studies of the Spanish Indignados movement and the Arab Spring, respectively.

Dr. Valeriani centered his talk on “tech savvies”, a potential new political elite that has played a significant role in the preparation and shaping of the protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia. Through conferences on topics such as open source software, creative commons, digital communication rights and blogging, these young intellectuals had already formed a commu-

nity of ethos and practices that span beyond national borders across Arab countries. According to Valeriani, these people served the function of «bridge leadership», that is, of creating bonds between different people, milieus and initiatives through the acts of connecting individuals, framing issues, and bricolaging practices from previously separate realms. This was possible because the culture of this group is strongly characterized by the desire and inclination to “remix” different materials (Lessig 2008). ICTs were relevant in this context because they enabled these communities to face two challenges posed by the response of authoritarian regimes to the dissenting movements: isolating protesters and saturating people with propaganda. ICTs enabled activists to avoid being isolated as they allowed to build bridges between local actions and broader informational networks of protesters and those that sympathized with them, between national, regional and global activism, and between «citizen journalists» reporting and commenting on events on the ground and mainstream transnational media that covered protests and broadcast them at home and, most importantly, abroad. In this respect, the «bridge leaders» identified by Valeriani were among the few Egyptians and Tunisians that could seamlessly move from an interview in Arabic to one in English, so they were heavily covered and employed as witnesses and commentators by different international broadcasters, thus playing a crucial role in the global dissemination and framing of these revolutions. Moreover, by sustaining communities of practices that already existed, digital media allowed protesters to avoid being saturated by the propaganda of autocratic regimes. In sum, ICTs and the young cadre of intellectuals/activists that coalesced around them were important in the Arab Spring because they laid some cultural foundations for the protests, bridged different groups and practices, and established a productive relationship with the mainstream media. The combination of these endeavors with the events and initiatives that took place on the ground provided a crucial contribution to the protests and the revolutions that they engendered.

Camilo Cristancho presented the main findings of some path-breaking research on the Indignados movement that is being conducted at the Autonomous University of Barcelona under the supervision of Professor Eva Anduiza. Evidence collected through surveys of people who engaged with these protests suggests that this movement defies some characteristics that have classically been associated with collective action. Participants to the demonstrations report having gotten involved after receiving calls to action – often channeled by the internet and social media – from friends and family rather than as a result of previous political involvement; compared to participants to other protests and social movements, those who took part to Indignados rallies had less experience with previous demonstrations and claimed to be less interested in politics and less engaged in it. These findings suggest that the Indignados



movement has managed to mobilize citizens who were previously inattentive and inactive. This is a surprising conclusion in light of what we know not only about social movements – whose participants tend to be more interested and engaged politically than the rest of the population – but also about digital media – which most scholars believe can only reinforce preexisting attitudes and patterns of engagement rather than mobilizing people that were previously detached from politics (Margolis and Resnick 2000). Cristancho's research also delves into the motivations of participants to these movements, one of which is aptly summarized by one of their most popular calls to action ("*Democracia Real YA*", "real democracy now"): politicians, parties and trade unions are seen as part of the problem rather than the solution, democratic representation is thought to be failing and instrumental types of participation such as voting are considered useless, which was reflected in the movement's pledge to send a signal to political elites by promoting abstention at the 2011 general elections. The Indignados movement is also characterized by a very articulated territorial structure, with more than 400 local organizations that are part of it, most of which do not exhibit clear leadership profiles. All these features suggest that this movement has effectively taken advantage of what has been termed the «logic of connective action» (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), that is, the fact that, in the contemporary media environment, participants to social movements can engage and mobilize other citizens not only through the organizational tools and endeavors that were traditionally required for resource mobilization (based on the premise that rational individuals will abstain from collective action unless selective incentives are provided, see Olson 1965), but by sharing contents and calls to action that their acquaintances can then use to build their own personal action frames, selecting only those inputs and opportunities that fit with their individual agendas and preferences and eventually propagating these calls to other people as well. In other words, movements that engage in this type of sharing – which is crucially enabled by digital and social media and whose adherents perform what Valeriani would call «bridging» and «remixing» – may find it easier to recruit participants and to marshal resources than traditional theories of collective action have posited.

In sum, both Valeriani and Cristancho's research suggests that digital media – and the communities that coalesce, organize and proselytize through them – have been an important component of contemporary dissenting movements and, most likely, a distinctive organizational tool and relationship facilitator that has contributed to their emergence and success on the ground.

To conclude, Democracy and Dissent has brought together a diverse group of distinguished scholars from many corners of the world to discuss various interrelated aspects that make contemporary protest movements distinctive

and politically relevant in a symbolic as well as substantial way. As a result, the discussion has addressed fundamental political and policy issues that involve core democratic values – responsive government, representation, equality and freedom – as well as the institutional and organizational structures and mechanisms that are supposed to put these values into practice by equally channeling societal demands into government actions. By relying on a diverse and dynamic spectrum of ideologies, frames, languages, communication channels and organizational arrangements, contemporary dissenting movements are calling for a deep and thorough rethinking of the philosophy and tools of contemporary governance in democratic regimes at the national as well as transnational levels. Our societies' ability to meet these challenges will determine whether democracy will be able to continue to adapt and thrive in an increasingly unpredictable and complex environment. Answering the normative, political and policy questions raised by these protests will thus not only constitute an exciting scholarly enterprise, but will also affect the direction our polities will take on in the face of a crucial turning point for our polities.

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