PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY'S MOMENT

Francesca Polletta

If there are two things that unite the stunningly diverse movements of the last five years, it is their reliance on new digital media and their determination to enact, as well as bring about, more participatory forms of democracy. In this paper, I look at these developments separately and together. Why has enthusiasm for consensus-based decisionmaking and leaderless organizations that were seemingly abandoned by the 1970s gained new life? How has that enthusiasm come to be shared by the right and left, by Tea Party members alongside Occupy activists? Without diminishing the importance of economic crises and policymakers' responses to those crises in shaping the movements of the last five years, I call attention to developments both outside and within movements that have made ours into a participatory age. Among those developments, the rise of the Internet has not only made protests easier to organize, it has also produced new understandings of equality, organization, and democracy. Yet the contemporary zeal for participation has also created new challenges for activists. Among these is the challenge to make participatory democracy attractive to people who do not have a deep ideological commitment to it.

Though diverse in their targets, the social movements of the last five years have shared a common demand for democracy—or for *more* democracy. The movements of the Arab Spring sought to overthrow authoritarian regimes and secure free elections and freedoms of speech and press that are the linchpins of liberal democracy. But movements with democratic goals have not been limited to countries with authoritarian regimes. Recent movements in democratic regimes have also invoked the cause of democracy. In Greece, anti-austerity protests called for "direct democracy now." The Spanish Indignados denounced a democracy without choice. The Occupy movement in the United States targeted a political system allegedly rigged in favor of the rich. Participants in the Occupy movement in Slovenia chanted "No one represents us." In Latin America, first waves of students, then waves of the broader population challenged political corruption and

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inequality. International campaigns for intellectual property sharing imagine an "open source government." The tens of thousands of activists who participate in the World Social Forum and associated regional forums call for globalization from the bottom up.¹

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Even more striking, perhaps, has been activists' determination to enact radical democracy within their own movements. To be sure, most fledgling grassroots movements tend to adopt a bottom-up style of operating. Leadership is often informal and collective, drawing together charismatic figures with people willing to pitch in. Boundaries between organizations are porous, and decisions are made on the fly by whoever happens to be around at that moment. But what we have seen in recent movements is something more deliberate. Decisions are made by General Assemblies that are open to all. Consensus,

rather than voting, is standard. The watchwords are decentralization, participation, and autonomy.

A half-century removed from 1960s activists' experiments in collectivism, and decades after progressive activists seemed to have abandoned consensus-based decisionmaking as simply unrealistic, participatory democracy has made a stunning comeback. Why now? Where do activists' understandings of participatory democracy come from? Are activists practicing participatory democracy in new ways? And have they managed to overcome the inefficiencies and stalemates that plagued their predecessors?

The short answer is that activists' practice of participatory democracy is profoundly new, thanks in part to a feature of contemporary protest that is as striking as its democratic slogans: its reliance on digital media. For longtime activists, digital media have made it easier to coordinate protests and recruit members, and have also produced new ideas about what radically democratic organizations should look like. For newcomers—the millions of people with no protest experience who found themselves enthusiastically waving their fingers to signal agreement in Occupy's General Assemblies or chanting about direct democracy in Greece, Spain, or Chile—digital media have contributed to an enthusiasm for participation that reaches well beyond protest politics.

DEMOCRACY FROM A(THENS) TO Z(UCCOTTI PARK)

In 1962, members of the fledgling Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) called for a "participatory democracy" in which decisions were made by those

affected by them.² SDS did not invent the practices of consensus-based decision-making and decentralized leadership that have come to epitomize participatory democracy. Eighteenth century Quakers, 19th century abolitionists and women's suffrage groups, and early 20th century European anarcho-syndicalists, labor groups, and radical pacifists had used those practices long before new leftists discovered them. In fact, SDS activists did not even have internal organizational practices in mind when they talked about participatory democracy. Rather, they used the term to describe a macro-political system. Still, SDS's organizational style at the time was informal, and the group was inspired by the consensus-based decisionmaking used by student civil rights activists in the South. The notion that the movement itself should be radically democratic gained force. By the late 1960s, consensus-based decisionmaking, decentralized administration, and an anti-leadership ethos had been adopted by countless groups in the women's liberation and antiwar movements. In urban neighborhoods, cooperatives proliferated, and in rural areas, communes did as well.³

