7
Democratization from Below: Civil Society versus Social Movements?

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While in part overlapping in empirical focus and theoretical concerns, social movement studies and civil society studies have grown apart from each other. Besides conceptualizing objects which are at least in part different, the two fields of studies have also focused on different normative and theoretical concerns. Both are plural fields, with different and contrasting approaches in each. While social movement studies developed from attention to conflicts, considered as positive movers of society, civil society studies stressed the emergence of an autonomous sphere of activities, separated from the state and the market. In this, the two fields of studies tend to present different conceptions of democracy: social movement studies stress the virtues of conflict, whereas civil society studies focus on the virtues of an autonomous sphere between the state and the market.

Besides and beyond disciplinary fields, civil society has however also been framed differently by a variety of social and political actors. Conflicts and autonomy have been in fact also mentioned by the collective actors that took part in democratization processes: civil society actors that carried out processes of democratization from below presented themselves as supporting another politics, developing participatory and deliberative visions of democracy. This radical conception of civil society stood out from the institutional actors in the democracy promotion policy field, which tended instead to spread a neo-liberal vision of civic society as subsidiary producers of (cheap) services and a legitimating frame for a narrow conception of representative democracy. The gap between what oppositional civil society expects from democracy and what democracy promoters expect from civil society organizations contributes to explain some failures.

In what follows, I shall first discuss overlappings but also tensions in the social sciences between the field of study focusing on social movements

and the one focusing on civil society. Second, I shall reconstruct the conceptualization of civil society in the paradigmatic case of Eastern European transition to democracy, singling out horizontal participation in autonomous public spheres as central main elements.

7.1   Civil society and social movement studies: a difficult dialogue

Social movement organizations (SMOs) and civil society organizations (as well as, for instance, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) are concepts often used as synonymous. Especially, some specific groups, issues, or campaigns have been analyzed as typical examples of the evolution of social movements, civil society, and/or NGOs. Interestingly for us, this had been the case when the 1989 wave of democratization spread, representing a turning point in research on transition and democracy (see inter alia Joppke, 1995; Goodwin, 2001). While that literature had been in fact permeated by first structuralist, and then elitist biases (inter alia Collier, 1999; Bermeo, 1997), the 1989 peaceful revolutions were greeted as examples of democratization from below and linked to the powerful agency of civil society. Democracy promotion was clearly also influenced by these visions, shifting from party building to incentive to civil society organizations.

Other examples could be mentioned. In particular, in the early 2000s, the transnational campaigns of the global justice movement brought together hundreds of charities, trade unions, faith groups, student unions, grassroots groups – that is, organizations that had been addressed in political sociology within the large field of social movement studies (defined as opposed to party and interest groups); in international relations, with a growing focus on NGOs (as opposed to nation-states); in social theory, within the 'revival' of the civil society (as opposed to the state and the market). The same is true of many countersummits, global days of action, and transnational social forums, joined by representatives of thousands of associations and tens of thousands of activists (della Porta, 2007; della Porta, 2009a, 2009b). Students of SMOs, NGOs, and the Civil Society have also been fast in extending their focus on the new global dimension of these mobilizations, through concepts such as *Transnational* SMOs, *International* NGOs, and *Global* Civil Society.

When moving from empirics to theory, it is however true that very little dialogue existed between the fields of studies focusing, respectively, on social movements, civil society, or NGOs (della Porta & Diani, 2011).

At least in part, this is due to increasing disciplinary specialization. While attention to social movements first developed in political sociology, civil society was conceptualized and debated by normative theorists, and international relations scholars coining the term 'NGOs' in order to conceptualize actors beyond the states. Although these fields of study have much to offer to our understanding of these emerging conflicts in our society, they most often talked past each other.

Focusing on social movements and civil societies, besides the possibility for growing dialogue, there are however also tensions between the two fields – both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, civil society organizations have often been conceptualized as the product of the 'taming' of social movements (Kaldor, 2003). Where social movements privilege protest, civil society organizations are said to use less disruptive forms. While social movements put forward radical claims, civil society organizations are presented as moderate and reasonable. And whereas social movements are based on grassroots organizational forms, civil society organizations are often well organized and quite rich in resources.

