Making the polis: social forums and democracy in the global justice movement

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1. Social movement and deliberative democracy: an introduction

Social movements reflect shifts in their environment: they are forced to adapt to changes in external conditions but they also anticipate such changes. In particular, they develop new ideas, that emerge from critical communities of experts and intellectuals (Rochon 1998). They are also particularly sensitive to the ideas and practices of democracy, both in their internal life and in the political systems they address. These sketchy assumptions are the basis for the reflections and research reported in this contribution, which focuses on democratic practices in contemporary movements. More in particular, I shall reflect on the potential of using theoretical debate and empirical research on deliberative democracy for social movement studies.

Although deliberative democracy has become a fashionable term in the area of political theory that examines the evolution of democracy, its normative-oriented perspective initially discouraged empirical research. As the latter developed in experimental psychology it focused especially, on the extent to which deliberative settings facilitate opinion transformation or, in the area of policy studies, on how public participation affects conflict resolution. In this article, I aim, rather to address the empirical issue of democracy in movements, in particular in contemporary movements, to examine its correspondence to the ideal of deliberative democracy, as well as the way in which research on social movements might contribute new perspectives in the study of deliberative democracy, which are normally especially developed within established institutions. As we shall see in what follows, rendering the main defining parameters operational in social movements requires a different approach than when dealing with formal institutions.

Let us start from a definition of deliberative democracy. Although mutatis mutandis, deliberative democracy has been defined on the bases of the following characteristics:

a) Preference (trans)formation. It is “a process through which initial preferences are transformed in order to take into account the points of view of the others” (Miller 1993, 75). In fact, “deliberative democracy requires the transformation of preferences in interaction” (Dryzek 2000, 79). In this sense, deliberative democracy differs from conceptions of democracy as an aggregation of (exogenously generated) preferences.

b) Orientation to the public good. In this model of democracy, “the political debate is organized around alternative conceptions of the public good”, and, above all, it “draws identities and citizens’ interests in ways that contribute to public building of public good” (Cohen 1989, 18-19). Democratic self-restraints should prevent people from pursuing self-interest (Miller 2003, 195). A deliberative setting facilitates the search for a common end or good (Elster 1998).

c) Rational argumentations. Deliberative democracy is based on reason: people are convinced by the force of the better argument. In particular, deliberation is based on horizontal flows of communication, multiple producers of content, wide opportunities for interactivity, confrontation on the basis of rational argumentation, attitude to reciprocal listening (Habermas 1981, 1996). In this sense deliberative democracy is discursive.
d) **Consensus.** Decisions are reached by convincing others of one’s own good argument. Decisions must therefore be approvable by all participants, by contrast with majority-rule democracy, where decisions are legitimated by votes. In this sense, deliberative democracy is consensual.

e) **Equality.** It “requires some forms of apparent equality among citizens” (Cohen 1989, 18); in fact, deliberation takes place among free and equal citizens (as “free deliberation among equals”, ibid. 20). At least, “all citizens must be empowered to develop those capacities that give them effective access to the public sphere”, and “once in public, they must be given sufficient respect and recognition so as to be able to influence decisions that affect them in a favourable direction” (Bohman 1997, 523-24). Deliberation must exclude power—deriving from coercion, but also an unequal weight of the participants as representatives of organizations of different size or influence.

f) **Inclusiveness.** All citizens with a stake in the decisions to be taken have to be included in the process and be able to express their voice. This requires the deliberative process to take place under conditions of plurality of values where people have different perspectives but face common problems. Deliberation (or even communication) is based upon the belief that, while not giving up my perspective, I might learn if I listen to the other (Young 1996). In this sense, deliberative democracy is linked to the concept of associational democracy.

g) **Transparency.** In Joshua Cohen’s definition, a deliberative democracy is “an association whose affairs are governed by the public deliberation of its members” (1989, 17). Publicity pushes to “replace the language of interest with the language of reason” (Elster 1998, 111).

These seven elements might be distinguished in conditions, means and effects: we have deliberative democracy when, under conditions of equality, inclusiveness and transparency, a communicative process based on reason (the strength of the good argument) is able to transform individual preferences and enable decisions oriented to the public good to be reached.

Deliberative democracy has been seen as a response to two related challenges to democratic governance. On the input side, contemporary democracy faces a problem of declining political participation, at least in the conventional sense. The declining capacity of political parties to bridge society and the state adds to this problem, while the commercialization of the mass media reduces their capacity to act as an arena for debating public decisions. While actual political power shifts to institutions that are less and less responsive to the electorate, alternative forms of “technocratic” legitimization—such as the so-called legitimization though the output, i.e. through the production of public good—are also weakening through the effect *inter alia* of various forms of globalization. The two problems are related since the weakening of the capacity of institutional actors to intervene in the formation of collective identities reduces their capacity to satisfy (more and more fragmented) demands.

Deliberative democracy has indeed been presented as an alternative to top-down imposition of decisions affecting society as a whole. Top-down approaches, indeed, not only appears as increasingly devoid of legitimacy, but is also becoming more difficult to manage because the problems are becoming increasingly complex and the un-institutional actors are increasing unable to make their voices heard. Deliberative processes should in fact allow better information to be acquired and more suitable decisions to be produced, as well as fostering participation and trust in institutions that representative models are less and less able to provide. Indeed, scholars highlight a “moralising effect of the public discussion” (Miller 1993, 83) that “encourages people not to merely express political opinions (through surveys or referendum) but to form those opinions through a public debate” (ibid., 89). Deliberation as a “dispassionated, reasoned, logical” type of communication promises to increase citizens’ trust in political institutions (Dryzek 2000, 64).

While in these concepts deliberation — pluralist, egalitarian, transparent, argumentative,
consensual, and directed to transform preferences in view of the public good — is at the basis of a (re) legitimization of democracy by improving both input and output, the discussion about the building of public forums where such deliberations can take place usually remains within a merely normative approach. Additionally, the normative debate on deliberative democracy seems to be characterized by two, very different components: on the one hand, scholars who still privilege representative institutions, looking for alternative ways of legitimizing parliaments or state agencies; on the other, those with a more participatory leanings, suggesting corrections to traditional forms of direct participation. In this approach, social movements are considered as important actors of deliberative politics. If Habermas (1996) postulates a double-track process, with an “informal” deliberation taking place outside institutions and then, as public opinion, affecting institutional deliberation, according to Joshua Cohen (1989), instead, deliberative (associational) democracy develops in voluntary groups, in particular in political parties. A strong supporter of the latter position, Dryzek (2000) has indicated social movements as best placed in order to build deliberative spaces, keeping a critical look upon institutions. Also Mainsbridge (1996) suggested that that deliberation should take place in a number of enclaves, free from institutional power — social movements being among them. According to Young, discourse does not exclude protest: “processes of engaged and responsible democratic participation include street demonstrations and sit-ins, musical works and cartoons, as much as parliamentary speeches and letters to the editor” (2003, 119). If social movements nurture committed, critical attitudes towards public institutions, as Claus Offe (1997, 102-103) has underlined, deliberative democracy requires citizens “embedded” in associative networks that are able to build democratic skills among their adherents. Some empirical research on the actual decision-making processes in social movements can help qualify these statements.