Scholars initially dismissed the political aspirations of participatory democratic forms. They argued that bids to operate as radical democracies were expressive and antipolitical, to be explained in terms of activists' psyches rather than their political purposes.⁴ By the mid-1970s, however, that view had begun to change. Political scientist Carl Boggs introduced the term "prefigurative" in 1977 to describe attempts to enact a radically egalitarian society in the lived practices of the movement, and sociologist Wini Breines used the term to describe the 1960s' new left.⁵ New leftists' experiments with consensus based decisionmaking and structureless organization were not antipolitical, Breines argued. Rather, they were a political alternative to the narrow instrumentalism and penchant for bureaucratic manipulation that characterized mainstream politics.⁶

The term "prefigurative" would enter activists' vocabulary as a powerful justification for radically democratic decisionmaking. But Breines, like other observers, did not see a prefigurative orientation as a recipe for success. Political reform demanded an ability to act quickly, manage resources shrewdly, and marshal expertise to realize goals. Decentralized and nonhierarchical organization made those things difficult. The inefficiencies of participatory democracy could be tolerated so long as a group was small, poorly funded, and low in political profile. But when opportunities arose for genuine impact, groups inevitably found themselves torn between democratic purists and those willing to give up some democracy in order to get things done.⁷

Another criticism of participatory democratic decisionmaking centered not on its inefficiency, but on its inequity. Participatory democracy could not even do what it was charged to do, namely, eliminate inequalities within the group. This was the complaint made by women's liberationist Jo Freeman. The activists Freeman knew had determinedly eliminated centralized structures and chains of command. But the "tyranny of structurelessness" was that in the absence of formal hierarchies, informal ones took their place. Power based on knowing the right people took the place of mechanisms of democratic accountability.⁸

There were still other criticisms. Political scientist Jane Mansbridge studied

Participatory democracy was treated as a worthy ideal, but one that was bound to fail. a New England town meeting and a leftist collective, and found members did not mind that some had more influence than others as long as everyone basically agreed with the final decisions. But when there were fundamental disagreements, either dissenting members were pressured into agreement, or the group fell into a stalemate.⁹

What gave such criticisms weight was that the scholars who raised them were genuinely sympathetic to activists' efforts to create egalitarian organizations. Moreover, the weaknesses critics identified seemed inherent to the organizational form. Participatory democracy was treated as a worthy ideal but one that was bound to fail.

By the 1990s, activists seemed to have accepted these criticisms. Confronted with the intrinsic limitations of participatory democracy and at the same time pressed by funders to accept more conventional organizational forms, activists began to abandon organizational practices that were once seen as *de rigueur*. Sometimes reluctantly, sometimes eagerly, they created boards of directors, fixed job descriptions, and hierarchical chains of command. Despite these changes, the result was not a return to the bureaucratic organizations activists had rejected. For example, sociologist Rebecca Bordt's study of feminist organizations in New York City in the early 1990s found that few of them resembled either an archetypal collectivist organization or an archetypal bureaucratic one. Most were hybrids: they combined a hierarchy of offices with informal consultation across levels, divided decisions into those requiring consensus and those not requiring it, and so on.¹⁰

This is not to say there were not movements operating with a more expansive understanding of participation. Portions of the antinuclear movement insisted on radically democratic decisionmaking. With the help of Quaker activists, they developed a model of affinity groups and spokes councils to make decisions in large groups. (The antinuclear Clamshell Alliance famously reached consensus with more than a thousand people participating.)¹¹ The direct action organization AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) used majority voting but permitted any member to bring issues to a vote at any time.¹² Democratic experimentation certainly continued. Still, the image of movement organizations as largely profes-

sional and at least quasi-bureaucratic dominated scholars' discussions, and to some extent, activists' as well.

