Overflowing Channels: How Democracy Didn’t Work as Planned (and Perhaps a Good Thing It Didn’t)

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Abstract
When eighteenth-century revolutionary elites set about designing new political orders, they drew on commonplace theoretical understandings of “democracy” as highly undesirable. They therefore designed government institutions in which popular participation was to be extremely limited. The new political constructions, in both France and the United States, never worked as planned. The mobilizations of the revolutionary era did not vanish as the constitutional designers hoped. More profoundly, challenging social movements were unintentionally woven into the fabric of modern democracy due to the confluence of three processes: The legitimacy claims of democratic powerholders also legitimate protest; the institutional architecture of modern democracy, especially the allocation of office through elections, provides structural support for social movements as well; and the practices of democracy recurrently trigger politically powerful emotions that energize protest. Understanding democracy therefore demands a theory of the interplay of social movements and governing institutions from the foundational moment.

Keywords
democracy, social movements, revolution, elections, emotions

“My dreams don’t fit in your ballot boxes”

—Spray-painted on a wall in Jaén, Spain, observed in February 2016¹

A RECURRENT CONFRONTATION
In May 2011, the drama of a Spanish election campaign was challenged and, for many, upstaged by a different drama few Spanish citizens had expected. One week before the country was to vote in municipal and regional elections, tens of thousands of people, many

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young, occupied plazas in dozens of Spanish cities. They set up encampments and stayed on through the voting, showing no signs of quitting for some weeks beyond. Commenting on the elections, many of their signs told us “they don’t represent us.” Some called for “real democracy—it’s time,” and others let us know that “they call it democracy, but it isn’t.” Television commentators, some connected to political parties, tried to explain what the protestors were all about. Many were soon referring to the protestors as los indignados—the “outraged”—but some commentators were obviously outraged at the call for “real democracy,” protesting that Spain had already achieved real democracy through the social movement mobilizations and elite negotiations that followed the death of longtime dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. The heart of democracy, these commentators said, was the election of representatives, not the occupation of public space.

Here, I contend that these kinds of confrontations, in which protestors challenge what they see as the deficiencies of current democratic arrangements and established parties claim that democracy has already been achieved, have been an integral part of the modern history of democracy since its inception in France and America and other places at the end of the eighteenth century. Such confrontations have sometimes altered what people think democracy means, and such processes will be part of whatever future democracy may have, too.

Collective action challenging current understandings of democracy have often overrun the institutional channels that supposedly define the proper actions of democratic citizens and have sometimes carved new channels that in turn would be overrun in future confrontations. This pattern began with the foundational efforts to define new institutions during the revolutionary moment in France and America. The new political order crafted on both sides of the Atlantic never worked the way those who wrote the foundational constitutions intended. The new political structures were challenged from the beginning.

Democracy has resisted definition. Philosopher W. B. Gallie (1956) saw it as a prime example of “essentially contested concepts.” Part of what makes democratization so dynamic is the role of social movements, something Gallie’s conceptual analysis fails to notice (Markoff 2017). Social movements have been intimately linked to the history of modern democracy because democratic government—and even democratizing government—fosters movements and social movements have played major roles in launching, sustaining, advancing, redefining, contracting, and ending democracies. Democracy fosters a public discourse that justifies movements’ existence; provides opportunities for movements to act; limits powerholders’ capacity to prevent them; nurtures skills and habits of thought that facilitate movements; disappoints or infuriates people for its inadequacies, including its obvious failures to live up to its promises; inspires people to hope for something better; and challenges them to think about rights as yet unachieved (Markoff 2011).

The great role of movements as consequence and cause of democracy has an almost perverse quality about it because many of the political actors and thinkers who participated in launching modern democracy were unenthusiastic, fearful, hostile, or at best ambivalent about citizen engagement in public life beyond some very limited though important roles. The enormous weight of social movements in the history of democracy is evidence that democracy in actual practice developed along very different lines than expected by the men who participated in the U.S. constitutional convention or sat in France’s revolutionary National Assembly.

BRINGING DEMOCRACY BACK FROM THE DEAD

Until the late eighteenth century, democracy was commonly held to be profoundly undesirable: It would threaten the better-off with expropriation by the worse-off, its claims of
popular sovereignty would be a call to insurrection, it would invite conflict among elites and encourage them to recruit followers among the resentful lower classes, the empowered people would make foolish or wicked choices, and it was impracticable on a geographic scale larger than the city-states of classical antiquity. What educated Europeans and those of European descent in the western hemisphere knew of democracy was largely gathered from ancient authors who were generally critics rather than champions of ancient exemplars (Ober 1998). The best that could be said on democracy’s behalf was that some limited democratic mechanisms were useful as restraints on the defects of pure monarchy or aristocracy, which was the ideal of “mixed government” put forward two millennia earlier by Polybius (Ryan 2012). Even England’s autocratic Charles I could acknowledge this extremely limited value in his confrontations with Parliament (Dunn 2014:15).

The designers of the new institutions of revolutionary America and France were therefore understandably concerned to avoid the evils of “pure” democracy, “ancient” democracy, or just plain “democracy” and were not at first inclined to use that term for the new institutions they fought to launch. But people soon spoke of those institutions as a new kind of democracy,2 appropriate for the modern world and without the defects of earlier versions. The widespread use of the new term democrat, starting with the Low Countries in the 1780s (Conze and Koselleck 1972–84, Vol. 4:821–99), is a sign that for the first time movements for sociopolitical transformation were embracing the label or being accused of having done so. As Palmer (1959:15) put it, “No ‘democrats’ fought in the American Revolution,” a decade too early. But by the 1790s, foes of aristocratic and monarchical regimes were frequently using democracy to denote their cause, although the term retained a strong negative charge for many.

Scholars are beginning to investigate in some detail what meanings attached to democracy in the Age of Revolution in various places as well as when and how the term began to be used to denote a desirable state of affairs (Innes and Philp 2013).

How was this new democracy supposed to work as a political system?3 First, the people were to be represented rather than act on their own behalf. Nothing so profoundly distanced the new order from ancient democracy as the pivotal role of representation (Manin 1997). In August 1789, the French National Assembly issued a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen as a first installment toward its development of a constitution. The Assembly declared it acted as the “representatives of the French people,” “[n]o body and no individual may exercise authority that does not emanate expressly from [the Nation],” and citizens would participate “by themselves or through their representatives.” It left unresolved how citizens would choose representatives, how government would be organized, and in what ways citizens would participate in person (Déclaration 1789). But the finished constitution of 1791 made clear that participation in person was to be minimal, confined to the act of voting for representatives. In both the United States and France, representation was largely filtered through a multistage process. Neither the U.S. president nor senators were to be directly elected by voting citizens but rather by those citizens’ elected agents. The president was to be chosen by an electoral college; in some states, the legislature, not the citizen-voters, chose the electors, which left those citizens “no role whatsoever” in choosing their president (Keyssar 2009:20).