In social movement studies, with few remarkable exceptions (in particular, Lichterman 1996; Polletta 2002) the issue of internal democracy tended to overlap with the debate on organizational forms of movements, 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 1979). Although different forms and trends of organizational structures and developments have been singled out (for instance, Kriesi 1996, Rucht 1996, della Porta 2003), and the typical network forms of movements stressed (Gerlach and Hine 1970; Diani 1995; see Della Porta and Diani 1999, chaps. 5 and 6 for a review), an instrumental vision tended to prevail. As Clemens and Minkoff (2003, 156) have recently noticed, with the development of a resource mobilization perspective “Attention to organization appeared antithetical to analysis of culture and interaction. As organizations were understood instrumentally, the cultural content of organizing and the meanings signalled by organizational forms were marginalized as topic for inquiry”. Moreover, empirical research often singled out the limits of direct forms of democracy, in particular the “tyranny of the majority”, the closedness of small groups to newcomers, the risks of an “hidden” leadership (among others, Freeman 1974; Breines 1989). The debate on deliberative democracy could open fruitful perspectives, first of all, by pushing to recognize the role of values and norms in the choice of organizational models. Moreover, empirical research on contemporary movements could help to single out the learning capacity of social movements, in particular on their capacity to invent solutions for the implementation problems of principles of direct democracy and participation, that not only scholars, but also activists have repeatedly acknowledged.

In the following, I shall attempt to develop these ideas on the bases of some early results of an ongoing research project on deliberative democracy in the global justice movement. Internal democracy is particularly relevant for a multifaceted, heterogeneous movement (which has significantly defined itself a “movement of movements”) that incorporates many social, generational and ideological groups as well as movement organizations from different countries. As the first studies on this subject are pointing out, this movement has a more pluralistic identity,
weakly connected organizational structure, and multiform action repertoire than those that characterised previous movements (Andretta, della Porta, Mosca and Reiter 2002 and 2003; della Porta and Mosca 2003). Moreover, global justice activists develop “tolerant” identities as opposed to the “totalitarian”, or at least organizational, identities of the past (della Porta 2004). Although the research project contemplates a cross-national comparison of Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the UK, I shall refer here to the pilot studies conducted on the Italian social forums.

In a pilot study on internal democratic practices in the New Global movement, with particular focus on the Social Forums in Tuscany, we combined different methods in an attempt to assess (and balance) the respective advantages and disadvantages of each of them. The methods used are: a) discourse analysis of documents; b) participant observation; c) survey; d) in-depth interviews with informants; e) focus groups. For discourse analysis, the websites of the main umbrella organizations (www.attac.it; www.disobbedienti.org; www.forisociali.org, etc.) are useful sources for mapping the local social forums (170 are catalogued in Italy in the Spring of 2003) and their links. The websites contain information about the statutes of the organizations. These texts present the organizational ideology: the organizational structure, the (formal) decisional procedures, division of labour, etc. The formal rules then have to be checked with the organizational praxis. We used some participant observation in our research, we attended the general assemblies and other open meetings of six Social Forums (Florence, Prato, Arezzo, Lucca, Livorno, Pisa and Massa)--combined with in-depth interviews with activists. Although considering our interviewees mainly as informants, we chose an interactive technique to stimulate the active participation of the interviewees (Holstein and Gubrium 2002). During the interviews we tried to activate their interpretative capacity, telling them about the focus of the research on deliberative praxis, and asking him/her to reflect upon the reasons for the perceived successes and failures. As we shall see in what follows, our partners were far from enthusiastic about the actual praxis of democracy within the movement, addressing very specific critiques to the implementation of the organizational ideology. While they showed different degrees of support for the formal model, nobody was really satisfied with the actual working of the organization. Additionally, the interviews confirmed the high degree of self-reflexivity present in the movement (Melucci 1989): internal democracy emerged as an important topic of discussion for the activists. Past experiences were reflected upon, showing important learning processes, but no satisfactory solution seemed ready yet to address the main organizational dilemma (participation and efficacy, equality and specialization, etc. etc.).

We also surveyed participants of the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2004.1 Although a brief introduction was included in each questionnaire stating the aims of the research, the interviewee was basically asked to fill in closed or semi-closed questions. The survey has the advantage of collecting systematic information on a large sample of the universe. In particular, we were able to collect data about the socio-demographic characteristics, trust in institutions and previous experiences of participation of the activists—that is variables that affect decision-making processes and the development of deliberative processes. For reasons well-known, however, surveys are not the best way to analyze either concrete organizational praxis or organizational values (Dryzek 2004). Besides the difficulty of assessing the effect of the interviewee’s attempts to provide “socially desirable answers or rationalization”, surveys tend to produce superficial or very standardized responses: “feelings and emotions, people’s uncertainties, doubts, and fears, all the inconsistencies and the complexities of social interactions and belief systems are matters that are not easily rapped with survey questionnaires” (Klandermans and Smith 2002, 27). What our survey indicated, however, is the presence of committed activists, with rich and plural background of political and social participation.

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1 We had used survey in a research on the anti-G8 protest in Genoa (Andretta, della Porta, Mosca and Reiter 2002 and 2003).
For a more in-depth knowledge of activists’ values and meanings, we turned to focus groups, locuses where the self-reflexive capacity of the activists seemed more stimulated. Focus groups are discussions within a small group, moderated by a researcher, and oriented to obtain information on a specific topic (Blee and Taylor 2002, 107). The moderator facilitates the discussion by presenting the main focus of the research, and then stimulates the debate, trying to involve all the participants and to cover some main topics. The focus group presents special advantages for researchers with particular interest in the norms that are at the basis of some groups’ behavior and their construction of meaning—it “can yield data on the meanings that lie behind those group assessments” as well as group processes (Bloor et al. 2001, 4). They enable one to observe the collective framing of an issue. Participants in the debates share and compare information and opinions (Morgan 1997). In fact, “in contrast to individual interviews, they allow the researchers to observe the group interactions that underlie the construction of collective identity, collective action frames, and the emotional dynamics involved in the creation of oppositional values” (Blee and Taylor 2002, 109). Discussions among members help them to discover the collective norms and meanings. Focus groups, “in principle and with a fair wind, can provide the occasion and the stimulus for collective members to articulate those normally non-articulated normative assumptions” (Bloor et al. 2001, 5), or collectively challenge assumptions taken for granted. Where quantitative data from opinion polls show the presence and spread of some opinions and/or behaviors, focus groups allow investigation of the reasons for and the meanings given to some behaviors. The focus group is “an ideal strategy to explore social construction processes” (Johnston 2002, 83)—especially useful to collect information about subgroups of the population and on issues that are of interest to them. In our research, attention focuses in fact on the understanding of democracy in movements and the values that support this conception. In our case, focus groups allowed us to analyze the way in which the organizational ideology of the new global movement acquires meaning and normative strength, as well as how these norms and understanding were collectively constructed and shared. We chose to work with six groups, all of them constructed by us with the aim of representing the main “souls” of the movement--different ideological positions, but also “unorganized” members (that is those who did not belong to specific associations)—and also different degrees of commitments (excluding, however, the leaders). Moreover, the groups were heterogeneous in terms of gender. Each of the six groups (with an average of 8 participants) was instead homogeneous by political generation. They were composed as follows: teen-agers (high-school students; 17 to 20 years old); the new generation (in their twenties; 21 to 27 years old); the “lost generation” of the nineties (socialized in a period of low protest; 28 to 35 years old); the ’77 generation (in Italy, particularly radical years; 36 to 43 years old); the ’68 generation (44 to 59 years old); and the post-war (and still active) generation (60 years and older). The rationale for this decision was twofold. First of all, in a movement that our survey had confirmed as multi-generational, we wanted to check for the specificities in the conception of democracy of the different generations. Assuming that the conception of internal democracy had evolved with time, we wanted to analyze how learning processes and path dependencies interacted