The discussion changed after Seattle. In 1999, massive street protests against the World Trade Organization brought international visibility to a movement that was challenging corporate globalization. The protests also launched a cadre of activists who were committed to developing techniques of radically democratic decisionmaking that could be used in the context of high-profile civil disobedience. In 2001, the first World Social Forum was convened in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a city that was then earning an international reputation for its citywide participatory budgeting system. Bringing together activists opposed to neoliberalism from around the world, the World Social Forum was intended to be a space for dialogue. Organizers declared that the Forum would not take official positions. In subsequent World Social Forums as well as regional spinoffs and global summits, activists shared an increasingly sophisticated repertoire of tools for radically egalitarian decisionmaking. In a catalogue of the context of the con

This was a new kind of participatory democracy. It was inspired by diverse traditions and exemplars. A resurgent anarchism that drew from punk subcultures and Murray Bookchin's social ecology was influential, as were radical feminist ideas about process, and the model of the Mexican Zapatistas. This participatory democracy was suspicious of arriving at consensus too easily and sensitive to the dangers of structurelessness. And it came with an array of techniques and people skilled in their use.¹⁵

Global justice activists played key roles in the emergence of the Occupy Movement. As David Graeber tells the story, he had only vaguely heard about the call by the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* to "Occupy Wall Street" when he happened upon a planning meeting run by a leftist group. Frustrated that the advertised General Assembly ended up being nothing more than a series of speeches, Graeber and a few friends from the global justice movement also at the meeting began their own genuine General Assembly, eventually drawing people away and beginning a horizontal planning process for the occupation in Zuccotti Park. Occupy Slovenia was launched by global justice activists and minority rights advocates. When global justice activist and anthropologist Marianne Maeckelbergh arrived at Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona, she frequently ran into people she knew.¹⁶

As movement scholars like to say with respect to protest more generally, very little is completely spontaneous. Most activism—and in this case, a certain style of activism—comes from long-standing networks. Still, that doesn't explain why so many people with little experience in participatory democratic decisionmaking, and activism in general, were such eager adopters of the form. Why were global justice activists able to get protesters to sign on to horizontalist decisionmaking?

WE'RE ALL PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRATS NOW

Part of the answer is the odd combination of participation and nonparticipation that many young people experience today. The experience is one of nonparticipation in the sense that young people feel marginalized economically and ignored by national governments that are more responsive to banks than citizens. At the same time, thanks in part to the Internet, opportunities for participation have proliferated. From Wikipedia to citizen science, open-source software to open-source politics, and do-it-yourself (DIY) popular culture to participatory budgeting; there are more and more opportunities for ordinary people to collaborate to gather information, solve problems, and, sometimes, make decisions that affect their lives.

These opportunities coexist with, and in some ways reflect, a cultural trend toward what scholars have referred to as personalized or "individuated" politics. Young people, especially, want to participate, but not in traditional institutions such as political parties and civic associations. Instead, they often get involved in impermanent projects that give them chances for self-expression, autonomy, and recognition. Such projects are typically collective and oriented toward the common good; this is not an individualism that puts the person's well-being above all, but there is a premium on avenues of individual creativity and impact. The Internet has both fueled this yearning—sociologist Manuel Castells attributes it to the rise of a society in which power resides in networks of information—and provided outlets for it.¹⁷

Of course, there are many kinds of participation, and only some of them count as democratic. Crowdsourcing an advertising campaign is not democracy. Young people were eager participants in the Barack Obama's 2008 Internet campaign, which was celebrated as a grand experiment in bottom-up democracy. All talk aside of supporters "owning" the campaign, it was centrally and hierarchically managed by a corps of Silicon Valley techies who figured out how to persuade supporters to donate millions of dollars and thousands of hours of volunteer time, while providing staffers the consumer data that allowed them to fine-tune their fundraising appeals. If supporters expected to have a say in campaign strategy, they were disappointed. 19

The important point, however, is that participation is culturally prized. It makes sense that young people would be receptive to the more radical notion of participatory power. After all, the point of participatory democracy is not just to participate, but to decide—and deciding is exactly what young people fear they are not able to do in their economic and political lives outside of these movements.