Second, political life would unfold as a discussion among reasonable and disinterested people who would collectively find the right course of action. Suitable representatives would have the qualities to support such reasonableness: (1) education that would equip them with the republican virtues of self-discipline, moral sense to recognize the public good, and knowledge on which correct decisions would be based; (2) economic means that would free them from needing to live from politics and thus make them less open to
corruption from aristocratic, monarchical, or factional interests; and (3) being endowed by nature with the proper innate character that could be strengthened by a proper republican education—a quality that many believed lacking in children, women, nonwhites, the enslaved, the poor, the deranged, and criminals. Unlike their chosen representatives, the voting citizenry did not necessarily need to be educated or know much about public issues, but they did need to know right from wrong and recognize such moral qualities in prospective leaders. Democrats understood these capacities to be widely distributed, whereas aristocrats thought them uncommon.4

Third, “The People” were understood to have a unitary collective interest and often spoken of in the singular and written with an uppercase P. The mission of their representatives was to find that unitary interest (Przeworski 2010). The U.S. constitution’s claim to be a statement of “We the People” is symptomatic. Across the Atlantic, some hoped the new order would see the construction of institutions to realize Rousseau’s “general will.” By virtue of their natural endowments and education and the wise institutional design for selecting them, their representatives would be far more capable of discovering the collective interest of most citizens and could speak on their behalf better than they could themselves.

Fourth, parties were excoriated as a mechanism for reinforcing or inventing division rather than finding unity (Rosenblum 2010). Self-seeking behavior was seen as corruption on the part of the unitary people’s representatives, reinforcing antipathy to parties, use of public office for private gain, and even campaigning for office.5 In revolutionary France, to describe someone as a member of a “party” was just a tad short of accusing that person of treason against the revolutionary people. Elections were thus organized very differently than in any democracy of the twenty-first century (Crook 1996; Gueniffey 1993). The proper role of the citizenry in political life was limited, confined to voting for representatives or perhaps on a referendum on a foundational constitutional document. In the United States, a dozen states elected special assemblies to decide on ratification. Exceptionally, there was a popular referendum in Rhode Island in which 92 percent of participants voted in opposition, thereby earning it the label of Rogue Island from those who held the negative referendum an instance of “excess of democracy” (Maier 2010). In France, there was no referendum on the first revolutionary constitution of 1791 because the people’s representatives had already approved it; when a new constitution was written two years later, a national plebiscite was held. As for revolutionary France’s numerous elections for a wide range of offices—from national legislatures to local schoolteachers—antipathy to parties and election campaigns meant there were no ballots in the modern sense: voters showed up and wrote or spoke the names of those they wished to elect (Gueniffey 1993; Rosanvallon 1992). In the new United States, vigorous public campaigns for office were generally seen as improper (Schudson 1998): “Gentlemen generally stood, not ran, for election” (Wood 2009:160).

Finally, despite how attractive some found Rousseau’s conception of the citizen as an active shaper of things, in all the new states of the dawning democratic era, the notion that only some citizens were suitable voters took hold. The major French theorist of the revolutionary attack on privilege, Sieyes, proposed a distinction between those for whom society is constituted and those by whose actions society will be actively shaped. “Active” citizens, those of suitable education, means, occupation, and natural endowments, should be entrusted with the responsibility of voting, whereas “passive” citizens would be entitled to other rights (Sewell 1988). George Orwell’s Animal Farm’s satiric slogan “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” is generally understood as a commentary on twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, but it could also fit some of the foundational claims of modern democracy. For example, every new democracy of the era denied voting rights to women; those whose laws had not done so with sufficient clarity did so later on (Markoff 2003).
People who believed in such a limited role for most citizens were not likely to look with favor on individuals organizing themselves to engage in collective political action. In the United States, it became common practice to locate the seats of state government away from the major centers of commerce, learning, cosmopolitanism, and the rambunctious people in concentrated form: in Albany, say, rather than New York City; Lancaster and later Harrisburg rather than Philadelphia; or Columbia rather than Charleston—\(^6\)—not to mention constructing a new city altogether as the national capital.\(^7\)

For Madison, the superiority of the new model over ancient democracy was its “total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity, from any share” in the government (Federalist No. 63 [1788] 1961). Yet these words proved to be dramatically inaccurate as a description of the political life of the new era he helped bring about. Since democracy literally meant that the people held power, small wonder that the revolutionary leaderships did not thus designate their objective.

THE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT: POLITICS OUTSIDE THE CONSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

The creation of new institutions in the Age of Revolution was accompanied by popular mobilizations that the new powerholders could neither contain nor harness for their own purposes, although they did make attempts to squelch them in the 1790s. France’s Reign of Terror in 1793 to 1794 was, among other things, an effort by the new revolutionary state to crush independent urban militant organizations, decentralized regional initiatives, and agitation on behalf of rural land redistribution; it was justified by the claimed need for absolute unity in the face of armed counterrevolution and foreign invasion. On the other side of the Atlantic, the presidency of John Adams adopted restrictive measures aimed at those who drew inspiration from France, without the vast body count but with similar antipathy to organized dissent (Hofstadter 1969; Smith 1956).

From the beginning, the new democracies did not work quite as envisioned. A far more participatory conception of democracy drew its strength from several sources: still active or barely remembered practices of local decision making in France (Babeau [1878] 1978; Babeau 1893), the numerous mobilizations of the revolutionary moment that frequently drew on long-established repertoires of collective action in France and America (Markoff 1996; Nash 2005; Pencak, Dennis, and Newman 2002), and fears that elected representatives themselves could constitute a new aristocracy, a term frequently used to denote one’s political opponents on both sides of the Atlantic (Doyle 2009).

The forms of organization and action of the mobilized people—keeping a suspicious eye on their representatives and taking direct action with great frequency—amounted to an alternative vision of democracy. These organizations, actions, and ideas have been closely studied for France (Alpaugh 2015; Brinton 1961; Kennedy 1982; Soboul 1958; Sutherland 2009; Tønnesson 1959, 1988) and America (Bouton 2007; Cotlar 2011; Countryman 1981; Gilje 1996; Holton 2007; Nash 2005; Taylor 2016). To some extent, these practices drew on forms of popular mobilization from long before the revolutionary era that were intended to fill in for an ineffective, wayward, derelict, or illegitimate state (Farge and Revel 1988; Lucas 1988; Pencak et al. 2002). But the proliferation of committees, clubs, and militias and their linkage in broad regional and national organizational networks was especially characteristic of the Age of Revolution. In the United States, writes Wood (2003:159–60), Americans “refused to accept the fact that the election of their representatives eclipsed their existence.” Noting the proliferation of “committees, assemblies and other extralegal bodies” as well as “[v]igilante and mob actions” to punish a diversity of wrongdoers, he adds: “[b]y 1787–88
all this activity by the people outside of government tended to give reality, even legal reality, to this idea that sovereignty in America resided and remained in the people at large, and not in any specific institutions of government.” Cotlar (2011) shows that by the early 1790s, critical voices were emerging that held that even if the new political system was beginning to be called democracy, this label in itself was not enough; this new kind of democracy needed to include the voices and organizations of those not in power. As Cotlar (2011:181) put it, in their view, “the act of electing representatives [appeared] less like the centrepiece of a democratic government and more like simply a convenient means of governing a large nation.” Foner (1998:43) points to these contrasting visions: “The emergence of the Democratic-Republican societies, organized by critics of the Washington administration, suggested that political liberty meant not simply voting at elections but constant involvement in public affairs.” That these new organizations could be denounced by their foes as “self-created” shows the degree to which collectively self-acting citizens were unwelcome in some quarters.