2 Developed by Lazarsfeld in the Bureau of Applied Research of Columbia University in the 1940s, from the 1950s to the 1990s, focus groups were mainly used in applied research (especially for commercial or electoral purposes). Often triangulated with surveys (for the formulation of questions or interpretation of responses, in a form of member validation), they have recently re-emerged.

3 In social movements, two large research projects have used group interviews (both of them in the 1980s): one was led by Alain Touraine on the student, antinuclear, regionalist, women and labor movements in France (see Touraine 1981); another was led by Alberto Melucci on the ecological, women’s, and youth movements in Milan, Italy. In both cases, the attention focused on the meaning-making processes in the movements. Touraine aimed at an in-depth analysis of the “I (dentity)-O(pposition)-T(totality), that is the fundamental self-understanding of the movement, or the highest meaning of its action. Melucci’s research, “utilizing an experimental qualitative method, was designed to investigate the process of forming a collective actor” (1989, 236), with particular attention to the qualitative and affective dimension of individual experience.
in each political generation. Second, we thought that age homogeneity would ease intra-group communication. In the (relatively) small movement environment it was not possible to include only people that did not know each other—however, we tried to mix, as much as possible, members with different organizational locations and, therefore, loose relationships.

One researcher played the role of the facilitator, introducing various stimuli. Each group was opened with the question: “what is the movement/what does the movement represent for you”. The debates then covered, in different order, such topics as the organizational profiles of the movement, its network structure, the role of larger associations and political parties, the role of individuals and their “subjectivity”, the strategic choices, the common values, the understanding of politics and democracy—with particular attention to the mechanisms, advantages, problems of internal practices of democracy. The topics to be covered and stimuli to be used were listed by the investigators with the help of a psychologist, expert in the use of focus groups in the private sectors and for political parties before starting the fieldwork. The psychologist was also present in some of the meetings and read and commented the transcription of the sessions. All the sessions were taped and transcribed. Transcriptions were then analyzed mainly through an indexing of the main themes that came out of the groups. Though a process of reading and re-reading, index codes were assigned to parts of the texts. Main themes were selected and excerpts from each focus group were listed together.

Our experience indicates that beyond stimulating the participants to develop their reflection upon the sense and functioning of the movement, focus groups also provided a sort of experimental setting for the investigation of internal processes of deliberation. Although the activists did not “decide” in proper terms, they however interacted with each other, communicating on central issues. The climate of the discussion was always relaxed, and potential conflicts were addressed with irony and good humor. Also, the focus group, with its use of mediators and facilitators as well as horizontal communication, mirrors the actual functioning of the movement’s groups (for more details on methodological aspects, see della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter forthcoming).

In the next section, I shall present the research project, singling out advantages and disadvantages of the main methodologies used. In the third section, I shall specify some hypotheses on the values and practices of this movement, in the light of the concept of deliberative democracy. I shall conclude with some reflections on the challenges now coming to face social movement organizations from some main trends in contemporary societies.

2. Between nodes and networks: opportunities and challenges

By contrast with parties and pressure groups, social movements adopt a network structure. With a low level of institutionalization, formal associations coexist with small informally structured groups; coordination is weak and a recognized leadership is often lacking; organizational boundaries are flexible; membership in a movement rarely involves holding a membership card. The social movements have been described as typified by a segmented organizational structure, with groups arising, mobilizing and declining continually; polycephalous, with a plural leadership structure; and networked, with groups and individuals connected through multiple links (Gerlach 1976). These general features of the movement appear in even more emphatic form in the globalization mobilizations. In internal practices, the challenge of building a transversal and supranational identity brought about a search for an organizational structure that emphasizes some deliberative characteristics: in particular, inclusiveness (versus exclusiveness), reticularity (versus hierarchy), direct participation (versus delegation), consensus (versus voting), etc.. In the following, I shall present the organizational ideology of the global movement as well as its success and failure in implementing it.

2.1. Network structure and inclusiveness
As mentioned, normative definitions of deliberative democracy stress the inclusiveness of deliberative arenas. In empirical research on institutional arenas, conditions of inclusiveness have usually been operational in terms of the capacity of all partners present in a certain representative body to have their opinion expressed and listened to. Inclusive policy making has been often evaluated on the basis of the involvement of representatives of different organized interests (i.e., business and labor). Social movements, as communities of people sharing common values and identities are, by definition, selective. Their degree of social and/or ideological homogeneity might however vary, together with their emphasis on equality or diversity.

The open and inclusive structure, already typical of other movements (particularly the women’s and peace movements), appears in globalization movements in a version with heightened reticularity. International counter-summits and campaigns, but also local-level protests, are normally organized by structures coordinating hundreds if not thousands of groups. More and more, various types of civil society organizations are evolving from a hierarchical towards a network model (Clark 2003, 2). Moreover, “a recent phenomena has been collaboration between organizations in different sectors” (ibid., 23)—including consumers associations (Mowjee 2003a, 41), transnational unions (Muro and Themundo 2003, 57), groups active to increase access to HIV/AIDS drugs (Mowjee 2003b, 75). The protest against the WTO in Seattle was called for by over 1500 groups (as against the 133 that had called for a similar protest in Berlin in 1988) (Clark and Themundo 2003, 116). The mobilization against the G8 in Genoa was largely coordinated by the Genoa Social Forum (GSF), which brought together some 800 groups of extremely varied sizes and origins. Jubilee 2000, demanding the remission of unpayable debt of the poorest countries, was a platform of hundreds of organizations, coordinated mainly via Internet (Grenier 2003). The Social Forums allow “the huge diversity of civil society actors comprising the movement to come together, while imposing minimal commitment and common standards” (Schoenleitner 2003, 129).