Beyond making participation appealing, the Internet has also shaped activists'

ideas about what democracy is. Open source software allows for modifications by the users themselves. It is now claimed as a democratic exemplar by both the left and the right. "This is an open-source movement," an organizer said of the Tea Party movement. "The movement as a whole is smart."²⁰

Anthropologist Jeffrey Juris argues that the horizontalist forms of decision-making developed in the global justice movement were self-consciously modeled on

online networks. Juris describes an encounter between a global justice activist and a Trotskyist, who had come to a strategy meeting to try to recruit new members. "But there is another idea," the activist objected, "the network...where the goal isn't to recruit more members to your particular group, but to bring as many different groups, people, and

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nodes into the network as possible, so it expands outward, horizontally."²¹ In this vision of movement practice, autonomy is valued over unity. Coalitions are temporary: they can form, dissolve, and reform. A multitude of tactics coexist. Activists committed to nonviolence can complete their march before Black Bloc members, who are willing to damage property, arrive on the scene. Radical democracy does not require consensus, but rather a combination of pragmatism and a willingness to respect the views of others. Similarly, the democracy prefigured by the movement is one modeled on the Internet, with autonomous groups linked along the lines of a virtual network. There is no political center, and any unity is self-consciously provisional.

Ideas such these have made contemporary activism profoundly different from that of the 1960s. A 1960s activist would be taken aback by the paraphernalia of participatory democracy today. Participants use a repertoire of hand signals to indicate agreement, concerns about process, and different levels and types of disagreement. There are specialized roles in decisionmaking: the moderator; the vibes watcher, who monitors the emotional tone of discussion; and the progressive stacker, who moves speakers from historically unrepresented groups to the front of the queue. Formal rules and roles are sometimes seen as necessary to equality rather than as obstacles to it. Along with equality, other terms in the old idiom have been redefined or replaced. Activists talk less about leaderlessness than about self-management and less about community than about a respect for difference.

Ideas about what participatory democracy should look like have continued to evolve. As the name implies, the "square movements"—Tahrir, Puerta del Sol,

Zuccotti Park—involved large numbers of people living in a central and public space. Global justice activists typically mobilized for Group of Eight (G8) meetings or social forums and then dispersed. By contrast, the point of the occupations was to perform a demos, one that was excluded from elite decisionmaking and yet could enact democracy better than representative institutions. Whereas global justice groups tended to insist that decisions be made in small groups, with larger General

Activists have learned that structure is not the same as hierarchical structure, and that simply professing their egalitarianism is not enough to bring it about. Assemblies used only to share information, many Occupy movements flipped that arrangement.²² Occupy wanted to show that direct democracy could work even in large groups; hence their use of the People's Mic, in which a speaker's comments are repeated by those in front to those further back so that everyone can hear without mechanical amplification, as well as time spent instructing people on hand signals, and the emphasis on consensus.

DEMOCRATIC DILEMMAS

What has activists' practice of participatory democracy achieved? Without a doubt, activists are better at it than they were in the 1960s. Activists have learned that structure is not the same as hierarchical structure, and that simply professing their egalitarianism is not enough to bring it about. They have developed decisionmaking techniques that are more egalitarian, more efficient, and less prone to stalemate than those used in collectivist organizations in the 1960s.

