

The DEMOS Project

The project focuses upon forms of **participatory democracy** as they are elaborated ‘from below’ and implemented both in the internal organization of social movements and in experiments with deliberative decision-making. In particular, the project analyses the issue of active democracy as it emerges in the theories and practices of **movements demanding a ‘globalization from below’**.

Social movements criticise the fundamentals of conventional practices of politics, and experiment with new **models of democracy** both in their internal structure and in the ways in which they interact with political institutions. Of particular interest are the conceptions and practices of democracy that have developed in the global movement/s that are mobilizing transnationally and demanding social justice and participatory democracy.

The ensuing debate about democracy is particularly relevant both for the development of civil society, and for the legitimization of political institutions at local, national and supranational levels. Our research — focusing on **six European countries** (France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Switzerland), as well as the **EU** itself — embraces an analysis of documents pertaining to both movements and public institutions, websites, semi-structured interviews with non-governmental organizations and public administrators, surveys of movement activists, participant observation of movement groups and experiences of participatory decision-making.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Our research analyses the evolution of the conceptions and practices of participatory forms of democracy in social movements. In particular, we address the following topics:

Movements’ criticisms of existing democracy. Movements challenge representative models of democracy. Looking at different territorial levels of governance, we aim to reconstruct the normative conception/s of democracy developed by movement organizations and activists.

Movements’ internal practice of democracy. Challenging conventional politics, global movement/s propose participatory forms of organization, based on individuals and organizational networks of horizontal social relationships, with broad participation and inter-changeable leadership. Focusing on Social Forums or similar networks, we shall analyse how participatory models are implemented, their advantages, and their problems.

Movements’ strategies in the construction of a public sphere. Social movement activists are frequent users of new media (especially the internet), both as internal and semi-public instruments of organization, debate and co-ordination, and as means of direct, unmediated coverage of activities (events, campaigns and various initiatives) of the movements themselves, as well as instruments of protest (web-strikes, mirror-websites, etc.). We shall observe a variety of these practices, focusing in particular on communicative strategies.

The project aims to make a significant and innovative contribution to scientific knowledge about experiments in deliberative democracy, both within social movements and involving social movements.

The focus of the research is upon ‘**active citizenship**’: the project takes into account the increasing demands of institutional reforms that, at local, national and supranational levels, can favour citizens’ trust in and support for democracy.

Our research is driven by policy considerations. Deliberative processes are important means by which to empower citizenship participation, and social movements are a relevant form of active citizenship. Better understanding of the emerging visions of democratic processes and the practices they involve is essential to the promotion of the active participation of citizens.

In particular, our research is intended to contribute to the design of ways to increase citizens’ participation in institutional decision-making processes. At the end of the project, the implications of the research for policy reforms will be elaborated.

THE RESEARCH

Political opportunities. The political opportunities and environmental resources for 'global movement/s' will be systematically assessed on the basis of existing evidence.

Searching the net. The movement's websites will be examined in order to develop understanding of alternative communicative strategies employed by movement actors.

Visions of democracy. Extensive discourse analysis of the documentation produced by social movements and self-organized groups will allow investigation of emerging images of democracy.

Organizational networks. Interviews with social movement organizations will be designed to acquire knowledge about the practical implementations of principles of horizontal participation and consensual decision-making, as well as the extent and types of interactions with authorities.

Global activists. A targeted structured survey will address the participatory visions and practices of participants in European demonstrations and movement events.

Practices of deliberative democracy. Participant observation aims to illuminate the activities of movement organizations, with particular attention to their experiences of participatory decision-making.

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