Our surveys indicate that activists in globalization mobilizations are indeed rooted in a very dense network of associations, ranging from Catholics to ecologists, from social volunteers to trade unionists, from human rights supporters to women’s liberation, often with multiple membership in associations of various types. While 97.6% of demonstrators interviewed at the protest against the G8 in Genoa in July 2001 stated they were or had been members of at least one association, 80.9% said at least two, 61% at least 3, 38.1% at least four, 22.8% at least 5, and 12.6% six or more (Andretta, della Porta, Mosca and Reiter 2002, 184). A survey of the activists at the European Social Forum held at Florence in November 2001 confirms the density of multiple and plural associational membership (Andretta, della Porta, Mosca and Reiter 2003), as well as overlapping participation in groups as different as religious communities and squatted youth centers, unions and environmental associations, student groups and charities (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter 2004).

The mobilization of these associational networks is achieved by a particularly flexible multi-centred organizational structure. By comparison with past movements, the “movement of movements” highlights more the presence of weak links between groups with differing organizational models. Mobilizing heterogeneous groups in fact requires a network structure that respects their specific features by bringing them into contact. Statutes stress inclusiveness, inter alia via the role assigned to a general assembly. The main organizations forming the global justice movement in Italy—such as Attac, Rete Lilliput and the Disobedients—are in turn networks of various associations and individuals. Rete Lilliput emerged in the late nineties from the “Tavolo Intercampagne” (inter-campaigns table), a coordinating committee of associations that, since the eighties, organized together protest campaigns, especially on global justice and solidarity. The programmatic document of the “Tavolo Intercampagne”—whose title was “Launching the net”—stated: “We are not thinking of a national structure that would suffocate the multiplicity and diversity under a single name. On the contrary, we want to start a process of communication from below, a networking, a federative path towards a common project” (quoted in Veltri 2003, 6). The
organization is in fact structured around local nodes, with a varying composition and high degree of autonomy from the center. Traditionally, the anarchists stressed the plurality of (anarchist) groups converging in federation and platform (Chiantera-Stutte 2003, 144-145). Statutes of the Italian local Social Forums state that the movement is composed of “a kaleidoscope of colors and experiences” (Catania Social Forum in Piazza and Barbagallo 2003, 6).

Interviews with activists show a pride in the “plurality of the movement”. As an interviewee of the Sicilian Social Forum points out “it is important and necessary to defend and enhance the multiple beliefs and ideological, political, cultural and religious positions. …” (in Piazza and Barbagallo 2003, 22). Focus groups confirm that the activists indeed value inclusiveness as part of the movement’s identity, revealing how this belief is constructed in the interactions between members of different groups. The movement’s strength is in fact located in its capacity of “networking” associations and “individuals”. The movement manages to bring together “many situations … that in previous years, especially the last ten, did not come together enough, only came together around big issues and for very short periods, and always with a highly emotional impetus, while instead this is, I feel, the first experience I have had in such an live way of contacting and networking where being in contact and in a network is one of the most important factors … this is the positive thing … the value of the Social Forums …” (4G, p. 89). The network is defined as more than a sum of groups: for it is in the network that the activist “gets to know people, forms relationships, becomes a community” (4A, p. 92). It aims at facilitating relations by building a network of individuals and associations – as one activist observes, “A word I feel is key to a different way of doing politics is the concept of relations … the ability to create and amplify relationships counts more than the ability to send them down from above” (in Del Giorgio 2002, 252).

2.2. Horizontality and the role of the individuals

If normative theory stresses the equality of participants in a deliberative setting, research on institutional implementation of deliberative principles has made this rule operational in terms of the share of the presence in the debate. The emphasis on horizontality, that in general characterized new social movements, is even stronger in the global justice movement. The first Intercontinental Meeting Of Peoples Against Neo-Liberalism organized by the Zapatistas in August 1996 saw the formation of People’s Global Action, a flexible coalition of hundreds of groups from the South and the North brought into contact through a website. Subcomandante Marcos, spokesman of the Chiapas rebels, significantly stressed that: “this intercontinental resistance network will be the means through which the various resistance movements can help each other. This intercontinental resistance network is not an organizational structure, has no head or leaders, no supreme command or hierarchy” (in Routledge 2003, 337).

Though a model of direct democracy is inherited from past movements, in actual fact the movements attempt to address the mistakes of the past. While the main institution of the social forums is the regularly held assembly, there are nonetheless some adjustments aimed at avoiding the flaws of past “assemblyism”. The organizational statutes of the new global associations and Social Forums limits delegation of power in various ways. The rotating of chairs of meetings prevents leadership becoming consolidated. Leaders are very often replaced by spokespersons to inhibit centralization mechanisms. Their public mandate is generally limited in time and confined to a thematic field. In the Italian Rete Lilliput as well as in Attac or the Disobedients the local groups nominate speakers (that have usually a limited mandate) to represent them at national assemblies. The anarchist federations as well as the Black Blocs often work via “committee of spokes” (Chiantera-Stutte 2003, 148 and 160). The Forums frequently single out spokes with competences restricted to a thematic area.

Even “spokes” however are criticized in the name of horizontality. According to written
documents, Rete Lilliput “refuses the personalization and professionalization of political commitment and does not want to be identified by the large public with one or more persons” (in Veltri 2003, 13). The role of spokes (or a “technical committee” in the case of Lilliput) tends, moreover to be limited to logistical issues and urgent decisions. Also among the Disobedients, spokes to national assemblies are not formally appointed and their role is mainly “technical” (Becucci 2003, 79). In the Bilanci di Giustizia, a network of local groups demanding fair trading, the speaker’s position rotates among all members of the group (Rosi 2003, 102). Only some of the local social forums have appointed speakers, and these are often rotating positions (Fruci 2003, 176). Experiments along the same lines develop also at the local level. In the Lucca Social Forum, in Tuscany, “there’s a rotating coordinator for every assembly, who takes minutes and receives material for drawing up an agenda for the next one, at which the new coordinator is appointed and it starts all over again” (Lucca Social Forum, pp. 4-5). In Massa and Livorno the choice of spokespersons emerges “from time to time according to what’s got to be done”, rewarding competence and involvement in the movement (Livorno Social Forum, p. 6).

Frequent consultations are usually considered as necessary in order to avoid hierarchy and delegation. Internet is used for the expression of members’ opinion through mailing lists and telematic referendums (see Veltri 2003, 16, on Rete Lilliput). The Genoa Social Forum had a committee of spokes, but also a general assembly that met every three weeks during the preparation of the anti-G8 protest (Fruci 2003, 170). The national assembly of the Disobedients meets every three months (Becucci 2003, 89), and, following the principles developed by the Zapatistas, the members of the Consulta (including speakers of the various local groups and parties and unions) are asked to go back to their bases in order to report and discuss any important decision (ibid., 90). Also in Attac, there are frequent calls for more participation, with an emphasis upon frequent consultations, and demands for limiting the role of the National Committee to routine implementation of the decisions taken in general assemblies (Finelli 2003).