Many participants have experienced participatory decisionmaking as meaningful and exciting. They talk about the solidarity they experience and the trust that joint decisionmaking breeds. However, many other participants have found consensus-based decisionmaking intolerably slow. They complain, as did 1960s activists, that hardworking and talented leaders are forced to operate behind the scenes, ritually denying their own leadership for fear of being perceived as directive.²³

In some ways, requiring consensus has been a good strategy. Practitioners of direct action have long argued that you cannot expect people to put their bodies on the line if you do not involve them in the decision to do so. Global justice activists argue that when authority is diffuse, police have a harder time shutting down demonstrations by arresting a leader. But critics point out that police can also use the absence of a clearly defined leader as an excuse to refuse to negotiate with the group. Most activists would agree that soliciting broad input from a group

helps identify tactical opportunities and creative solutions that might otherwise be missed. However, some activists would then argue that when the time comes to implement tactical plans, the strategic value of soliciting broad input diminishes.

Champions of participatory democratic practices generally refuse to defend their practices on narrowly instrumental grounds. Rather, the point of operating in a radically democratic fashion is to prefigure an alternative. Activists want to show "that another world is possible," as the slogan of the World Social Forum contends. To enact an alternative is to demonstrate that it is in fact possible. It is to refuse the constraints of the present. Prefiguration thus bridges strategic and expressive motivations for radical democracy.²⁴

But there is another tension at the heart of prefiguration—though one that activists do not talk much about. It is the tension between preserving an alternative within one's own activist network, and modeling an alternative for a wider audience. Sociologist James Jasper refers to this as the strategic dilemma of "reaching out or reaching in."²⁵ How much energy does one spend ministering to the needs and ideals of the members of a group—the people who are doing the hard work of the movement—and how much energy does one spend trying to make the movement attractive to people outside it? Is the aim to prefigure an alternative society for like-minded activists or a broader audience?

It is instructive, in this respect, to consider the 1950s American radical pacifists, who are often cited as early practitioners of prefigurative politics.²⁶ Groups such as the Peacemakers and the Committee for Nonviolent Revolution combined daring acts of direct action against the war machine with collectivist organizations, in which all decisions were made by consensus. As radical pacifists saw it, challenging militarism meant challenging the bureaucratic ethos and narrow instrumentalism that accompanied it. "The movement must live its principles," said one pacifist. "It must live cooperation."²⁷ But the goal was survival. Radical pacifists operated in a period of state repression and public opprobrium. The point of prefiguration was to preserve the values of individual conscience and nonviolence among activists' small network. It was to preserve, as Peacemaker A.J. Muste put it, "a church in the catacombs," until pacifists could have any hope of mobilizing a wider constituency.²⁸

When the prospects for mobilizing a larger constituency are dim, the internal life of the organization becomes extraordinarily important. To preserve a flame of radical democracy in an era hostile to it would be an accomplishment in and of itself. The rigor and purity of participatory democratic practices would be more important than their ease or flexibility. Indeed, more demanding practices might keep members bound to the group during a period of political intransigence.

But what about when there are good prospects for mobilizing people? And

what about when there are opportunities to demonstrate to a much wider circle that another world is indeed possible? While there are some activists who believe that the system's collapse is imminent and simply maintaining cooperative institutions within a small circle is enough, most want to see participatory democratic practices taken up much more broadly. But they do not spend much time making that happen. By contrast, radical pacifist Bill Moyer argued that if you had five

To preserve a flame of radical democracy in an era hostile to it would be an accomplishment in and of itself. people involved in developing an alternative institution, one of those five people should have the sole job of spreading the idea of the institution. Presumably that would include making it look plausible that the institution could work.²⁹

I do not know whether ordinary Americans who saw media footage of Occupy's General Assemblies have begun to think about majority rule in new ways, or whether some of the large NGOs that have sent representatives to the World Social Forum have modified their own practices in response. Activists have

certainly not spent a lot of time or energy figuring out how to make horizontalist practices seem easy, appealing, and useable in a range of settings.

