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Mobilising Dissent: Social Activism in a Global Age

Summary

Geoffrey Pleyers is a professor at the Université de Louvain in Belgium and also Chair of the Research Committee on Social Movements of the International Sociologist Association. In this talk Prof Pleyers shares some thoughts about democracy; what democracy has become today and the idea that there are multiple forms of democracy. He discusses democracy as it is lived out in social and transition movements particularly among young people and the role of information. He also considers the recent return of young people to party politics. He concludes by suggesting that we need to think about a different concept which he calls ‘multiple democracy’ to explore how these different actors and models of democracy can work together, even if there are some tensions, towards a more democratic and fairer world.

Introduction

Prof Pleyers began his talk with a quote from Colin Crouch: “*While formal democracy is now solidly established in a record number of countries, the substance of democracy has considerably declined in the last decades.*” This statement, he suggested, is quite true if we consider formal democracy. For example, in Europe and at a national level the role of lobbyists and technocrats, the role of the Troika¹ in making decisions in southern Europe and secret negotiations of international treaties all indicate some kind of post-democracy. In addition some alarming studies of young people, among whom abstention was very high in the last European elections and where many young people voted for far right parties, suggest that they believe less in Europe and that Europe has become less democratic. However this is only part of the picture.

At the same time as we see post-democracy symptoms in many different countries we also see an expansion of democratic practices and considerations in grass-roots movements and all realms of life. Prof Pleyers went to see what is happening in different countries in Western and Eastern Europe and also in Latin America. What he found leads him to question the statement of post-democracy by posing another question: are we looking in the right place when we look for democracy? When we think about democracy we tend to look at the Prime Minister, governments and institutions when actually democracy has become quite different and is very lively at different scales and in different spaces. We have a strong focus on institutions, and this is important, but it is only a piece of the puzzle. Prof Pleyers invited us to look again with an expanded idea of democracy starting from the bottom up. He suggested that the sincerity of social movements and emerging groups can help us to rethink democracy and the way we live together.

¹ The term Troika which comes from the Russian meaning ‘group of three’, was increasingly used during the Eurozone crisis to describe the European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank, who formed a group of International lenders that laid down stringent austerity measures when they provided bailouts, or promises of bailouts for indebted peripheral European states – such as Ireland, Portugal and Greece – in the financial crisis.

A number of political scientists have suggested that today our societies are democratic not so much because of elected parliaments but because of the people who monitor elected representatives: journalists, NGOs and others who check if leaders are corrupt and who denounce misbehaviour. This is the idea of ‘monitory democracy’ and the role of civil society. This is important and should be included in the panoramic view of democracy. However, we can also go one step beyond this to think about democracy beyond the relations between citizens and formal, institutional democracy.

Democracy is also about the way we behave with each other. It is about the way we connect with each other. It is about the way we consider each other as equals, and so democracy is not limited to the public sphere, it is also in the private sphere. Prof Pleyers’ argument is that we have to open the box of democracy to think in different ways and in different realms of life, but then after that, to see how these different forms of democracy may fit together and have to work together. This is the proposal of ‘multiple democracy’ and this talk is about how this idea was developed.

So small movements may help us think about democracy today. We have to focus on their successes as well as their limitations. All these movements are limited, if not they would have already changed the world. Prof Pleyers has developed a model which describes six kinds of actors and six elements of democracy (see below).

Actors	Models of democracy
Occupy	Direct democracy Deliberative demo.
Transition movements	Responsible demo.
Bloggers, Netactivists Journalists	Informational democracy
Expert activists	Argumentative demo.
‘Mobilizers’ SM Organizers	Protest democracy

Democracy at the core of social movements

In the early part of this decade, between 2010 and 2014, the emerging social movements had a strong will to renew both democracy and activism. They all pointed to the limits of formal democracy. One area they highlighted is the collusion between economic, media and political elites. In Iceland for example people realised that there were many family ties between the government and the banking sector. Similarly the Occupy movements have highlighted that 1% of the richest people owns more wealth than all the rest of the population of the world. There are lots of other examples of collusion across the world and these movements challenged this. However, if you look closely, they did not spend much energy on denouncing the lack of democracy, they put most of their energy into implementing democracy on the city squares and in local neighbourhoods.

So this leads to the idea of democracy not so much as a demand from government but something you want to apply around you. They developed a whole range of practical practices of democracy in the city squares, in the Occupy camps and in the neighbourhoods. People often ask: why has the Occupy movement disappeared? But if you look many of these young people are still very active in housing movements, food movements and local democracy. As one young person put it: *“We learned what we had to learn on the square. What was the point to remain there all the time? It is about changing society from below.”* So what is important is to implement democracy. It is a personal commitment to implement your own values in your practices. This is the starting point and the aim and objective of the movements.

This thinking is not new at all but what the camps do is to build spaces of experience, sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society which permit actors to do three things: to live according to their own principles; to knit different social relations; and to express their subjectivity. The camps are sporadic, they don't stay forever, but research has shown that they have a huge and long-lasting impact on people's lives. This is especially because in these movements democracy is seen as a way of life, as not only a demand, but as a practice and also as a personal commitment.

These kinds of movements, most of the time, see social change starting at a local level and very often they reduce democracy to a local level. Can we really change the world just with a small neighbourhood assembly? We can have an impact but direct democracy at this very local level is also limited. How do you go from local change to world transformation? It is seeing this small scale, local democracy as part of the solution that makes it much more interesting.