Activists especially note the concrete difficulties to implement the horizontal model. Though “we all know we have to find new ways of doing politics ... nobody ultimately gets what these forms might be” (Massa Social Forum, p. 7). Many activists remain critical of the practical functioning of the assembly, though. Interviewees point to the fact that “sometimes decisions are taken by those who remain at the assembly until late” (activist of the Catania Social Forum, quoted in Piazza and Barbagallo 2003, 7), and “not everyone can get up to speak since a small group of people (a politico-bureaucratic caste) tend to centralize the decisional mechanisms” (Catania Social Forum, in Piazza and Barbagallo 2003, 8). The representativeness of the assembly is regarded as doubtful: “thank God”, notes one activist, “this is not a movement of big meetings, since at big meetings it’s hard for anything to be decided seriously... who is to be represented, who’s there besides, but what about who’s not? Why aren’t they? The participation summing up on Porto Alegre taught us a few things about this, I mean, what assemblies are really representative” (3C, p. 66). In particular, if commitment by “individuals” is high in stages of heavy mobilization, “once mobilization ebbs and there’s a calm period all the problems associated with internal organization return...” (Livorno Social Forum, p. 11).

Indeed, the very associational density presents particular obstacles to building a deliberative atmosphere. As one participant in the focus groups notes “the biggest problem ... is still how to combine different, historically established practice ... a fluid thing like the movement with organized areas .... It’s not hard for me to get along with A, in no way, it’s harder to relate to structure as such, which at a certain point has its position, has to maintain it, and the practice of contamination and consensus can break down and lead to the things you were talking about, namely that this movement has in fact never set up representation to date, and I don’t think its even able to do so today ..... ” (3E, p. 65). One much-felt risk is indeed the manipulation by the best organized – what the activists call “putting a hat on”. Among the “flaws I can see” one activist cites “the tendency to hegemony by some groups ... which I feel would mean destruction ... since ultimately
as long as it’s varied it’s a movement, but once it’s the expression of a voice, calling it a movement, well...“ (1D, p. 11). A critique of “the media protagonism of some people that make a move only to get into the papers” (1D, p. 11) blends with the one of organization representatives who “act as such”. As one Florentine social forum activist says, “I call it the showcase mechanism, the fact that everybody needs to defend their identity, only to go and repeat things that have already been said, announce things everybody knows, repeat the content of leaflets being distributed, bits of communication that are just to show they exist, and all that burdens the discussion a lot ... instead of a discussion with intersecting opinions....” (4G, p.96). The assembly, as emphasized in much research, in the past too, can be controlled by “leaders and petty leaders, men and women, who turn up at the forums and try to hegemonize, little games and that...” (2G, p. 44). At the forums, especially some of them, “this attempt to put a hat on to lead us in one direction or another...” (5D, p. 131) is noted and feared. The limits on “horizontality” are in fact linked to previous organizational repertoires. As an activist of the Catania Social Forum explains in an interview, the capacity to develop inclusive and horizontal communication “depends upon the culture of the organization you belong to; the culture should stress welcoming and opening towards others” (in Piazza and Barbagallo 2003, pp. 6-7).

The organizational values that the activists stress, however, are participation and respect for differences. Linked with participation, the respect for subjectivity is in fact perceived as a new and positive aspect of the movement. The activists define their individual participation as fundamental, building a conception of militancy that values individual subjectivities. By contrast with the totalizing model of militancy in past movements, individual experiences and capacities are positively valued. For the emphasis is on the individual before the organization: the style of militancy has to respect the subjects instead of annihilating them in the community. As Italian activists say, “if subjectivity dies then the whole movement dies a bit, or else it ends up like everything else, like the parties.”; “for me politics also means building a society in which subjectivities can coexist, can be rich, ... subjectivity is me with what I have to say, it is what I propose.” (cit. in Del Giorgio 2002).

2.3. Reopening the public sphere

In normative theory, albeit with some limits, the need to justify a claim in public has a positive effect on the quality of the discourse, pushing towards the assessment of general values. Empirical research on institutional politics has tended to make transparency operational in terms of the visibility of the formal part of the decision-making process, for instance, the public meeting of parliaments. As for social movements, their general assemblies have been the traditional spaces of debate open to the public, although less visible forms of decision-making have prevailed, especially in periods of repression. The principle of publicity has been particularly emphasized in the global justice movements, where assemblies are usually opened not only to members, but also to outsiders (see, for instance, the statute of Rete Lilliput). The main decisions should be taken in open and visible assemblies. In fact, the construction of “convergence spaces”, “that facilitate the forging of an associational politics that constitutes a diverse, contested coalition of place-specific social movements”, has been noticed (Routledge 2003, 345). For the global justice movement, particularly relevant is in fact the “forum” quality of some arena, that is the presence of places where “critically collective discussion about members’ interests and collective identities” develops (Lichterman 1999, 104). If “the forum shrinks if members come to assume that their collective interests and identity are obvious and need not to be discussed, or if they talk only to strategize they present presumably shared identities or interests to others” (ibid.), the global justice movement seem far from having reached this stage.

In reality, activists complain, meetings are hold outside the assemblies by some leaders, while the very creation of solidarity internally reduces openness to the outside: “after a bit, at the
full assembly, with all the discussion of everything and everyone some people couldn’t stand it any more. Those who stayed on were in a sense amalgamated, and the new ones that came along, I’ve seen this even recently, didn’t find things easy …” (Arezzo Social Forum, p. 7). And according to another activist: “the Florence-wide assemblies are really dreadful, with really useless discussions because the decisions are then taken by the three that turned up and then arranged to meet the next day and put them on the list at 2 in the morning, saying tomorrow at 3 we’ll meet at the Casa del Popolo … so as to screw them all…” (1E, p.30). Discursive skills are indeed unequally distributed, favouring a few, better organized upon the many, “unorganized”—“there was this magnificent charter according to which political and deciding power lies with the assembly which meets every fortnight and is the sole body that can vote and take decisions and is run dreadfully according to me … it’s so boring …it’s always the same ones that talk, with 20 years of political experience behind them, and ultimately the language is exclusive, and if you try to bring up some innovative aspiration you’re of course expelled …” (4A, p.96). Decisions are taken not just informally but in rather more elite fashion: “in fact this movement, as well as having these broad participatory moments, also has much more restricted sessions, in which agendas, proposals and political documents are drawn up; objectively, these sessions involve representatives of organizations who are not always the epitome of novelty even in terms of their practices; … for instance, the assembly of social forums that closed the European Forum … while there was the assembly and all the networks brought their agendas up, for all the 360 things that were said, it was then a restricted group not elected by anyone that actually pulled the threads together …” (3C, p.66).