Indeed, even if they wanted to, the complex apparatus of decisionmaking that activists have developed to make the process fairer—the hand signals, the procedures around stacking and standing aside, and so on—may also have the unintended consequence of making it less accessible to people outside anarchist circles. As a Latina activist said of Occupy Boston's consensus process, "If the point was to involve community members and immigrants, it was an inaccessible language, it wasn't connecting with the people."³⁰

It is not that people could not learn the techniques if they so desired. Rather, it is that many of them see consensus-based decisionmaking as middle class and white. I want to emphasize that there is nothing inherent about that association. Indeed, in the early 1960s, consensus-based decisionmaking became appealing to northern white students precisely because it was associated with the southern civil rights movement—because it was seen as *black*. In the mid-1960s, though, that changed. For black activists in the United States, participatory democratic movement practices came to be seen as ideologically, rather than practically, motivated as middle class, and as white. Those associations continue to the present. One consequence is that a style of decisionmaking that is intended to empower people without privilege by treating them as equals sometimes has the opposite effect: it makes them feel that they are not really part of the group.³¹

How can one change participatory democracy's symbolic associations?

Anarchist Andrew Cornell says that he often asks himself, "When I think I'm acting like an anarchist, are people perceiving me to be acting like, say, a white and/or middle class, and/or male, and/or straight person? Am I?"³² Activist and sociologist Betsy Leondar-Wright argues that when operating in mixed-class groups, middle class activists need to abandon "inessential weirdnesses," such as countercultural clothing styles, group hugs, or an insistence on pure consensus, that are often off-putting to working class activists.³³ Note that she calls for junking only *inessential* weirdnesses: the point is not to compromise one's political commitments, but rather to figure out which practices really are political commitments.

More broadly, if activists want to demonstrate to people outside their networks that participatory democracy is in fact possible, they need to find ways to make their decisionmaking practices, if not easy, at least attractive. They need to give people without an ideological commitment to enacting a radical democracy a reason to participate in decisionmaking processes that are often long, frustrating, and without immediate tangible benefits. Perhaps they should take a page from the digitally-based forms of participation—the wikis, open-source software, and crowdsourcing platforms—that have managed to make participation fun, even when it involves substantial work. Perhaps they should build more experimentation into their decisionmaking, with the goal not only to show that bottom-up democracy is possible (within a fairly small group of like-minded people), but to show what it should look like to achieve maximum effect.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY NOW—AND LATER?

Historically, popular enthusiasm for citizen participation has come in waves. During the Progressive Era, a movement of intellectuals and activists developed deliberative forums around the country, and eventually won support from Congress and the White House. Ordinary people, many of them newly arrived immigrants, organized evening meetings in public schools to discuss issues ranging from local budget decisions to national immigration policy, sometimes directly with local officials and candidates.³⁴ When federal planners devised new antipoverty initiatives in the 1960s, "maximum feasible participation" was the new paradigm, prioritizing community-led development and involving the poor in the initiatives' administration. As one observer wrote at the time, "the days when poor people would passively accept what they were given were numbered everywhere."³⁵

Such enthusiasm, however, was not sustained. The Progressive-Era forum movement collapsed when politicians decided that, in the run-up to World War I, public opinion should be fashioned from the top down, not the bottom up. After the war's end, enthusiasm for using propaganda techniques in peacetime and the rise of a "public relations" industry sapped intellectuals' faith in the possibilities of

participatory citizenship.³⁶ Likewise, the pro-poor movements of the 1960s waned in the 1970s, and "maximum feasible participation" became the punchline to a joke about government inefficiency.

Today's enthusiasm for bottom-up democracy is arguably larger in its scope than ever before, cutting across business, education, government, and popular culture. The forms of collaboration made possible by new digital media undoubtedly have solved some of the problems of coordination and scale that have long plagued arguments for participatory democracy. If the past is any guide, however, the pendulum will eventually swing the other way, with our newfound confidence in the capacity of ordinary people to make important decisions replaced once again by skepticism. For contemporary activists, then, the challenge is to create the habits of citizen input that will endure even after the blush has worn off the new technologies of participation.

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- ³² Cornell, 182.
- 33 Leondar-Wright, 134.
- Kevin Mattson, Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 41–47.
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- ³⁶ Mattson, 126.