Responsible democracy

The second part of the model is 'responsible democracy'. This is seen in movements such as transition towns, alternative food networks, city gardening and many others which are partly concerned with ecology but also with democracy. These people insist on the consistency between your values and your practices. It is not only about implementing your concept of democracy in collective decision-making processes but also about implementing it in your daily life and in all realms of life: *“I have done it (got involved in the transition movement) because I don't want any more to take part in that, I don't want to tell myself that somewhere people are suffering from my choices as a consumer.”*

The centrality of this ethical relationship with self, democracy as a personal commitment and personal responsibility brings us close to the thinking of Jacques Rancière who said: *“Democracy is an emancipation project that lies in people practices oriented towards the presupposition of the equality of anyone with anyone.”* There is a self-questioning that leads us to a broader reflection about democracy beyond the state. The idea that the state has taken a monopoly over democracy may be a misconception or even a trap. Just voting and then thinking everything is OK is not enough – you have to implement democracy every day and work at it. Many countries are not democratic at all even if they have relatively fair elections.

Informational democracy

A third component of democracy is 'informational democracy'. The Internet has changed a lot of things. It opens access to information but also brings new challenges. How can we bring relevant information to citizens and how can they find relevant information? There was

so much hope in the Internet as opening an information society with everyone having access. But there is still the mass media who manufacture information and there is collusion between political, economic and media elite. Berlusconi being an extreme case.

In thinking about becoming a better informed society we have to go beyond the online/offline divide. The Internet and social media are part of this but social media has not replaced mass media. Most people still get most of their information through mass media. Even when social media has been important, for example in the Egyptian revolution, people actually took to the streets when the small YouTube videos were broadcast by Al Jazeera. So the real change is the articulation between the different forms of media. Sometimes these work together synergistically but often there are confrontations. For example if you look at some of the demonstrations in Mexico and Brazil people didn't march to the presidential palace but to the headquarters of the mainstream media. So today we have probably become less naïve about the possibility of the Internet and the information society.

Another point is that the Internet, although it does allow direct encounter with everyone, does not only promote an open and tolerant culture and spread democratic values. It also allows the spread of hate and racism and the values of the far right and fundamentalism. The Internet is also not a space that is free from states and politicians. Politicians care about their online image and also work to give others a bad image online. There is also repression and control associated with writing online in many countries. So the key point is when we talk about democracy the more insightful way to look at information is to focus on the interplay between online and offline rather than the divide.

Argumentative democracy

The fourth kind of democracy is 'argumentative democracy'. Here the idea is that in a democracy, in the end, the best argument will prevail. If you have a really good argument which is clearly much better for the common good, even if it is just made by a minority of people, it will win through. There are many NGOs and expert networks who try to build counter expertise to show how alternative policies are rational. They do have a real impact on some specific measures at the national and European level. But is it that easy? Is it true that the best arguments change the world? The 2008/9 financial crash shows that this is not the case. The best arguments did not prevail because it is not about arguments it is about meaning and power relations. However large it is the crisis itself will not generate social change. Social change depends on the capacity of social movements to bring out the questions posed by the historic situation and to advance alternative political visions and economic rationality.

Protest democracy

The fifth kind of democracy is the most obvious one; the mobilisers. These are people who believe that if you want to have an impact you have to put people on the street. These people are experts in building social movements and in organising and connecting movements. In the end they hope that the government will change its mind and implement good policies. They trust that the government will in the end make the right decision. But they never really trust government, even progressive governments. They think government will only do the right thing if there are sufficient people demonstrating to push them towards the good policies.

Multiple democracy

So there are these five kinds of actors and each one is implementing, in the main, actions towards an element of democracy. Prof Pleyers suggests that it is most fruitful if we think of all these forms of democracy together. Up until recently his thesis was that many people are no longer interested in institutional policies and party politics but that young people in particular were developing a range of alternative forms of participation. However, recent events have questioned this perspective. It seems that young people may be returning to the sixth type of democracy party politics. This can be interpreted in a couple of ways. The first is that young people now want to 'occupy' politics. Another way to see this however, is through this idea of multiple democracy of which institutional democracy is one piece. Institutional democracy is not enough but it may be part of the game.

Everyone said that if you want to get young people back in to politics you have to develop new ways of doing politics. So what are Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders doing differently? There are three lessons from the Corbyn campaign. The first is that he is not a geek. He didn't campaign online, he had direct, face to face meetings. Secondly he directly addresses issues of concern to young people. Thirdly, and this may be important, young people saw him as an authentic person; he believes in what he says. This idea of personal ethics in relation to oneself is something that young people are looking for in politics too.

So are we back to the old politics? Well not exactly. Firstly it would not have happened at all without digital media and the interplay between online/offline. Secondly, and most interestingly, it is an attempt to combine different forms of democracy. To combine representative democracy with direct democracy using different forms and tools to foster participation. There are a number of experiments across Europe attempting to combine direct and representative democracy including the Pirate Party in Germany, the Five Stars party in Italy and Podemos inspired by Indignades the Spanish Occupy movement. But we have to face the fact that most of them have been a failure so far.

So if we think about multiple democracy we have to reflect much more about the way these different types of democracy combine, even if there are some tensions. In particular we have to de-centre our perspective from institutional politics. This may be an important piece but it is just part of democracy. From this perspective social movements have many impacts not only in the institutional arena but also in daily life. At the same time there is no direct translation from social movements to institutional politics, it goes through many different routes.

If we look at democracy in different ways not only in the institutional world but also at local, national and global scale with different forms of citizenship we have some elements to reflect on one of the main challenges of today. As the sociologist Martin Albrow, has said: *"Global democracy and citizenship remain, for the most part, to be invented"*. Taken together these multiple strands of democracy offer concrete ways forward for a multi-dimensional approach to deal with, first of all, the structural limits of representative democracy but also to explore paths towards more democratic societies.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.
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