The French Revolution began with an extraordinary convocation of the Estates-General through a vast process of participation, deliberation, and representation. Around the country, nobles and clergy met in local assemblies to choose representatives and provide them with lists of grievances. Drafting of these grievances as well as election of the delegates to carry the statements to Versailles generated anguished debates. For the numerous Third Estate—the overwhelming majority of the French population—a complexly structured, multilevel series of meetings gave most adult men (and a few women) the right to participate. Most remarkably, meetings were held in some 40,000 rural villages where villagers, just like their noble neighbors, got to debate and adopt lists of grievances with which to instruct their deputies. These rural deputies would later meet with the deputies chosen by urban populations (Shapiro and Markoff 1998). Because its people, or at least its male adults and some narrowly defined categories of women, entered the revolution with such an intense experience of participation in deciding on the future, it is extremely telling that such a model was so resolutely rejected in the new elites’ vision of the political order to be constructed. Despite their recent experience of this vast national participatory and consultative process, elites envisaged nothing like it when they drew up the constitutional blueprint for the new order.

It is utterly unsurprising that in many places, people continued to meet and act regardless of how narrowly the National Assembly tried to define the responsibilities of the citizen. Soon enough, many an urban neighborhood was being run by frequently meeting, decree-issuing, weapon-wielding citizen activists who were disinclined to abandon the making of their own history. And in many a village, the newly formed National Guards units became vehicles for rural activists to challenge those they defined as foes without waiting for orders from anyone. Some people were organizing themselves to support new claimants to authority, others to oppose them, still others for self-defense or the provision of vital services as established ways of doing things evaporated. For some, this activity was burdensome and the reestablishment of authority and predictability would be a welcome opportunity to get back to other things; but for others, participating in making one’s own history was exhilarating and not to be lightly abandoned just because some new claimants to rightful rule had been installed in the palaces.

The institutional design of what soon came to be called democracy therefore did not terminate grassroots mobilizations. But from the beginning, the designs failed in other ways that mattered for the future of social movements. First, wherever and whenever there have been parliaments, deputies have organized themselves into groupings for mutual support around shared interests, personal ties, and common backgrounds to effectively shape parliamentary decisions. Parliamentary groupings were visible in seventeenth-century England
and eighteenth-century Sweden (Metcalf 1977). Where elections become important, parliamentary parties come to be vehicles of mutual support in contesting elections. This was no less true at the revolutionary moment of creation of new representative institutions. Even during the French Revolution, when parties and election campaigns were held in very negative esteem in public rhetoric, people organized collectively away from public view to support the election of preferred representatives (Crook 1996). Parties, largely excoriated as a form of corruption, soon established themselves as a pivotal part of democratic practice.

Second, the representatives of the people were people, not angels, as Madison famously noted in Federalist No. 51; they were not simply disinterested beings engaged in a collective search for the wise policy. To the extent that legislators proved to be advancing their own interests or seemed to represent some portion of “the people” at the expense of others, the common charge that an emerging political elite was becoming a new aristocracy took on plausibility, and some form of defense of the people (and of self-defense by the people) seemed reasonable.

Third, and perhaps most profoundly, the conception of a unitary People in the singular was from the beginning impossible to reconcile with actual people who have different interests, have different conceptions of right action, are embedded in differing social networks, take on differing social identities, and change their minds.9

One symptom of the degree to which the actual workings of democracy departed strongly from the vision of its eighteenth-century founders is the frequency with which the participants in the U.S. constitutional convention in later life expressed disappointment in the new democratic republic they had helped launch, a republic that was far more dynamic, inventive, venal, entrepreneurial, and religious than they had worked for (Wood 1992).

BEYOND THE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT: DEMOCRACY ALWAYS FOSTERS MOVEMENTS

Living practices from before the revolutionary era meant that even after revolutionary impulses subsided, forms of local action, local participation, and local democracy continued. Although Tilly (2004) doubts that these local practices contributed much to national democracy, they provided a continuing basis for political engagement within guilds, on ships, in villages, and in neighborhoods. The revolutionary moment meant many people experienced their local forms of action as having an impact on a much broader geographic scale. Popular sovereignty was a powerful idea that could not be contained in popular passivity.

But such episodes of revolutionary turbulence hardly explain the long-term recurrence of disruptive movements that powerholders would try to crush, undermine, harness, sponsor, or channel into safer paths.10 Despite efforts by the powerful to sideline popular action, democracy invariably encourages movements. Social movements are part of what one might call a democratic system of political contention, alongside and often interconnected with political parties, election campaigns, lobbies, mass media, labor unions, and other interest group organizations. Movements involve sustained campaigns rather than single episodes or events, but they may produce many such episodes or events. They involve making claims on behalf of some group or groups, although participants in a movement are not necessarily members of that group. They make claims on governments, either directly or because the ways the claims are made gets agents of the state involved.11

Because movements extend in time beyond particular episodes, people involved often develop a common identity. They may identify as participants in a specific movement (e.g., “we environmentalists”), partisans of one movement strategy against another (e.g., as “bolsheviki” or the “majority”), the kind of person who engages in movements (as “activists”),
or a group on behalf of whom claims are made (e.g., “we residents of this neighborhood”). Such identities might be local, but they often have broad geographic reach as physically distant people who have never met feel themselves acting together for a common purpose. The identities claimed in movements may have preceded the existence of the movement or formed in the course of action. Social movements involve openly embraced identities and openly stated claims. Movements deploy many forms of acting collectively, including demonstrations, marches, rallies, occupations of spaces, petitioning, picketing, blocking access, displaying slogans, sponsoring literature, singing, mocking opponents, damaging property, throwing rocks, and much else. Participants may develop new organizations that carry on these activities or make use of already existing ones.

Democracy nurtures movements through the confluence of three sets of causes, each a component strand of the DNA of modern democracy in the sense that without any one of them, democracy as it developed downstream from the revolutionary big bang would be unrecognizable. First, the basic legitimating claim of popular rule justifies action by the supposed rulers: “the people.” Second, institutionalizing capacities for collective self-organization and constraining the repressive discretion of the state encourage the formation of politically active bodies. This is especially so in light of the crucial role of elections in the institutional design of every modern national democracy.  Third, democracy recurrently generates strong emotions around its eternal failures to live up to its promises while also generating hope that these failures can be remedied. Let us develop each of these points in turn.

DEMOCRACY JUSTIFIES MOVEMENTS, EVEN INVITES THEM

Morgan’s (1988) innovative account of the origins of ideas of popular sovereignty in England and America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries argues that “popular sovereignty” began as a formula justifying the rule of a new but narrow elite. Faced with the challenge of justifying their claim to govern without a king sanctioned by God, England’s rebel parliamentarians of the 1640s claimed “the people” were sovereign and it was for the people that they acted. This claim was no less a fiction than the king’s claim to be the lieutenant of God, but, argues Morgan, it had a dynamic, immediate series of consequences.

First, people felt empowered to make claims on parliament—after all, they were said to be the sovereign. Meetings, petitions, and other forms of collective action blossomed. Second, powerholders were inhibited in their capacity to suppress popular claims because their own claim to rule was that they embodied the people’s sovereignty. Finally, members of parliament almost immediately discovered the power of claiming that “the people” insisted they follow some course of action and as agents of the people they were compelled to pursue that course. Some members of parliament therefore supported or even organized movements to make demands on themselves. Some of the many meetings and petitions of the period were thus tolerated, supported, encouraged, or even initiated from above.

