

Donatella della Porta. Can Democracy be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements.

Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2013. \$69.95 hardcover / \$24.95 paperback

Laurence Cox

National University of Ireland Maynooth

Can Democracy be Saved? is two books in one, and carries off the trick impressively. The first book is a textbook of models of democracy – liberal, participatory, deliberative, electronic, global. As with comparable textbooks, it is essentially a typology, organised around the different adjectives which enable the all-purpose “democracy” to acquire concrete meaning. The second book is an account of how social movements practice democracy – both internally and in their pressure for wider political and social democratisation.

Linking these two narratives takes some skill, but the book’s concept is a strong one and implemented consistently. Thus the development of liberal democracy is neatly tied to the scholarship concerning the movement struggles underlying first-wave democratisation and the vision of participatory democracy is intertwined with the history of European workers’ movements. Deliberative democracy is explored in tandem with the experiments of the global justice movement, *indignados* and Occupy, while e-democracy is illustrated with online activism and movements’ use of social media.

The democratic deficit of European and global governance is related to “global civil society”, Social Forum processes and activists’ cosmopolitanism, while recent democratisation processes are reconnected to social movements in an important assertion of “democratisation from below”. The narrowing of space for protest through aggressive policing is documented, as are the more hopeful attempts at intra-institutional experimentation with deliberative and participatory processes. In each case, a formidable battery of literature is consulted, complexities and contradictions are

acknowledged, national differences are highlighted and (usually) typologies are deployed to make sense of each area, along with relevant vignettes (including, rather nicely, a protest by della Porta's own students at the European University Institute).

Audiences

The result will be a rich source for student readers in particular. I would have been very happy to offer my own first years a book like this when teaching courses on democracy and active citizenship: it offers a clear narrative, structured partly logically and partly chronologically, with complexities that resist easy simplification and offer sufficient data to draw a range of conclusions.

The book has something very significant to say to political theorists, if they will listen: theories of democracy which do not reflect systematically on agency are academic in the pejorative sense. Any substantive (rather than simulated) democratisation means redistributing power, and one of history's dirty secrets is that the major mechanism for this is the popular construction of power from below, in other words social movements. There are certainly other routes, but they too pass through collective agents (albeit of different kinds). A theory of power structures, normative or descriptive, which does not consider the power relations required to construct those structures, has a gaping intellectual (and, for normative theories, political) hole – and this book highlights that hole.

For social movement readers, the book might seem to have less to offer. Much of the empirical material will be familiar (at least to historically and comparatively minded scholars). However the material is marshalled to make a case which should be of real interest to movement researchers: highlighting the significance of what we do to the wider world. Too often social movements research allows itself to be boxed off as operating within a given, pre-structured "level of activity", as a neatly self-contained subdiscipline. This book shows that anyone who seriously wants to understand how democracies come into being and how they are weakened, how popular participation rises and falls,

and how things could be improved, needs to think about social movements. We should be saying this more clearly, more frequently and more publicly, than we do.

Concerns

Reading this book, I had three concerns, on varying scales. The first is that the discussion of how states police movements could, and according to the logic of the book's other chapters should, have been accompanied by a discussion of how movements contest the policing of protest. Such contestation has been central to democratic struggles since the outrage over the 1819 Peterloo Massacre if not before. It is also important to understand that while political policing is indeed getting more aggressive across the global North, it faces substantial limits set by this history: other groups can and do protest when states' attacks on movements overstep what are felt to be popular gains. EP Thompson made this argument fifty years ago.

Secondly, the great missing figure of this book is Latin America's experiments with democracy. Following the "thin democratisation" of the post-dictatorship period, social movements have engaged with the state in a variety of forms, from the more traditional experiences of the Brazilian Workers' Party or Venezuela's "Bolivarian revolution" via the remarkable experiments of movement involvement in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian state to Mexico's dramatic Zapatista enclave or the neighbourhood assemblies of the Argentinazo. If we want to explore what real democratisation – more participatory or more deliberative – might look like, we need to look beyond the handful of examples given here (primarily Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting) to the possibilities and limitations of Latin America's attempts at deeper democracy.

Lastly, the short conclusion is disappointing, not least in relation to the book's self-chosen theme. After a book (rightly) full of ambiguities and empirical richness, a reader might reasonably expect the author to take a position on whether democracy can in fact be saved, rather than restating how

complex the question is. In particular, the retreat to political theory and the various models discussed in the book at the expense of considering the contemporary power relations affecting the struggle for “real democracy now” falls short of what we might hope for from the magisterial sweep of this book.

These concerns aside, this is a fascinating and valuable book which deserves to be widely read and (perhaps more importantly) widely debated.