From the theoretical point of view, social science literature on the two types of actors stresses quite different contributions to democracy: social movement studies pointing at the virtues of conflicts, civil society studies underlining the autonomy of these actors from the state and the market.

Social movement studies have long stressed *conflict* as the dynamic element for our societies. The 'European tradition' in social movement studies has looked at new social movements as potential carriers of a new central conflict in our post-industrial societies, or at least of an emerging constellation of conflicts (della Porta & Diani, 2006, chapter 2). In the 'American tradition', the resource mobilization approach reacted to a, then dominant, conception of conflicts as pathologies. In his influential book *Social Conflicts and Social Movements*, Anthony Oberschall (1973) defined social movements as the main carriers of societal conflicts. In *Democracy and Disorder*, Sidney Tarrow influentially pointed to the relevant and positive role of unconventional forms of political participation in the democratic processes. From Michael Lipsky (1965) to Charles Tilly (1978), the first systematic works on social movements developed from traditions of research that stressed conflicts of power, both in the society and in politics. In fact, a widely accepted definition of social movements introduced conflicts as a central element for their conceptualization: 'Social movement actors are engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts, meant to promote or oppose social change.

By conflict we mean an oppositional relationship between actors who seek control of the same stake – be it political, economic, or cultural power – and in the process make negative claims on each other – i.e., demands which, if realized, would damage the interests of the other actors' (della Porta & Diani, 2006, 21). Conflicts – and in particular protests – have been in fact considered as positive for different reasons, ranging from the 'internal' effects of creating solidarity and collective identities as well as organizational networks, increasing incentives for collective action (della Porta, 2011; della Porta & Mosca, 2005), to the 'external' one of improving democratic outputs (della Porta, 2013).

Analysts of civil society have rather stressed the role of non-contentious forms of collective action, focused on consensual agendas. For example, della Porta and Diani (2011) listed, 'campaigns promoting collective responses to pressing public issues that most recognize as central (e.g. environmental degradation or the persistence of inequality between Western and developing areas) are surely akin to coalitions if not to full-fledged social movements: they involve multiple organizations and may also generate long term solidarities'. As they noted, instead, 'the conflict element is largely missing as civil society often acts in pursuit of goals defined broadly enough to make them acceptable – if not prioritarian – to large sectors of the public opinion'.

If the presence of conflicts is certainly not denied in social science literature addressing civil society, nevertheless, especially since the 1990s, the conception of politics as an arena for the expression of conflicts has been challenged (or at least balanced) by an emerging attention to the development of communicative arenas as spaces for consensus building. In normative theory, but also in the empirical research, attention to autonomous spaces of communication developed, especially within the study of civil society. Dubbed as the 'most favored export from sociological theory into politics' (Mitzal, 2001), but also as 'flattened out and emptied of content' (Chandoke, 2003), the concept of a civil society has been used as a synonym of associational life and emancipation from state power. Particularly inspired by new social movements and the movement for democracy in Eastern Europe (Mitzal, 2001), in social theory, the 'revival' of civil society developed especially in the 1990s with the search for a space that was autonomous from both the state and the market.

In fact, 'in the aftermath of the revolution of 1989, the term "civil society" was taken up in widely different circles and circumstances', expressing a 'concern about personal autonomy, self-organization, private space became salient not only in Eastern Europe' (Kaldor, 2003, 2).

In many reflections on contemporary societies, an autonomous civil society is referred to as being capable of addressing the tensions between particularism and universalism, plurality and connectedness, diversity and solidarity. It is, in this sense, called to be 'a solidarity sphere in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes gradually to be defined and to some degrees enforced' (Alexander, 1998, 7). Also some of the proponents of the deliberative vision of democracy have seen social movements and similar associations as central arenas for the development of these autonomous public spheres (Mansbridge, 1996; Cohen, 1989; Dryzek, 2000; Offe, 1997).