Morgan’s argument draws on seventeenth-century English particulars, but the galvanizing importance of powerholders’ claims in encouraging collective action outside of institutional channels was important in many other times and places, including the sites of the revolutionary foundations of modern democracy. Although a significant current of opinion at the foundational moment held that popular sovereignty was exercised through the actions of the people’s representatives, and thus there was no reason for most people to take any action beyond the choice of those to represent them, the claim of popular sovereignty provided powerful support to those who sought to pressure, overturn, subvert, or ignore those representatives. The superior authority of the people, above that of representatives who have betrayed those they are supposed to represent, is a recurrently powerful claim in democracies, from the
insurrectionary artisans who controlled French urban neighborhoods in defiance of elected
officials in the 1790s, to U.S. students in the 1960s chanting “democracy is in the streets,” to
Spanish citizens in 2011 claiming they were unrepresented in the system established in the
post-Franco transition of the 1970s. At those moments, individuals who support established
practice are apt to claim the protestors are foolish, wicked, or foes of democracy as embodied
in lawful procedures and the decisions of those chosen to represent the people in its entirety.
Popular sovereignty both sustains the authority of those who rule and disrupts their capacity
to do so unhindered.

PERMISSIVE AND ENABLING INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES:
ELECTIONS, PARTIES, LOBBIES . . . AND MOVEMENTS

The galvanizing potential of regime legitimacy claims is far more likely to be actualized in
conjunction with the permissive and enabling institutional structures that are characteristic
doing political orders. In Linz’s (2000) fundamental taxonomy of nondemocratic
regimes, he shows that the twentieth century’s “totalitarian” regimes claimed to speak for a
mobilized people, too, but a broad array of control mechanisms severely limited the pros-
spects for social movements: There were controls on media, limits on permitted forms of
organization and association, compulsory participation in regime-sponsored activities, and
terror. Bayat (2010) compellingly sketches the forms of subaltern collective action charac-
teristic of highly repressive states and tellingly labels them nonmovements because they lack
the public display of explicit challenge by formally organized collectivities. But democra-
ties come richly endowed in practices that support movements and that limit, although
hardly eliminate, states’ repressive responses.

The role of elections in empowering citizens

Electoral practices do more than designate the people’s representatives; they empower social
movements that challenge them. Modern national democracy differs radically from ancient
democracy in the pivotal role of elected representatives (see Manin 1997). In the founding
generation of modern democracy, ordinary citizens’ main role in government was to be voters
who would choose among members of the educated elite who presented themselves as candi-
dates; sometimes, citizens were merely asked to validate the credentials of a candidate in an
uncontested election (Schudson 1998). By the twentieth century, some students of politics had
concluded that the only reasonable way to define modern democracy was as a political system
in which elite contenders for power were selected by popular vote (see Schumpeter 1950).

But this definition of democracy leads to a paradox. The very significance of electoral
processes encouraged the development of the modern social movement and lent power to
some of its most common forms of action. Because democracy is a political system with
winners and losers in electoral contests (Przeworski 1991) and winning elections depends on
the numbers and enthusiasm of supporters, the public mobilization of substantial numbers of
people on behalf of particular demands acquires a new significance in democratic circum-
stances. Numbers could be displayed through petitions, gatherings, or marches on behalf of
stated demands, giving great weight to what we now call demonstrations.

In addition, the regular practice of elections extends the time horizons of political actors.
Not only do election campaigns unfold over weeks or months, but one must always take the
next election into account.14 Even under circumstances in which one imaginable outcome of
an election galvanizes powerful actors to try to end democracy, this prospect too will get the
politically active thinking beyond election day. The political culture of extended social
movement campaigns and electoral competition support an orientation toward something much more extended in time than the single-event collective actions that were common in France for centuries before the Revolution, planned by villagers after Sunday mass and immediately carried out that afternoon (Markoff 1996). And because movement campaigns may have a past and a future, they may establish organizations that endure well beyond one campaign in preparation for the next. Membership in such an organization, like membership in a political party, may provide an identity.

The founders of modern democracy were hostile to the idea of parties, interest group politics, and social movements because all three violated their unrealizable vision of governing as a disinterested search for the common good of the unitary people. But all three developed together, shaped by the anticipated recurrence of electoral contests. The growth of effective states meant people affected by state actions had an interest in what those actions were, and those with the means to do so developed ways to influence legislators and administrators. The centrality of elections as the vehicle to occupy office meant parties would form.

Parties, lobbies, and movements are thus mutually supportive institutions. Interest groups may seek to influence election outcomes by funding candidates and parties, and they may seek to influence legislators and administrators by bribery or providing them with ideas (e.g., drafts of legislation or regulations). Parties may support movements, as may interest groups. Movements may give rise to parties as one vehicle for achieving goals. Parties, lobbies, and movements become sites for the development of a variety of skills useful to all three.

In short, although we may distinguish parties, lobbies, and movements conceptually, their histories are profoundly intertwined. There are times and places where the boundaries are especially blurry and these forms of action are particularly interconnected. No one could plausibly explain the history of European socialism in the nineteenth century or fascism in the twentieth without treating the interconnection of movements and parties. Burstein (1999), for example, sees some recent U.S. movements as a kind of lobby,15 and Trejo (2012, 2014) provides an exceptionally rich account of the interplay of parties and movements during the late twentieth-century transnational wave of democratizations.

COMPLEXITY, CONTRADICTION, DISAPPOINTMENT, ANGER, HOPE

But democracy inherently does more than make rulers lay claim to popular sovereignty and spawn movement-enabling practices. Democracy is a perennial generator of powerful, politically relevant emotions: disappointment, anger, and hope.

Disappointment and Anger

Disappointment with democracy as it exists has been a frequent source of anger. Its compounds of equality and inequality, inclusion and exclusion, dignified citizenship and scorned marginality mean democracy is often infuriating. Proclaiming commitments to equal citizenship rights encourages frustration among those who find such claims mendacious or hypocritical (Markoff 2011). Consider the iconic emblems of democracy’s founding in the United States. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass asked, “What, to the American slave, is your fourth of July?,” and William Lloyd Garrison called the Constitution a “covenant with death” as he explained why he would not participate in electoral processes (Douglass [1852] 2000:196; Finkleman 2000). Strong words. Democracy’s failures can make your blood boil, and so can its supposed successes, when the successful are challenged by others. “What are they griping about (or throwing rocks about)?” ask the satisfied, angrily. And what some see as successes may be experienced as disappointments by the very activists who fought for
them, leading some to abandon transgressive protest to move back toward established channels that may seem more effective, while other activists move toward a deeper rejection of the mainstream and correspondingly more radical tactics. “Is this all we accomplished?” can fuel both resigned acceptance and anger.16

Complexity and Contradiction

Democracy’s conceptual complexities and contradictions not only provide fertile soil for philosophical exploration but also nurture such emotions. Already in the late eighteenth century, democracy was a complex concept that combined notions of equality, freedom, and accountability of governors to the governed with notions of effective rule-making that are inherent in any form of government, democratic or otherwise. The difficulty of realizing these notions simultaneously means current realizations of democracy are frequently found badly wanting, providing fuel for potential movements claiming to embody truer democratic values and nurturing disappointment and anger that energize those movements. Political philosophers have written extensively on balancing equality and liberty, combining popular voice with effective decision making, and reconciling inclusionary claims and exclusionary practices, but the main point here is that the impossibility of doing so to the satisfaction of all means movements in defense of some threatened liberty or challenging some form of inequality can readily claim the democratic mantle and feel fired up about what needs to be done.