Notwithstanding these difficulties for the older activists, the movement reopens a public sphere that had been shut off in earlier decades. The dimension of an open space is in fact stressed also in organizational statutes. The coordination of the European Social Forum presents itself as having the task of constructing “a wider public space in which the networks, associations, movements, social forums, the different social actors, can debate with each other and intertwine their contents, practices and campaigns. A space that belongs to all” (quoted in ibid., 187). The Italian local Social Forums define themselves as open, public arenas for permanent discussion: a forum is, in this interpretation, “a tribune for the local civil society” (Fruci 2003, 174).

2.4. Reasons or passions?

According to deliberative theory, the aim of the discourse is to reason upon the public good, and indeed much research on institutional implementation of deliberative principles refers to the quality of discourse. But to what extent is “reason” important for social movements that also have to rely upon emotional appeals and build utopias, in order to motivate their supporters? If we conceive reason as synonymous for rationality or lack of passion, social movements are far from the best sites for developing high-quality communication: in fact, the role of emotions is not only recognized, but also welcomed as necessary for collective mobilization (Jasper 1997). Our research stresses the search for an open arena of debate, with tolerance for different ideas, as well as a high degree of respect for knowledge and specific competences.

The global justice movement lays particular stock by internal communication. The charter of the World Social Forum defines it as an “open meeting place”. The functioning of the World and Regional Social Forums, with their hundreds of workshops and dozens of conferences (with invited experts), testify to the importance given (at least in principle) to knowledge. In fact, the World Social Forum has been defined as “a market place for (sometimes competing) causes and an ‘ideas fair’ for exchanging information, ideas and experiences horizontally” (Schoenleitner 2003, 140). In the words of one of its organizers, the WSF promotes exchanges in order “to think more broadly and to construct together a more ample perspective” (ibid., 141). Investigating recent movements, Francesca Polletta stressed in fact the use of deliberative talk by activists: “they 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 favoring 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).

In focus groups a quest for dispassionate, open confrontation emerged. For all the risks of manipulation and bureaucratization the activists identify, their shared hope is that the flexible, multilayer organizational structure may build up arenas for confrontation among different associations and subjectivities, that do not just act in common but also transform each other reciprocally, building new identities and values, becoming communities:

“the desire for change is so widespread that it overcomes the organizations, the organizations can’t manage to sustain it ... there’s this great spread of mailing lists, initiatives, leafleting: there’s no one site or body that brings them all together ... there’s a very broad offer, in which the individuals can orient themselves without having to select exclusively, this is a movement open to all” (4A, p.92).

Furthermore. specific expertise is particularly valued. In the organizational statutes, the importance given to expertise is testified by the frequent establishment of “thematic working groups”. They exist (at least on paper) in Rete Lilliput, as well as in most local social forums. Knowledge, however, is not presented in an elitist fashion as the skills of the few but as the rich subjectivity of the many—“all have a personal richness to share with the others” states the statute of a fair trading cooperative in Florence (quoted in Rosi 2003, 116). Many social forums are structured in thematic groups that have independent empowerment for developing protest events and campaigns. Spokes are frequently carriers of specific substantive competence (environment, immigrants, social policy, urban planning, gender issues, information, civil rights), and a specific transversal relational competence (i.e. mediation of conflicts, dialogue and hearings) is also emerging. In the working groups there is in fact perceived “mutual listening”, as well as a building of knowledge regarded as increasingly important: “working groups are very important from my point of view, giving the capacity to grow together, in the search for and also production of content in the working groups ... so much so that by now in the Florence Social Forum alone there are some ten groups, and they’re getting along wonderfully. They are getting along that way because they are attached to some sort of knowledge, to a content, to some substance, and they go on to produce initiatives” (5D, p. 131). The involvement of individuals is in fact regarded positively also in terms of specific contributions to the construction of knowledge. In the words of one participant in the focus group, “... that’s what ought to come forth, and this has to be the line to bring out those who are working inside with specialist knowledge greater than mine and make them disclose it to me ... for by putting everybody’s skills together, everyone looking for an alternative system, we can say I’m not against but I’m for, and that’s a verbal gap that is not easy ...” (@2, pp. 44-45).

2.5. Consensus and divergences

Deliberative democracy is consensual: it is a form of decision-making in which, instead of counting or negotiating, people convince each other of one’s good argument. The consensus method is supposed to enable all to express their opinion, learn from others and reach decisions that are easier to implement just because they are shared. If consensual and participatory democracy has been stressed also by previous movements (Mainsbridge 1985; Breines 1989, Lichterman 1996), the challenge for the “global movement” is to combine the expressive advantages of deliberation with pragmatically efficient decision-making. In fact, “Today, direct action activists embrace consensus but not the deliberative styles that they associate with ‘new age’ or ‘Californian’ protest — self oriented... and unconcerned with practical politics” (Polletta 2002, 4). The voting procedure generally follows wide debates oriented toward consensus building, and is limited to final
documents proposed at the local assembly, national forum or international, global forum. Stressing the respect for differing opinions, the social forums are supposed particularly to be a locus for exchange of ideas where – on the basis of argumentation open to everyone’s contribution – consensus is reached around values built up together. There is also emphasis, much more than in past movements, on the importance of reaching consensual decisions and on tolerance, and in fact an openness towards differing experiences (Epstein 2000).

While the consensus method was already proposed by the student movement from its outset and later taken up with more conviction by the feminist movement, it nonetheless proved hard to run, instead it tended to slow decision-making down to the point of obstructing action. Many “new global” groups revived the consensus model but created new, more or less formalized rules to help overcome the impediments on decision-making deriving from continuing differences of opinion or manipulation of the process by a few. As a sociologist who has studied the evolution of participatory democracy practices in American movements notes, “a 60s activist would be surprised by the procedural machinery that today accompanies the democratic deciding process. There are formal roles – timekeepers, facilitators, observers of feelings – and a sophisticated range of gestures. Raising moving fingers as if playing a piano indicates support for a point; making a triangle in the air with fore-finger and thumb of both hands indicates concern with respect for rules of the deliberative process; a raised fist indicates an intention to veto the decision“ (Polletta 2002, 190-91). For instance, the Direct Action Network that coordinated the blockade on the Seattle delegates for instance, developed a complex formalization of the consensus-oriented deciding process. Within small affinity groups seeking to network, two “facilitators” (chosen by rote) were charged with leading debate and encouraging participation by all. When it seems a consensus is close, the facilitators summarize the proposal emerging from the debate and invite participants to express their position, which may range from a veto to support through a range of intermediate choices like non-support, reservations and abstention.5