Similar reflections could be addressed to forms of action. Social movement tactics are disruptive as, in order to obtain the attention of public opinion and put pressure on decision-makers powerless actors need to make their voice more audible through direct actions that challenge law and order. In fact, protest is defined as a non-conventional form of action that interrupts daily routine (Lipsky, 1965). Moreover, social movements express a fundamental critique of representative democracy, contesting institutional assumptions about political participation as mainly electoral and promoting instead participative democracy. This vision of social movements as challengers has also been stressed in the concept of contentious politics, which has been defined as episodic, public, collective interaction among claims makers and their targets (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). Research on civil society has instead stressed civility as respect for others, politeness, and the acceptance of strangers (Keane, 2003). Linked to this is a view of civil society as consisting of cooperative and associational ties that foster mutual trust and shared values, so strengthening social cohesion (Putnam, 1993).

Both elements – conflict and autonomy – are relevant for understanding the characteristics of democratization from below and its outcomes. In fact, in the theorization of civil society by the actors of the 1989 peaceful revolutions, the two aspects were intertwined. In the policy implementation of democracy promotion, instead, the rhetoric moved away from conflicts, and the practices also from autonomy.

7.2   Conceptions of civil society: radical versus neo-liberal

Movements active in mobilization for democracy developed some specific vision of their role, and identified around them. In particular, references to civil society (re)emerged in Latin America and Eastern Europe during struggles for democracy. Civil society was in fact framed as an alternative to the authoritarian control that was extending its grip on everyday life.

First and foremost, social movements developed grassroots conceptions of mobilization, contrasting civil society to vertical bureaucracy. In Brazil, the urban popular movements that developed with the liberalization of the 1970s played an important role. Even if they were fragmented along class lines (middle class versus popular classes) and at risk of being co-opted into clientelistic networks, they were particularly influential in introducing a participatory ethos opposed to the once dominant one of an enlightened vanguard. As Mainwaring (1987, 149) noted, 'The movement has helped redefine the parameters of political discourse in subtle but significant ways. Perhaps most important has been the change in discourse, away from the technocratic elitist discourse that permeated all sides of the political spectrum in the late 1960s and first half of the 1970s, to a new discourse that emphasized popular participation.'

The relevance of participatory and even deliberative conceptions of democracy in the opposition is particularly visible in Eastern Europe, where it was embodied in a specific conception of civil society. There, during the struggle for democratization, informal 'micro-groups' allowed for the spread of 'horizontal and oblique voice', with 'the development of semantically coded critical communication'. This coded communication included 'political jokes, innuendo, emphases and mannerisms of language, and choice of topics that encode one's own political preferences' (Di Palma, 1991, 71). As Di Palma observed, the oppositional actors have chosen horizontality to mark their opposition 'to "vertical voice", that is, to the communication of petition and command that dictatorships prefer'. Additionally, the oppositional actors explicitly rejected the opacity of the system by being themselves public and transparent. This 'created an emotional and cognitive bond among opponents of the regime, who came to recognize that they were not alone' (Di Palma 1991, 71). This vision is embodied in the samizdat, whose characteristics Di Palma links to a specific conception of civil society:

> First, the publications – typically, personal political and parapolitical testimonials, were authored, reproduced, and circulated through self-generated, improvised networks, in which the authors and the disseminators at each step were often single individuals. Second, this meant that in certain cases, though the publications were illegal and alternative, they were not strictly clandestine. Full clandestinity would have defeated the testimonial function. Third, the individual nature of samizdat also meant that organizational

infrastructures to sustain publication were, strictly speaking, not necessary. (1991, 71)

Transparency was in fact a central value, often pointed at in the oppositional conception of 'a life in truth'. The samizdat reflected, and at the same time helped spread, a particular organizational culture. First of all, there was a rejection of underground conspiracies for power, as they rather 'sought to build, slowly and by the power of example, a parallel society'. In fact, in this environment,

> members and supporters developed modes of contestation that were less conspiratorial and power seeking and that were instead more appropriate to alternative, at times single-issue, movements in pluralist societies. Examples include challenging the official counterparts of unofficial organizations; collecting information, reporting and denouncing government activities and misdeeds; demanding redress of grievances; holding the authorities accountable; proposing alternative policies; negotiating with the authorities, if it came to that. In turn, this unselfish mode of contestation, contrasting as it did with the reclusive and offensive opacity of nomenklaturas, gave organized dissent a popular credibility not dissimilar from that enjoyed by the more heroic examples of individual dissent. (ibid., 72)

So, dissent transparency was opposed to the conspiracy of the regime.