Hope

Important foundational notions of national democracy are frequently contradictory, are sometimes hard to reconcile with effective government, or are simply “neither coherent logically nor feasible practically” (Przeworski 2010:17), as in the notion of The People as a unitary actor. But as Morgan (1988) points out, democracy also has the capacity to arouse the hope that political action can make these dreams more real. Social movements activate those hopes. The experience of movement activism is one where we discover our freedom to act, that our own voices, together, count. For many, the movement itself is a site of democracy, at least until we discover that it too has defects, which may lead us to form some new organization or even a new movement. And hope that something better is possible can stir anger about how things currently stand. Anger is a great energizer, especially joined to hope. Periodic election campaigns, with their profusion of promises destined to be unfulfilled, seem an excellent mechanism for triggering cycles of hope and despair.17 Castells’s (2012) comparative study of the 2011 protests calls this activation of moments and movements a cycle “of outrage and hope,” a phrase that could characterize many important protests throughout the history of modern democracy.

Human rights as an expandable, subversive premise

Foundational texts on both sides of the Atlantic made it easy to connect such hopes with notions of rights as yet unachieved. When the American Declaration of Independence famously tells us there are “certain unalienable rights” and “among these” are the three U.S. schoolchildren are expected to memorize, it virtually invites citizens to ask what their other rights are, sooner or later.18 The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, adopted from an inconclusive discussion of a longer list in a hasty effort to assure an insurrectionary country that the National Assembly was working toward a new constitution, suggested itself to be but an initial statement. It may have proved to be, as one historian put it,
“the Revolution’s most lasting utterance,” but at the time it was understood to be merely “a provisional text” that was part of a work in progress (Baker 1990:269; Rials 1988; Van Kley 1994:72). The new order in America and France announced itself as unfinished, building in mechanisms for amending the new constitutions. The very notion of debating and then writing a new constitution for the future, rather than finding a preexisting constitution, that is, searching for the best and most authentic past practice, built an element of self-subversion into the foundational documents of the new political arrangements.

When, for example, some Pennsylvanians wrote down their new revolutionary constitution in the fall of 1776, they wrote of “deliberately” forming “for themselves” rules “for governing their future society” for “the people of this State, and their posterity” and provided that their plan could be altered “in such articles as shall hereafter on experience be found to require improvement.” Democratic claims have been empowering rulers since the late eighteenth century and by the late twentieth century were doing so on a greatly expanded geographic scale; but these democratic claims also made it difficult for rulers to wield their power unhindered by collective challengers who demanded the improvements their foundational documents suggested they figure out down the line. Without studying these proposed improvements, those who fought for or against them, and their moments of realization or defeat, we are leaving out a great deal.

Past the foundational moment, social movements might identify their cause with established or overthrown but valued past practices, or they might lay claim to rights that have not yet existed. This is what makes foundational claims for human rights such a challenge to all governments (Hunt 2007). Democracy has an important place for a better future.

**Institutionalization**

Social movement scholars have observed with keen interest the processes whereby formerly transgressive tactics, stigmatized identities, and outlandish demands become the stuff of routine politics, honored participants, and plain common sense. Strikes, say, go from feared challenges to the established order to routinized rituals within a partially altered order (Shorter and Tilly 1971). Scholars have traced movements’ bifurcation over time, between those who opt for more transgressive actions on behalf of more radical ideas and those who opt for more conventional actions on behalf of more modest reforms. These researchers have tried to understand the specific social conditions under which this bifurcation of institutionalization and radicalization occurs (Koopmans 1993; Meyer 1993; Meyer and Laschever 2016; Santoro and Fitzpatrick 2015). Long-term studies of movements have thus paid a lot of attention to their institutionalization.

Beyond the institutionalization of elements of particular movements, some scholars argue that high levels of movement activism suggest that by the late twentieth century, it made sense in many places to speak of a “social movement society” (Meyer and Tarrow 1998) in which activism was understood as a form of “normal politics.” Some scholars argue that the social conditions of the wealthy democracies in the later twentieth century were especially favorable to the normalization of social movements. But in a longer time perspective, the argument made here is that democracy itself, from the beginning, has encouraged movements that challenge current arrangements; with the successful institutionalization of some of those challenges, democracy provides the conditions that will later challenge those institutionalizations as well. Tarrow (2011:115) summarizes such recurrent institutionalization with a quote from Kafka: “Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony.” We need to add that outside the temples there are other leopards that will one day make their presence known.
The potential institutionalization of previously transgressive protest forms has existed since democracy’s inception. Alpaugh (2015) shows that alongside the spectacular episodes of insurrectionary violence for which the revolutionary crowds of Paris have been remembered were very large numbers of peaceful parades through the streets. These parades were so frequent that they acquired a more or less routine character, with nonviolent marches well on their way to acceptance as a legitimate form of popular voice. To be sure, the marchers often brandished weapons as reminders of the more violent moments recently enacted and as threats of possible violence ahead. But Alpaugh’s research places the ancestry of today’s omnipresent demonstration some decades further back and in a far more revolutionary context than the early nineteenth-century England described by Tilly (1995); The nonviolent protest march was one of the leopards that became part of the ceremony.21

Precisely what is acceptable, even humdrum and routine, and what is transgressive defiance gets redefined from time to time and potentially contested anew. When the Spanish government passed its Gag Law in 2015 prohibiting protests in front of parliament (backed by a fine of 30,000 euros), activists organized a ghostly procession of hologram images of protestors projected at the forbidden site, something easily diffused on YouTube and more poignant than any live human bodies were likely to be.22

JOURNEYS TO THE DARK SIDE23

None of the arguments sketched thus far suggest that democracy’s course followed a smooth curve from revolutionary origins to recent realizations, pushed onward by social movements. That movements have intermittently pushed political practices away from their current, provisional forms is a very different claim than that they, with some consistency, pushed them toward the forms of the early twenty-first century, let alone that they will continue to push them along the same trajectory in the years ahead. From their revolutionary beginnings, movements have pushed in multiple directions, sometimes simultaneously, and claims of what practices are or are not democratic have continued to jostle each other.24

For the first seven decades of U.S. democracy, a growing anti-slavery movement galvanized a growing pro-slavery movement that could also claim the mantle of democracy. Some members of the pro-slavery movement contended that democracy depended on slavery and claimed Athens as an inspirational instance (Fischer 2005). The ending of slavery after years of bloody combat triggered the creation of a movement to reverse black Americans’ newly acquired rights through a mix of terror, economic pressure, election victories, and judicial action. Foner (2014:425) shows how after America’s Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan “was a military force serving the interests of the Democratic party.” Reborn in the 1920s, the Klan’s millions of adherents were a significant element in U.S. electoral politics (McVeigh 2009). David Cunningham (2013) has studied the internal debates in the Klan in the 1960s over the right mix of violence and electoral politics. David Scott Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin (2014) point out that the United States built racial exclusions into its earliest legislation on naturalization and immigration in 1790 and 1804, and social movements were a source throughout U.S. history for these and other racial exclusions. In a nutshell, racist movements, like anti-racist movements, have flowered in democracy’s soil.