The role of consensus is stressed in the statutes of many of the new organizations that belong to the new global movement. On March 2003, the national assembly of the Genoa Social Forum stated the value of the consensual method seen as “a way to work on what unites us and continue to discuss about what divides us… So that everyone can feel that the decisions taken are their own, although with different degree of satisfaction” (quoted in Fruci 2003, p. 189). Attention to consensus building as well as the technical instruments of qualified majorities characterized groups apparently different such as the French Agir contre le Chomage (AC!) (Mouchard 2003, 65) and the Italian grass-roots union Cobas (della Porta 2003). Rete Lilliput defines the “method of consensus” as a process in which, if a proposal does not receive a total consensus of all participants, there is further discussion in order to find a compromise with those who disagree and, if disagreement persist and involve a numerically large minority, the project is not approved (Tecchio, quoted in Veltri 2003, 14). In the statute of Attac France, art. 10.7 refers to the “search for a consensual decision” (in Finelli 2003, p. 35). Attac Italy, less centralized than its French counterpart, stresses the need of frequent consultations—on the model of the zapatistas “walking and questioning” (ibid., 46). All Sicilian Social Forums state that decisions have to be taken by “massima condivisione” (maximal level of sharing) (Piazza and Barbagallo 2003). The Disobedients state their search for “unanimity” in decision making (Becucci 2003, 90).

Interviews with informants confirm the values of consensus building. During discussions the

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4 The global justice activists distinguish themselves from what they criticize as the “California style” favouring feelings over action, and seek to combine consensus and decision, with a certain pragmatism that sometimes even goes as far as accepting the principle of qualified majority (often two thirds) (ibid.).

5 Facilitators were used for instance in the participatory process of writing a Chart for the Fair Trade consortium in Italy (Rosi 2003, 127).
clash of different positions is supposed to help reach better solutions. As an activist of the Lucca Social Forum explained, after “extensive, highly charged” initial debates on the organizational formula, “we reached a sort of synthesis; organizationally, it is supposed to work like this: the assembly takes decisions and is sovereign, but hardly ever votes, it seeks to reach a synthesis equilibrium, a decision that is maximally shared by all, with practically no decisions taken with a noose round your neck, so that an event is organized but nobody comes, so the people don’t simply just say yes... that’s the reason why there are hardly any votes; if there is a vote heads are counted, individuals, again, to emphasize the value of the assembly, and the associations are not counted” (Lucca Social Forum, p. 4).

There is indeed the acceptance of a limited consensus: against exclusive belonging to an organization, multiple identities are emphasized. According to one activist from Bologna, “[I believe that] one of the great steps forward is that you can say one day I’ll go and keep the Tobin Tax stand, another I’ll go with the Lilliput network, or I’ll put on the white overalls. The strength of this movement is the very fact you can do things and join things, make your contribution even if you have no faith-like swallowing of everything, you can join, one time 20%, or 30%…” (from del Giorgio 2002, p. 234). Building a common organization thus does not rule out other memberships – indeed, the multiple organizational memberships is seen as an enrichment, enabling the building of a common identity. As one activist explains, there is participation “as long as I can manage to find myself”:

“For instance, my collective ... we joined the Social Forum right from the beginning, and kept it up, and what keeps us there is also collaboration at the tables that might even have interested us rather more, since a university collective like ours often chooses to be ... in parallel is too crude ... but transversal to the Forum. Certainly, there are interpretations, confrontations, identities that also lead you to create a group. ... Therefore, either we try an internal battle within the Forum itself, by encouraging group divisions, and ultimately you are going to block the work of a whole series of people or comrades, or else the fact of saying I participate as long as I can manage to find myself ... maybe choose to have more external participation, to go along to give a contribution on individual questions, and it’s there that the various collaborations arise among groups about pieces of knowledge, training and all the rest …” (2D, p.46).

2.6. Transforming preferences or negotiating?

Deliberative democracy differs from conceptions of democracy as aggregation of (exogenously generated) preferences, in so far as it aims at the construction of common preferences. In the global justice movement, the awareness of a very pluralistic composition of the movement is intertwined with the appeal to the construction of a common discourse. The Social Forums, at different geographical levels, are indeed understood as public sphere where the different actors meet and debate, but also move towards mutual understanding and common conception of the public good.

In the actual functioning of the forums, a mechanism of “intergroups” --of “federations of organizations that sometimes reach agreement but then compete when they can … because those organizations are in competition and cannot accept one of them following after the other and so forth” (5E, p.132)--is stigmatized as an expression of “bossiness” by the better organized over the “individuals” (see also Fruci 2003, 172). In the logic of intergroups “what is represented are genuine organizations, associations, with a name … there’s delegation, there’s representation” (4G, p.108). Mere coordination – with “the envoys of the various parties trying to get out of it what they can” (4A, p.108) — is presented as rather undemocratic because it excludes the less organized – “I’ve been at some assemblies and some meetings in Rome, and according to me it’s a real disaster
there, I even felt they were mocking me in a way… anything but consensus method, who decides is a small group of people that speak a language all of their own” (4A, p.108).

The focus groups confirm that, notwithstanding the already mentioned problems in implementing a deliberative model of internal democracy, there is a perceived capacity to transform initial identities, developing the feeling of belonging to a community. An activist recalls: “I got caught up in the wave of enthusiasm too, and got involved in 45 different activities … according to me the individual is activated specifically by curiosity, from having heard something said, by all these colorful demonstrations, by the desire to be there … you get there … you also see yourself being offered nice things, and maybe you’ll join and go in a direction your way of feeling takes you … you won’t stand aside to check out everything, probably you’ll come into the network, get to know some people, form relationships, become a community … of whatever type … and then maybe gradually you’ll become aware of all the entities, and leave some to join others … there’s a lot more room for such things” (4A, p.92).

It is especially during common initiatives (such as campaigns and counter-summits), that relations of mutual trust develop. In joint actions – especially when it comes to smaller scales, such as small working groups – the capacity is seen for building common values, for, as one activist says, “fluidifying”. The various organizational solutions adopted are thus often defined in pragmatic fashion as experimentations, efforts to get as close as possible to the participatory model, that helps real communication and understanding:

“I personally, in the contamination and in participation in the movement, have come back to believing in certain things and have come to realize that … it’s one thing to arrive at a democratic situation more or less in assemblies where de facto more or less preconstituted positions clash, and then there’s a vote and a majority and a minority, that’s quite different from building a participatory pathway, in mutual respect, where the various positions fluidify and the various areas, even the organized ones … for in the Forum there are areas and organizations … including mine … that are really organized, yet there’s a new willingness to really fluidify, for confrontation without wanting to pull this way or that, more or less, some people more and some less, then in the end you can do it all the same, but those who do not vote or maybe occasionally vote against are really such a marginal proportion, and those who have really shared their own motivations with others, that ultimately there’s not that trauma that there is in the long run in those organizations that work with the old system instead …” (3C, p. 66)

Interaction around concrete objectives helps, in the activists’ view, to build an ever more solid common base. Different subjects join together to “get it together” around concrete objectives, and at any rate build a gradually broader common path:

4E: a Forum brings together absolutely different entities, but at least on the big issues they manage to come together … that’s its richness … the capacity to bring together differing entities that can at least talk about the big issues …

4C: I feel there’s also a certain weakness in the Forum, namely … that according to me there’s a weakness up to a certain point because even if it’s maybe been a strategically winning choice … namely to go forward for a long time coming together around particular points, leaving aside more systematic discussions, theoretical ones and so on … that is, I believe that even only a year ago, for instance, it would have been impossible to communicate with each other the way we are doing now, even if according to me confrontation does not come into the questions all that much … I repeat, it’s fine that way, since if the confrontation had been a year ago according to me the Social Forum would immediately have split, it wouldn’t have stood up, and maybe today the times would be ripe, perhaps … I don’t know, to try to do, I am not saying a systematic analysis we can all agree on, but at least to try focusing a little more …
4F: Yes, I too think this method worked, I don’t know whether over time, there you are ... but for now it’s maybe the method that has enabled so many different entities to stay together ... the method you were talking about, of going ahead only on some things, emphasizing the points of convergence, and going forward ...

4F: without tackling any maybe too thorny points, no? But likely in time the thing ... but so far the experience is very positive in that sense ... me, given we’re talking about the 80s ... I don’t remember anything of this sort ....there’s always been communication difficulties among different universes ... this type of capacity for synthesis had never existed, and that’s very positive, even if it’s based on the premise of not tackling some thorny points that sooner or later will come along” (pp. 89-90).

Concluding, at least from the normative viewpoint, there is trust in a deliberative democracy where the individuals (still more than the associations) bring their contributions to the debate, helping the emergence of the common good. The deliberative element emerges particularly in the acknowledged higher capacity for dialogue – “the Forum has something evangelical, that is, something new, something we were waiting for, something there was a need of ... how is it new? It’s new particularly ... in the way of arguing, the way of confronting each other, in its caution, its different mode of approach, avoiding oppositions: it’s bringing together components that are very far from each other and very different, that see each other a different way today ...” (6G, p. 144).

3. Democracy in movements: some conclusion

Our discussion ends up with a somewhat unfocused picture, and certainly no clear answer to the question whether the global justice movements are developing a peculiar model of deliberative democratic politics. As we mentioned, internal differences are the driving force in the search for forms of participation that respect individual “subjectivity”, avoiding exclusive commitments and vertical control; consensus rules are privileged vis-à-vis majority rules; direct participation is emphasized against representative mechanisms, leaders are considered as ‘speakers’ or ‘facilitators’. The specific structure of the movement, involving many well-developed organizations, makes the respecting the principle of equality among participants difficult to implement, although the delegation of power is limited. Consensual methods are implemented, with varying degrees of commitment and success. The social forums open arenas for confrontation, yet decisions are often still taken informally in small groups. The search for the “better argument” is expressed in particular in the development of a specific knowledge. Even though intermittently, with particular success in the stages of mobilization to act, the movement nonetheless seems to have succeeded in the delicate task of building collective identities that can be presented as plural and tolerant.

The problems that emerged in the functioning of previous movements have not been entirely resolved —experimentation is under way, with varying success, to seek more democratic models of internal organization. The organizational model chosen adopts instruments from the past, but attempts to adapt them to a current situation. While the assembly remains one of the principle arenas of internal democracy, there is nonetheless a search for new rules (facilitators, limitation of delegation, search for consensus) that can limit the traditional problems of direct democracy. The “movement of movements” has the peculiarity of building itself upon a dense and rich network of movement organizations, often the product of previous protest cycles: that means it also build upon experiences of organizational institutionalization, but also reflexive criticism of it. These networks of networks provide important resources, but also the challenges of maintaining open public spaces, without discouraging individual participation. In terms of the building of internal public spheres, the challenge is to maintain a deliberative form of communication as opposed to a strategic one. But, especially, innovation is visible in a value system that stresses diversity, instead than homogeneity; subjectivity, instead than obedience to the organizational demands; transparency, even at the cost of
effectiveness; open confrontations oriented to consensus building over decisions; contamination instead than ideological puritanism.

These values could be simply inherited from the outside. The evolution from hierarchic centralization to a network structure does not just involve the movement organizations but also firms and public administrations, given the effectiveness of networks in reducing coordination costs and facilitating transmission to the center of information collected on the periphery (Anheier and Themundo 2002). And deliberative democracy is suggested as a solution for decision-making in different arenas—and movements can just reflect changes in organizational ideology developed in other circles and for other purposes.

It seems, however, that if movements have adopted some ideas from their environment they have however adapted them to suit their values and objectives. The organizational elements we have highlighted are indeed witness to the adjustment to a number of challenges that the movement has to face, given the available resources.

In the first place, the challenge of post-Fordist society causes a weakening of traditional identities, with fragmentation particularly marked in the social basis of the workers’ movement. The deregulation of the economic market, with the spread of non-traditional jobs, has helped to fragment the social reference basis for protest. Even the social movements of the libertarian left have seen a tendency to specialize around single issues. At the same time, however, there has been a structuring of more or less formal organizations and groups linked to various movements emerging in the seventies and eighties, but also to the “old left”. In these conditions the movement faces the challenge to keep different, heterogeneous groups together by developing tolerant identities. In a reticular, flexible structure, the forums represent arenas open to horizontal communication that expect on respect for differing opinions.

Second, one element of post-modernity is a spreading of a culture that emphasizes the role of the individual. Processes of “individualization” have in fact been seen as obstacles to the development of collective action, taking away the strong identifications of the past. On the other hand, however, as some scholars of social movements have already indicated (especially Melucci 1989), contemporary societies offer multiple resources for building up complex identities. In some circumstances collective action has been observed even within cultures marked by personalism, i.e. “ways of speaking or acting which highlight a unique personal self. Personalism supposes that individuality has inherent value, apart from one’s material and social achievement, no matter what connections to a specific community or institutions the individual maintains” (Lichterman 1996, 86). The challenge for the contemporary movements is, then, to develop a model of internal democracy able to bring all the subjectivities together by valuing the role of individuals instead of sacrifice for the collective.

Finally, neo-liberalism, by shedding light on the markets’ unwillingness to self-regulate and governments incapacity to intervene has delegitimized representative democracy. Globalization as the liberalization of movements of goods and capital has spread an image of growing inability of national governments to intervene in the major economic and social problems (starting with unemployment), with deterioration in particular in policies for reducing inequality. The international organizations seem for their part to be oriented towards investment in a policy of favoring free trade, with a growing democratic deficit in public decisions. While these circumstances tend to reduce citizens’ trust and interest in democratic participation, the new cycle of protest, by contrast, is witness to a growing demand for politics, albeit of a new, unexpected type, in particular from the new generations. In this sense, the challenge for the movement is to build an organizational model that can enable broad participation in joint campaigns, combining social engagement and political effectiveness.
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