Transparency was bridged with the development of free spaces. The organized opposition chose in fact the form of civic forums, which were conceived as broad in scope and ambition as '[t]hey aimed at defining postcommunism by an alternative (though nonetheless traditional) set of shared civic values and at consolidating a public sphere, a critical public opinion (that is, a civil society), as the core of a transparent democratic order' (ibid.).

In this sense, the democratic opposition expressed a criticism of liberal democracy, stressing instead participatory and deliberative democratic qualities (Olivo, 2001, 2–3). In fact, while not wanting to conquer the state power, the democratic opposition aimed at building autonomous spaces in which to develop what they defined as 'a culture of dialogue', 'a culture of plurality and the free public domain' (cited in ibid., 14). In these free spaces (or parallel polis, in Havel's words), as the dissident Ulrike Poppe put it, 'members learned to speak authentically and to relate to each other … to engage in social matters and to put up resistance' (in ibid.). In her words, the groups that formed the citizens'

movement in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were characterized by 'openness and publicity… grassroots democracy rejection of patriarchal, hierarchical, and authoritarian structures, non-violence, spirituality, unity of private and public consciousness' (ibid., 88). The citizens' movement (calling for 'democracy now') aimed at constituting public forums for deliberation, open to all citizens, self-organizing with a commitment to participatory democracy (ibid., 92). Local round tables and citizens' committees reflected this conception.

Self-government had to develop in this free space. As Ulrich Preuss noted, the 1989 movements did not try to impose a common will of the people, but rather promoted a principle of self-government, suggesting 'the idea of an autonomous civil society and its ability to work on itself by means of logical reasoning processes and the creation of appropriate institutions' (1995, 97). The cultural effects of the mobilization of the civil society implied in fact 'the breakthrough in pursuing a new civic culture – a culture that wishes to deny the historical prophecies that stem from regional retardation and fragmentation – has been made by dissident movements' (Di Palma, 1999, 80).

Autonomous from the state, these spaces were however political. The 'Antipolitics' promoted by Charter 77 was indeed a call for another politics. As Baker (1999) summarized, '[f]or the opposition theorists of the 1970s and 1980s, civil society was an explicitly normative concept which held up the ideal of societal space, autonomous from the state, wherein self-management and democracy could be worked out. That is, the idea of civil society was political and prescriptive' (Baker, 1999, 2).

In the civil society, a community was to be formed. Civil society theorists, such as Michnik and Kuron in Poland, Havel and Benda in Czechoslovakia, and Konrad, Kis, and Bence in Hungary, 'in addition to their calls for a more liberal politics of checks and balances, also saw civil society originally in the more positive, or socialist, terms of community and solidarity. Indeed, for many such theorists civil society indicated a movement towards post-statism; for control of power, while not unimportant, would be insufficient for the fundamental redistribution, or even negation, of power itself. If this was to be achieved, self-management in civil society was necessary' (ibid., 15).

The theorists of the civil society considered in fact self-organized structures from below as fundamental loci for and of democracy: 'workplace and local community self-government, based on personal contact, exercised daily, and always subject to correction, have greater attraction in our part of the world than multi-party representative democracy because, if they have their choice, people are not content

with voting once every four years [...] When there is parliamentary democracy but no self-administration, the political class alone occupies the stage' (Konrad, in Baker, 1999, 4–5). Not by chance, in Poland, the Workers Defense Committees (KORs) renamed themselves Committees for social self-organization (Ash, 2011). And the Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia was a loosely coordinated umbrella organization with local branches which worked independently from each other in organizing debates, strikes, and demonstrations.

If this framing helped mobilization against the regime, it appeared however also problematic to sustain mobilization after transition to democracy, when (neo)liberal institutions prevailed.

