Democracy in Movements: An Analysis of Written Documents of 244 Social Movement Organizations
Press release of the Demos Project (http://demos.iue.it)
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The Demos project focuses on a central concern for social forums: visions of democracy as they are elaborated with reference to both the internal organization of social movements and public decision-making. It is a main assumption in our research that social movements do not limit themselves to developing special channels of access for themselves but, more or less explicitly, they express a fundamental critique of conventional politics.

The issue of democracy is particularly relevant for contemporary movements due to both internal and external challenges. Internal democracy is first of all a central issue for a multifaceted movement that incorporates socially, generationally, and ideologically heterogeneous groups as well as movement organizations from different countries. Additionally, contemporary movements develop in a political environment in which representative models of democracy, although still dominant, are increasingly challenged by crises of legitimacy as well as efficiency.

Recent challenges to democracy are reflected in the movement discourse. Social movements have traditionally supported a participatory conception of democracy, stressing the importance of increasing citizens’ participation. Participatory is however more and more often linked with the emerging interest in deliberative democracy—concerned, in particular, with the quality of communication.

This emerges from our research on conceptions of democracy based upon the systematic analysis of the documentation (off-line and on-line) produced by 244 social movement organizations that have participated in the social forum processes in Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, and Switzerland as well as at the transnational level. The analysis of the organisational documents’ focused on: a) the constitution of the organisation; b) a document of fundamental values and/or intent; c) a formally adopted program; d) the “mission statement”; e) the “about us” section of the website; f) the “frequently asked questions” section of the website; f) equivalent or similar material on the website, expressing the “official” position of the organisation as a whole, like annual reports, membership application forms. These documents portray the dominant views within movement organizations and so constitute an important source of information.
Our data confirms the importance of the issue of democracy: most of the organizations we have sampled mention democratic values in their documents. Looking at the values on internal democracy, participation is still a main dimension of social movements’ visions of democracy, mentioned by one third of the organizations as an internal value. Not only the most “pure” forms of social movement organizations, but also trade unions and left-wing political parties involved in the movement tend to stress participation as a founding principle. Some additional values however also emerge specifying (and differentiating) the conceptions of participatory democracy. References to limits to delegation, rotation principle, mandated delegation, criticism of delegation are present in about one tenth of our groups, and those to the deliberative democracy, consensual method inclusiveness and non-hierarchical decision-making in about a quarter.

Looking at general democratic values, it is remarkable that references to plurality, difference, heterogeneity as important democratic elements have been singled out in the documents of as much as half of our sample, with a value very near to that of the reference to (more traditional) participation. Equality is mentioned in the analysed documents of about one third of our sample and values such as transparency, inclusiveness and individual autonomy in about one quarter. Significantly, representative values are mentioned by just 6% of our organizations.

Our data on the basic themes mentioned in the documents confirms the “bridging” function of such frames as democracy as well as alternative globalization, global justice and workers’ rights (about half of the groups mention them) as well as of the reference to social justice (almost two thirds of our groups mention it). Ecological values, women’s rights, migrant rights and peace also emerge as quite relevant, being mentioned by about half of the groups. Reference to the Global South emerges in about half of the groups calling for solidarity with third world countries, but also in the half of them stressing human rights and in the one third referring to fair trade.

Our research confirms the pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of the Social Forum actors:

- First of all, our organizations cover a wide range in terms of size of individual and collective membership: about 50% declare (individual) membership of up to 1000 individuals; and those organizations that allow for collective membership, often involve quite a large number of groups (more than 25 in half of the cases).
- As for the territorial level involved, local presence is still considered to be important by three quarters of our organizations; also the international level is however important: about one third of our groups declare that they are organized at that level.
• Also the age of the organizations involved in the movement varies: in our sample, we have in fact, about one third of organizations founded before 1990 (about 13% before 1968), one third between 1990 and 1999 and one third after the year 2000.

• Social movement organizations also present different levels of formalization, centralization, formalized accountability, and autonomy from external actors.

These differences interact with different organizational models. Half of the organizations in our sample support an associational conception of internal decision-making. This means that – at least formally – a model based upon delegation and majority principle is quite common. Here the typical form of internal accountability is the representative one: delegates elected by the asambleary body have an important role in organizational decisions, and the decision-making system stresses the majority principles: preferences are aggregated either by pure majority or by bargaining, and the balance of aggregated preferences determines the group line. To a certain extent, this is an expected result: the presence of well established, large and resourceful organizations such as parties, unions and third sector associations in the global justice movement has often been noticed. However, it leads to a (not yet developed) reflection on the conditions for, and consequences of, the presence of large numbers of associations in common campaigns and networks.

The spread of the associational model is however only part of the picture. 13.1% of the organizations were classified as assembleary, since in the documents we analysed they stress the role of the assembly in a decision-making process which remains tied to aggregative methods of decision-making, such as voting or bargaining. The participatory elements are emphasized via the important role attributed to the assembly and its inclusiveness, but consensus is not mentioned as a principle, nor used as a decision-making method.

In an additional quarter (23%) of the organizations, the deliberative element comes to the fore. In particular, these organizations stress the importance of discourses and/or consensus over majoritarian decision-making. In these groups, consensus and/or deliberative democracy are explicitly mentioned as an organizational value and/or consensus is used in the decision making process in the assembly or in the executive committee. We can distinguish between the 13% of the organizations which apply consensus within an associational type (deliberative representation), and the 9% which apply consensus within an assembleary model (deliberative participation).

What these different organizations have in common is a high degree of reticularity. As many as about 80% of our organizations mention
collaboration/networking with national organizations and about the same percent with transnational organizations in their fundamental documents. Also significantly, among those who mention this information, about one third (slightly more at the transnational level) mention collaboration with groups that work on issues other than those they work on themselves, but with which they share values. The presence of network organizations is also remarkable: in our sample this is reflected by the fact that about half of our cases are networks/federations or ad hoc umbrella organizations. An additional indicator of the high reticularity of our movement organizations is the fact that almost half of the groups have collective membership. Our organizations emerge also as inclusive in terms of membership: only 15% mention requirements for individual members and 20% for collective membership.

Notwithstanding their critical position, social movement organizations interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Our organizations are quite open to interactions with institutions—they are not just emphasizing a negative message, but also often accepting to collaborate on specific problems. At the same time, however they tend to be critical of those institutions, and to perceive their own role as actively engaging in citizens’ control of institutional politics and implementing channels of discursive accountability. In relationship with representative institutions, statements of open refusal of collaboration are rare (11.5%), while an attitude of either collaboration or democratic control is more frequent (about one third each). Relations of collaboration are more often mentioned at the national than at the supranational level (where instead relations of control prevail). Differences between institutions are however limited, indicating that attitudes tend to spread from one institution to the others.

In trying to influence institutional decisions, social movement organizations use a variety of strategies. If protest is mentioned by a large majority of our groups (more than two thirds), a similarly large share mentions influencing the media, spreading alternative information and raising awareness as a main function of their groups, and almost half of the organizations claim to engage in political education of citizens. Although smaller, the significant number of groups mentioning political representation, advocacy, provision of services and self-help (oscillating between 11 and 22%) signal that most organizations engage in different types of activities. Even larger percents of organizations also mention lobbying (more than one third) and almost one fifth the defense of specific interests. This plural repertoire confirms the pluralistic nature of the movement, with a (somewhat pragmatic) orientation towards the use of multiple tactics.