Downstream from the French Revolution, a vigorous ultra-right mobilized against minority rights and to restrict civil liberties, with significant popular support at various points for new monarchies, military strongmen, anti-Semitism, and deeply exclusionary visions of the French nation. For example, Paris shopkeepers, threatened by economic crisis in the 1880s and facing long-term challenges from the new department stores and foreign competitors, formed militant organizations that challenged the Third Republic. They staged huge demonstrations, some violent, whose targets were Socialists, Germans, Jews, and their corrupt
allies in the state institutions. This foreshadowed the fascist movements of the decades ahead (Nord 1986).

Some of these movements proposed alternative practices they claimed to be democratic; others made democracy their reviled target. Yet the array of movement-sustaining processes that has characterized democracy sustained these movements alongside, and often in opposition to, movements for greater social inclusion and liberal political institutions that, for the moment, we are likely to recognize as democratic in the early twenty-first century.

Consider, briefly, the European fascist movements and parties of the 1920s and 1930s. There was a moment of significant democratic reform in very diverse countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the early twentieth century was a time of hopeful democratic revolutionary movements in Russia, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, Mexico, Portugal, and China (Kurzman 2008). Small wonder that when the victorious democracies came out of the First World War with their political systems intact, the new states that emerged from the ruins of empire enacted their own democratic constitutions, and other states continued with major democratizing reforms.

Endowed with all the movement-promoting processes that democratization entails, flourishing movements in postwar Italy, Germany, Austria, Romania, and Hungary rejected democratic debates, processes, and institutions and closed national ranks against enemies whom the altered borders had left within national territories, enemies who could be defined culturally, racially, or politically (e.g., socialists and pacifists). The fake democracy of competing parties and parliamentary negotiations was to be extirpated and replaced by a truer representation of the national spirit. The unitary people were to overcome divisions by expulsion and coercion. Uniformed, violent militants would crush other parties and bring an end to party competition. Instead of just plain democracy, there would be “National Democracy,” to take the name of a major illiberal and nationalistic Polish party of the era, instead of socialism, “National Socialism.” Violence in the streets, disruption of enemy movements and parties, electoral campaigns, and denunciation of out-of-touch elites constituted the tactical mix characteristic of the fascist parties acting within the enhanced democracies of that moment, parties that sometimes achieved power through constitutional processes.

Mussolini’s model fascist movement included in its first program reducing the voting age to 18, women’s suffrage, elimination of the legislature’s upper house, an eight-hour workday, progressive taxation, and worker engagement in factory management (Schnapp 2000). Noting the democratic context, Riley (2010) writes of the “civic foundations of fascism in Europe”; observing the extremely violent outcomes in these and other instances of movements cleansing the enemies of the true people, Mann (2005) writes of “the dark side of democracy.” As Riley (2010:202) trenchantly puts it, fascism was “carrying forward the project of a democracy beyond liberalism.”

From a longer historical perspective, the eighteenth-century revolutionary moment that opened the way to endless struggles about democracy and undermined—in idea, institution, and practice—the long-legitimated rule of feuding sacralized monarchies and hereditary aristocracies also opened the way for new forms of despotic rule. We need to see the democratic context of these powerful assaults on democracy. The fascist movements were intertwined with electoral processes, as Clark’s (2015:254) almost day-by-day account of the Romanian instance lays out: “Activists discovered politics as a domain newly available to ordinary citizens,” just the sort of thing that we argued has repeatedly characterized democratic activism. Fascist and democratic movements both thrived in democratic politics. Fascism might be seen as democracy’s maleficent cousin.

Social movement scholars have analyzed the dynamic dialogues of movements and countermovements, movements and states (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). These encounters,
sometimes of great intensity, may reshape democracy, too. Dahrendorf (1969) argued that by thoroughly wrecking the prewar German social order, the Nazis destroyed significant longstanding barriers to a deeper democracy so that postwar German democracy had very different dynamics than its earlier versions. France’s post–Second World War Fourth Republic did not simply reproduce the institutions of the Third but, among other things, instituted women’s suffrage. In summary, movements self-consciously renouncing democracy and movements intending to move democracy forward both contribute to the dynamic properties of democratic political systems.

FROM THE EIGHTEENTh CENTURY TO THE TWEnTY-FIRST

The foundational statements of how modern democracy was to work make no mention of movements, interest groups, or parties, yet all democracies have them. Social movements are intimately intertwined with other institutions and organizations involved in political struggle, not only at the national level but also in the local arena, at the provincial level, and increasingly in the twenty-first century, in transnational arenas. Rather than isolate a particular piece of complex social struggles as a scholarly specialty, some movement scholars are urging us to address a broader field of human contention, to pay attention to the interplay of the local, national, and transnational and the intermixing of struggles that play out in the streets, the courts, bureaucratic offices, universities, the media, factories, villages, neighborhoods, around the family dinner table, and in electoral competition. And sometimes on the battlefield. This treats movements as one aspect of a broader field of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; see also Goldstone 2004).

More specifically, it deeply connects political democracy and social movements and demonstrates that the recent historical connections between elections and movements (see McAdam and Tarrow 2010) are examples of processes that have been part of the history of modern democracy from the beginning. A look at recent history shows no sign that those connections are becoming weaker. In fact, Trejo (2012, 2014) persuasively argues that the great wave of democratic transitions that began in the 1970s was often impelled by oppositional parties supporting movements that were working toward opening up limited electoral possibilities and movements collaborating with opposition parties whose electoral success promised them more favorable conditions. The world’s geographically most extensive transnational wave of democratizations thus built further links between democracy and movements (Markoff 2015). New connections between lobbies and movements have been noted, too, as lobbying firms now organize supposedly grassroots protest (Walker 2014). Noting the common linkage of party and movement in Central America, Almeida (2014) writes of “social movement partyism.”

The early twenty-first century suggests no diminution of such connections among these three practices that all gave the founders of modern democracy deep misgivings. Documenting the overlap of identifying with the U.S. Democratic Party and supporting the antiwar movement opposing Republican President George Bush’s military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Heaney and Rojas (2015) chart the rise of what they call “the party in the street”—and its decline when Bush was succeeded by a Democrat. Other scholars have examined cases of movements transforming into electorally successful parties, like Spain’s Podemos. In places in Latin America and Europe, when established parties on the left supported the retrenchment of social safety nets and severe cuts in social spending in the face of economic downturns or to please transnational creditors, the way was open for new political groupings propelled by social movements to enter the electoral arena. Scholars have begun to analyze the conditions of emergence and varying fortunes of such “movement parties” (della Porta et al. 2017; Kitschelt 2006).
We began by noting the protests of Spain’s indignados and their 2011 declaration that “they don’t represent us.” Four years later, a new party, Podemos, drawing on the ideas and veterans of that movement, supported candidates in regional and local elections; social movement activists took office in many places in May 2015. When, for example, Ada Colau, among the founders of the movement group, Platform of People Affected by Mortgages,27 noted for numerous acts of civil disobedience to block evictions, assumed office as Barcelona’s first woman mayor in June 2015, she was adding yet another datum to more than two centuries worth of evidence that movements are inextricably intertwined with democracy.