First, procedural democracy obscured the substantive claims of the radical conception of civil society, contributing to provoking a reduction in citizens' participation. To a certain extent, also given the speed of the breakdown of the old regimes, the civil society frame became problematic during the Round Tables period. As Glenn (2001) observed, in this context, the civil society frame was pivotal in the mass mobilizations that produced the rapid fall of the regime as very decentralized organizations allowed for rapid diffusion of protest. The horizontal organization conception was however unfit for institutional negotiation and electoral competition. The civil society frame had difficulty in producing a winning alternative also because many in the opposition did not want to form parties, which they saw as instruments of the past (ibid., 139).

Second, the concept of a civic society as a community had difficulty in adjusting to emerging conflicts. During the transition in Czechoslovakia, for instance, Civic Forum 'continued to portray itself as the representative of the nation by presenting speakers from all parts of society. Havel declared: "after forty years, *citizens* are beginning to meet freely. It has happened after what we all called for – dialogue with the powers that be!"' (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992, 89, emphasis added). As Solidarność in Poland, it presented itself as the embodiment of the nation and its members as 'self-administering and independent representatives of the common will throughout the republic' (Glenn, 2001, 113). In fact, after the general strike of 27 November 1989, when the Central Committee resigned and the opposition asked for a government of national understanding, the Civic Forum refused to make recommendation for the government as it did not consider itself as a political party but rather 'a spontaneously emerging movement of citizens united in their efforts to find a way out of the crisis in our society' (ibid., 181). The attempts to govern in the name of a united society did not help in revitalizing democracy, as '[i]dentity claims on the basis of the unity of society offered little

guidance for how to resolve conflicts within democratic institutions' (ibid., 195).

The vision of the civil society proposed from below was also at odds with the one which was proposed from above. As Baker (1999) rightly noted, the radical view of the civil society that had developed in the opposition in Eastern Europe (as in Latin America) was 'tamed' after the transition, when a liberal conception of democracy prevailed.

This happened, indeed, during the consolidation of a model of democracy which was based on a liberal conception, focusing on elected elites and excluding instead civil society from the true construction of politics and democracy, which had rather to be mediated through political parties. Representative democracy thus obscured the substantive claims of the radical conception of civil society, contributing to reduce citizens' participation.

This is even more true as policies of democracy promotion have been implemented by external actors in that region and beyond. In this case, in fact, funds and support have gone to those groups that presented their role as subsidiary to the state, intervening on non-contentious issues, and organizationally accountable. As the introduction to this volume convincingly argues, a specific type of organizations has been promoted, using material incentives, and then spread by imitation. The specific view of civil society as non-contentious has driven funds distribution, marginalizing instead those SMOs that could claim social and political reforms, as well as practicing different conceptions of democracy.

The mismatch between the oppositional conception of civil society, developed from below, and that imposed from above by various sponsors explains, at least in part, both the failure of democracy promotion policy initiatives and the disillusion of activists of social movements that struggle for democracy but then find the results of their struggle much below their hopes and expectations.

7.3 Conclusion

Social science literature on civil society and on social movements developed quite separately from each other. This is puzzling, given some overlapping in empirical coverage, as well as theoretical concerns. There are however also different emphases, on the positive role of conflicts in the case of social movement studies and on autonomy from the state and the market in reflections on the civic society. This has also brought about a tendency in empirical literature in the two fields to focus

either on rebellious, grassroots, and contentious groups or on tamed, well-structured, and consensual ones.

When moving from scholarship to the 'real' world, the example of democratization processes in Eastern Europe indicated that during transitions civil society groups framed themselves as horizontal networks aiming at building open public spheres. Not only the aim, but also the forms of action were contentious as well as political. In fact, in most cases one could speak of a relevant role of social movements of different types in various stages of democratization from below. A grassroots, self-organized, and contentious society was however not what institution building and democracy promotion policies considered as appropriate to the development of the very specific form of neo-liberal democracy that was spreading also in the West – what Colin Crouch (2004) defined as post-democracy. Within a limited conception of the role of the citizens as electors, if not consumers, the civil society has been assigned the role of (cheap) provider of services and legitimation of procedural, minimalistic models of democracy.

These profound gaps between the conceptions of civil society defined from below and the one imposed from above have certainly contributed to the failure of policies of democracy promotion based on selective contribution to self-appointed 'civic' society, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

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