Participatory Democracy in Social Movements

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Participatory democracy refers to an organizational form in which decisionmaking is decentralized, nonhierarchical, and consensus-oriented. It can be contrasted with bureaucracy, in which decisionmaking is centralized, hierarchical, and based on a formal division of labor, as well as with majority vote.

Participatory democratic organizations today claim a diverse lineage, with precursors in ancient Athenian democracy, the New England town hall, Quaker meetings, Spanish civil war affinity groups, and the American post-WWII pacifist movement. The term itself was popularized in 1962 by the new left group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and it soon became an organizational ethos for many in the new left and the student wing of the civil rights movement. "Collectives" run on participatory democratic principles proliferated in the radical feminist and antiwar movements of the late 1960s (Ferree and Martin 1995; Polletta 2002). By the end of the decade, many young activists perceived the political system as intransigent, and they turned to building alternative schools, health centers, food coops, and publishing guilds, thus contributing to an enduring cooperative movement (Rothschild and Whitt 1986). With the rise of the antinuclear movement in Europe and the United States in the late 1970s, activists put participatory democratic movement organizations to use once again in overtly challenging the

state, developing institutions of "affinity groups" and "spokescouncils" to coordinate mass actions involving thousands of people. More recently, participatory democratic forms have been prominent in the anti-corporate globalization and global justice movements (Polletta 2002; Juris 2008).

For sociologists writing about the surge of collectivist organizations in the 1960s, the participatory democratic impulse reflected a youthful repudiation of authority that was at odds with the demands of effective political reform. Since then, many scholars have instead adopted Breines's (1989) view of participatory democracy as animated by a *prefigurative* impulse. By enacting within the movement itself values of radical equality, freedom, and community, activists have sought to bring into being a society marked by those values. Far from anti-political, participatory democracy has been an attempt to transform what counts as politics.

Still, most scholars have seen participatory democracies as fragile. Earlier accounts emphasized the form's fundamental inefficiency (see discussions in Breines 1989), inequity (Freeman 1973), or its inability to reconcile competing interests (Mansbridge 1983). More recent accounts have sought instead to identify the factors that make participatory democracies more or less difficult to sustain. For example, participatory democracy is generally good at some movement tasks, such as fostering tactical innovation and leadership development and less good at others, such as coordinating large-scale protests and negotiating with authorities (Staggenborg 1989; Polletta 2002). Funders' requirements that organizations have formal job descriptions and conventional board of directors has forced many movement organizations to adopt a more bureaucratic structure than they originally envisioned (McCarthy, Britt, and Wolfson 1991; Matthews 1994).

A view of participatory democracy as middle class and white has sometimes discouraged its use among activists of color (Polletta 2005).

At the same time, scholars have recognized that the meanings of participatory democracy, equality, even consensus, have varied across organizations and over time. For example, contemporary feminist organizations with a formal hierarchy of offices but consultation across them, or with only some decisions made by consensus might not be recognized as "pure" participatory democracies by 1960s activists but their proponents say that they are participatory, democratic, and effective (Disney and Gelb 2000). Perhaps an even better example comes from the contemporary anti-corporate globalization movement. New digital technologies have not only made it possible to coordinate actions democratically across long distances and multiple organizations; they have also generated new conceptions of participatory democracies as horizontal networks (Juris 2008).

Future research should investigate more broadly how new communications technologies are changing movement practices of participatory democracy. Research should also examine if, when, and how participatory democratic movements have influenced the practices of mainstream organizations. Finally, we know little about participatory democratic organizations on the right. If they exist, are they also animated by prefigurative purposes? In short, there is much still to learn about the rationales for and impacts of participatory democracy in movements.

SEE ALSO:

Anarchism, Anti-Globalization Movements, Democracy and Organizations, Leadership in

Movements, New Left, Oligarchy and Organizations, Social Movement Organizations, Women's

Movements

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