Encouraged by their observations of new movements, parties, and governments on the left in Latin America; the emergence of a major new player in Italian politics (the 5 Stars Movement); the energy of the indignados at home and the movements that took heart from them; the enormously favorable public reception the indignados and later movements enjoyed according to the surveys that tracked this28 and aware as well that when last in power the Socialists had been heading down the neoliberal road, a group of activists formally launched Podemos in 2014. They won a million votes in elections to the EU parliament. In May 2015, they supported candidates for local and regional Spanish office with other left organizations, although they did not field slates under their own label at that point. They were to take that step the next year in elections to the Spanish parliament. Some of the distinctive features of the plaza occupations of 2011 were carried into the internal organization of Podemos, which contributed to its ability to carry activist energies into electoral politics, including the energies of activists who typically regarded electoral politics with dismay and disdain. And some of those features were carried forward into the new city governments too.

Within days of occupying the plazas in 2011, working groups and committees had formed to discuss the state of Spanish society and institutions. Discussion continued until consensus was found, and decisions were to be made by a general assembly open to all. When it formed, Podemos invited participants to form “circles” for in-person or virtual discussion and take part in major decisions. Virtual participation was enabled by new electronic technology, specifically, a user-friendly platform through which one could join circles or vote on various matters. For some participants, this was an electronic continuation of the exchanges that took place on the plazas; one of its online tools was called Plaza Podemos. But there was also a central decision-making body and a charismatic general secretary with a national reputation as a left-wing television talk-show host.

Because the structure of Podemos itself was one of the things under discussion, scholars have been grappling with how to characterize its mix of “horizontal” organization, open recruitment, and circulation of ideas from below with the “vertical” influence of its leadership core. All of this was and is unfolding more or less in public view and with not infrequent internal votes on national, regional, and local policy and leadership. Even casual visitors to its electronic plaza would encounter enthusiastic discussion of how to choose electoral candidates and in which venues Podemos should field its own candidates or enter alliances. One lively debate, for example, concerned whether candidates would be chosen centrally or regionally. In assessing the nature of its internal democracy, should one stress citizens’ intensive unhindered participation in the circles and the internal voting, or should one stress the plebiscitarian affirmation of the wishes of the charismatic leader? One not especially friendly newspaper account called it a party whose mass base was anarchists but whose summit was occupied by Leninists. But other accounts of Podemos indicated that its shrinking number of active participants felt their voices mattered.29

It would be misleading to describe the amalgam of movement and party as simply Podemos in many places, including Madrid and Barcelona, because Podemos was often just
one participant along with other movement-parties in forming electoral slates or majorities on city councils. Indeed, as noted earlier, Podemos did not field candidates under its own label in the municipal elections of May 2015 but cooperated with other parties and movements. Martin (2015) argues that the diversity of grassroots voices and dialogue among them (in the spirit of the 2011 plaza occupations) has become more characteristic of these alliances at the municipal level, like Barcelona en Comú or Ahora Madrid, than of Podemos itself as a national movement-party.

Perhaps it is their fluidity that leads the Spanish to label these new alliances tides or confluences. As scholars turn to comparative study of the municipal governments where they won majorities in 2015, we will learn a great deal about the movements carrying new democratic visions into local arenas. For example, consider Madrid Now, whose mayor and city council majority have been promoting initiatives that clearly continue the plaza discussions. Madrid has instituted what its champions call a “civic technology platform” that allows residents to learn of public initiatives, exchange comments on them, propose their own, and vote on their preferences. If this platform, Decide Madrid, sounds like something dreamed up in the plaza occupations, note that one of its designers, the city council member in charge of “public engagement,” has both a background in computer programming and experience as one of the indignados of 2011.

A visitor to Decide Madrid might, for example, decide to express a view on the best choice among proposed urban mural designs for some bare Madrid walls with the competing design proposals on view. In 2016, Madrid developed a participatory budgeting initiative allowing citizens a vote with budgetary consequences; the following year, it decided that future versions would be incorporated into Decide Madrid. The program’s enthusiasts give us their own view of how to situate these innovations within the history analyzed here when they claim that this consultative process is “the biggest step in democracy in Spain in decades” (Ostrow 2017). The software is openly available to other municipalities, so there is no technological barrier to replication.

A FEW CONCLUSIONS

Keane (2009) intends to be provocative when he argues that by the late twentieth century, the expression representative democracy had ceased to accurately describe the actual political process of the states we label as democratic because too many other processes were going on. A vast array of bodies, movements, institutions, lobbies, funders, and parties elbow each other and push against the official, elected representatives. Because all these many actors are busy monitoring each other, he dubs the results monitory democracy. This essay suggests that Keane correctly describes the current scene, but it has been thus since democracy’s birth out of the revolutionary big bang.

In many ways, democracy did not work as planned. Those who prefer a more inclusive notion of citizenship than the authors of the revolutionary constitutions or find slavery intolerable might add “and a good thing, too.” Even the very notion of calling the new political institutions they were inventing democracy was not part of the original package in the United States. The founders would hardly rush to label their new design with such a disreputable term. The disrepute of democracy, abstractly considered, was powerfully amplified by actual practice amid revolutionary turmoil, as when a delegate at the U.S. constitutional convention excoriated the new state constitutions for not providing “sufficient checks against democracy” (Bouton 2007:171). But soon they were calling the new government a democracy anyway, one of the first of many ways their blueprint was repeatedly challenged and sometimes altered.
The democracy embraced later on has often been shaped by people challenging what was called democracy earlier. Some of these challenges were mounted by people who thought they were advancing democracy and some by people who hoped to restrict or overturn democracy; and there were those journeys to the dark side. The causes of the dynamism that has characterized the more than two centuries of the history of modern democracy have not receded, so if there is anything worth calling democracy two centuries from now, it will also have characteristics neither anticipated nor desired by those in authority today. And it will have characteristics neither anticipated nor desired by those who challenge those in authority today. For those who think of themselves as democrats in the early twenty-first century, the deeply unpredictable nature of the changes ahead make it impossible to know whether this will be a good thing or an awful one.

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NOTES

1. “Mis sueños no caben en tus urnas,” a variant on a phrase used by the Zapatistas of Chiapas. For images, see: https://www.google.com/search?q=mis+suenos+no+caben+en+tus+urnas&tbm=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiqpIax99PWSAhVmA3MOHctAeAQIwU0cBiw#biw=1024&bih=636.

2. Thomas Paine is sometimes credited with being early to see the new U.S. Constitution as the framework for a new kind of democracy (Foner 1976). According to Rosanvallon (1995), no revolutionary newspaper in France had democracy in its headlines before 1795, the word never appeared in the debates over voting rights down to the Constitution of 1791, and of the 10 dictionaries of political language produced in the first dozen years of the Revolution, the word only appears in one. Jaume (1989) suggests the term became current in France in 1794.

3. This article takes the U.S. and French revolutions as pivotal, but a full treatment of the impulsion of democracy by the revolutionary era would consider the presumed role of “the people” in other sites where new social orders were launched: in Europe, revolutionary France’s satellite republics and the Spain of the Cádiz constitution of 1812; and in the Americas, Haiti and the newly independent states of Latin America.

4. Although contemporaries could readily point to the assertion by a slaveholder that “all men are created equal” as an instance of hypocrisy (Armitage 2007) and future generations could see this as an obviously unfilled democratic promise, Jefferson likely believed that the capacities he thought self-governing citizens would need were widely diffused (Wills 1978).

5. This may be an echo of the taboo on office-seeking in elections in medieval monasteries because it was associated with the serious sin of simony, or trafficking in ecclesiastical office (Moulin 1978). In Canto 19 of Inferno, Dante wedged simoniacs upside down in holes with their feet on fire.

6. On the complex web of causes for the choice of state capital, see Montès (2014). Willentz (2005:83) suggests a different and more democratic impulse for making South Carolina’s capital Columbia: to provide greater access to the backcountry people.

7. In 1783, Congress was driven from its initial Philadelphia home by mutinous unpaid soldiers. Rejecting proposals for a permanent location in other towns, they preferred a new place with no people to bother them and to be outside the structure of the states. Writing the history of the founding of Washington, DC, to commemorate its centennial in the late nineteenth century, an authorial trio explained that the Philadelphia turbulence had “made that city and other cities which could be controlled by mob influence unsafe as a place for such permanent residence as Congress was seeking” (Crew, Webb, and Woolridge 1892:66).

8. On the circumstances under which women could participate, see Shapiro and Markoff (1998). Although Condorcet (1789] 1982) could ironically point out that some of the noble deputies owed their election to the votes of women, we might note that past the revolutionary moment, no French women voted until after the Second World War.
9. For a splendid statement of the conceptual issues posed by the notion of The People as a singular actor, see Przeworski (2010:18–31).

10. In this article, I am concerned with the ways in which democracy fosters movements and the effects of movements on democracy. But the links between democracy and movements run even deeper because of an array of social transformations that have been favorable for both democracy and movements—speedier transportation and communications, strengthened national states, development of a commercial society and national markets, the growth of literacy and a broadened educated stratum, and much else besides. I will set aside such processes here to keep the focus on the direct consequences of democracy for movements. For a fuller treatment, see Tilly and Wood (2012).

11. This description of movements borrows from Tilly and Tarrow (2007:8).

12. A qualification: The argument that follows applies to forms of political life of nation-states that have generally been described as democracies since the late eighteenth century, in which major powerholders gain formal office through election by citizens. Parts of the argument would not apply to forms of local organization that could reasonably be called democratic or modes of decision making in which elections are not very important, including ancient Athens. As new political institutions emerge in the future, as they will, and become part of what will be understood as democracy, as some also will, the arguments will have to be revisited, if any care to. A second qualification: Regimes that would generally be described as authoritarian exhibit enormous variety, and some also have significant social movements (Chen and Moss 2018). This opens up the question of which parts of the argument apply to the interaction of such movements and such regimes.

13. In the twenty-first–century United States, when opponents deride as mere “astroturf” supposedly “grassroots” movements that are actually impelled from above, they are attempting to empirically distinguish forms of political action that have been deliberately confounded over centuries. Claims about what is or is not astroturf are aspects of struggles about standing to participate in democratic life as part of the sovereign people.

14. Summarizing their quantitative analysis of regime change across decades of Latin American history, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñan (2013:274) note that even just favoring democracy encourages a long view: “A normative preference to democracy extends actors’ time horizons.”

15. Burstein (1999:8) writes that “it is not useful to think of SMOs [social movement organizations] as something different from interest groups.”

16. For some empirical support, see Santoro and Fitzpatrick (2015), whose excellent data suggest movements’ institutionalization and radicalization can be impelled by apparent success that activists experience as disappointing. (Santoro and Fitzpatrick build on previous research on the interplay of institutionalization and radicalization; i.e., Koopmans 1993; Tarrow 1989.)

17. Krupa and Nugent (2015) argue that cycles of hope and despair are characteristic of all modern states, not just democratic ones.

18. The declaration of rights in the second paragraph of the U.S. Declaration of Independence was subsidiary to that document’s central concern with proclaiming the existence of a new state in the world. Decades later, Abraham Lincoln was to observe that although those words about human equality were “of no practical use” at that foundational moment, they were “placed in the Declaration . . . for future use” (quoted in Armitage 2007:26).


21. Tilly and Wood (2012:34) allow Britain priority because these French forms subsided after 1795, did not pick up again until after 1848, and were then severely repressed under the Second Empire “for another two decades.”


24. In the fall of 2017, the confrontation between the government of Spain and the government of its “autonomous community” of Catalonia was making headlines. The Spanish government dissolved the Catalan for its promotion of an illegal referendum and its subsequent declaration of independence, arresting pro-independence political figures and sending in national police. Huge demonstrations took place in Catalonia and Spain. Key actors, strongly opposed to each other, claimed democracy’s mantle. The Spanish government claimed to be defending the democratic constitution of a democratic state
against those ignoring its laws, champions of Catalan sovereignty contended that they embodied democratic practice in following up on a regional referendum on sovereignty, and some of the social movements active in Barcelona neighborhoods were distancing themselves from both rival claims, insisting that a more democratic set of practices involved local control over public policy, thereby rejecting both nationalisms and urging that sovereignty be thought of very differently than which national flag flies over public buildings (Bernat and Whyte 2017; Lucas 2017; Minder 2017).

25. There are lessons here for academic disciplines. Scholars of social movements need to broaden their field of vision to take in other forms of conflict with which movements are frequently intertwined and devote more attention to such institutionalized practices as elections and bureaucratic politics. Political scientists need to think about movements alongside and in conjunction with electoral politics, lobbies, and government action. There are now important disciplinary trends of both kinds. And everyone needs to pay attention to history.


27. Plataforma de los Afectados por las Hipotecas (PAH).

28. One survey indicated that millions of people participated to some extent in the 2011 movement and that 71 percent of those surveyed saw it as a movement that was renewing democracy; even among those who voted for the right-wing Popular Party, the big winner in that year’s elections, 54 percent had a favorable view of the indignados (Marzolf and Ganuza 2016). Small wonder that the founders of Podemos rejected identifying their project as another, new party on the left but claimed to be expressing a “new majority” that would reject the outdated left-right divide. “The 15-M also crystallized a new culture of contestation that could not be grasped by the categories of left and right” (Iglesias 2015b:4).

29. For accounts of the history and functioning of Podemos from its inception to the elections in which it entered parliament, see Marzolf and Ganuza (2016), Martin (2015), Romanos (2017), Romanos and Sádaba (2015), Torreblanca (2015), and Villacañas (2017). Even an abbreviated bibliography of the history of Podemos needs to include the leader’s own account of that history: Iglesias (2015a, 2015b).

30. They are called mareas and confluyencias. Platform is also often used to designate movement organizations, including the new movement-parties. The attractive website for the Madrid version, Now Madrid, describes it thus: “Now Madrid is a space of confluence whose participants are Podemos, Ganemos Madrid, United Left, Equo, and people who belong to no party. Since June 2015 we’ve been governing the municipality” (Ahora Madrid 2018). At the national level, for the May 2016 parliamentary elections, following an internal vote of its participants, Podemos entered an alliance with several other left parties. This confluence, Unidos Podemos (United We Can), became a major actor in the parliament. In May 2018, it agreed to support a Socialist prime minister to replace right-wing Partido Popular, probably inaugurating a new phase in the history of Podemos.

31. Because participatory budgeting projects vary enormously (Baioecho and Ganuza 2017; Sintomer, Röcke, and Herzberg 2016), Madrid’s version needs a much deeper examination.


33. For a splendid example from Boston politics, see Levine (2016).

34. Scholars will continue to rethink it, too (see e.g., Fishman 2016).

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