

# Opinion Article

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## Protest and Democracy in Southern Europe: Beyond (neo) Liberal Democracy?

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Since 2011, protests spread in Southern Europe and beyond, while trust in representative institutions dropped at minimal levels. Not only the austerity measures adopted to address national financial crises—which had common origins but took different forms—were contested. What emerged, strong and clear, was a criticism of what was considered to be the corruption of the liberal forms of democracy, face to growing evidence of the creation of small cliques of businessmen and politicians (what in Iceland was significantly called “the octopus”), which had conquered at the same time economic and political power. If these protests contributed to declining trust in institutions, they however also carry with them the potential for saving democracy, by combining old liberal conceptions with new participatory and deliberative ones.

More and more in recent times representative institutions have shown growing mistrust in their citizens. The moving of political decisions upwards, towards international organizations of dubious democratic credentials or, even worst, to the most powerful foreign states, has meant a declining capacity of the citizens to held decision makers accountable. Face to the evidence of growing public dissatisfaction, national politicians tried to shift the blame towards outside forces. Reducing state competences through a mix of deregulation and privatization, they had then to admit they could no longer meet citizens’ expectations. Especially, face to growing citizens’ claims and criticisms, they have proclaimed, as Italian (former) Premier Mario Monti did, that the most important asset for a country economy is the “trust of the market”—not indeed the trust of the citizens, but rather of the occult forces that regulates the financial markets. In this discourse, protest is stigmatized as “destabilizing” the trust of investors, and therefore damaging the national economy. The (already quite limited) conception of democratic participation in representative democracies was, that is, further limited, in parallel with the reduction of the will and capacity of state institutions to grant that modicum of welfare that had contributed to their own legitimation in the past.

The declining trust *of* representative institutions in their citizens is reciprocated by declining trust of the citizens in those institutions—as neatly reflected in opinion polls indicated. In Italy, surveys at protest against austerity revealed that only 5.9% of the participants trusted much or enough the national parliament and only 6.6% did trust much or enough political parties, with a dramatic drop from respectively 19.5% and 26.2% registered at the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001. What is more, opinion polls confirm very similar levels among the entire population, where trust in parliament is at 8.9% and trust in political parties at 3.9%. Similar trends could be

noted in the other South European countries.

Mistrust has been singled out as a problem for what political scientists Robert Dahl called “really existing democracies”. Democratic theory has suggested in fact that democracies need trustful citizens. This is the case because, symbolically, governments and parliaments have to enjoy legitimacy between an election and the next, but also because, pragmatically, mistrustful citizens tend to pay less taxes. For a long time, deferent citizens were considered as the most supportive of democratic institutions, as they were ready to recognize their own limitation (according to e.g. Schumpeter, in knowledge and rationality) and delegate power to the (political) experts.

Apparently, this is no longer the case. When protests spread from far away Iceland and Arab countries to Spain and Greece, as well as Portugal and Italy, protestors stigmatized not only the growing social inequalities, and drastic drops in living conditions, but also the corruption of democratic institutions.

Beginning in Iceland in 2008, and forcefully in Spain and Greece in 2011, indignation has been addressed towards the corruption of the political class, as testified for by increasing evidence of bribes (the dismissal of corrupt people from institution is called for) but also in the privileges granted to lobbies. The crisis has been in fact perceived not as an unavoidable effect of market mechanisms, but as produced by specific public policies that have privileged the interests of what emerged as restricted elites with overlapping political and economic power. Patrimonialism and kleptocracy are, that is, no longer terms reserved for describing politics in authoritarian regimes, but more and more seem to aptly describe the situation in countries which still called themselves democratic but in which, according to protestors’ slogans, “*le llamas democracia, y no lo es*” (they call it democracy, but it is not such). The slogan “they don’t represent us” reflects a deep criticism of the degeneration of liberal democracies, as giving up on their task to reduce inequalities and allowing an abduction of democracy, not only by financial powers, but also by international organisations, such the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, as well as stronger foreign countries, such as Germany. Pacts for the Euro and stability, imposed in exchange for loans, are considered as anti-constitutional forms of blackmail, depriving citizens of their sovereignty.

These types of protest have been, as mentioned, considered a challenge for political and economic stability, spreading populism and producing increases in spread or discouraging foreign investors. While however the protestors criticize the degeneration of (neo)liberal democracy, they do not oppose democracy—rather they call for a real democracy. “*Democracia real ya!*” was in fact the main slogan of the Spanish *indignados* protestors that occupied the Placa del Sol in Madrid, the Placa de Catalunya in Barcelona and hundreds of squares in the rest of the country from 15 May 2011 on, as they called for different social and economic policies but also greater citizen participation in their formulation and implementation. Similar claims spread then to Greece, where similar calls for real democracy were widespread among the citizens who camped in Syntagma Square and in many other symbolic spaces.

These occupations represented not only occasions to protest but also experimentations with different forms of democracy. Beyond calls for participation, the *acampadas* that populated the main Southern European squares where also prefiguring what political theorists have recently defined as deliberative conceptions of democracy. The democracy in the squares and of the squares reflected in fact a vision profoundly different to that which legitimates representative democracy based on the principle of majority decisions. Democratic quality here is in fact embedded in the elaboration of ideas within discursive, open and public arenas, where citizens play an active role in identifying problems, but also in elaborating possible solutions.

Even though confidence in politicians is extremely low, protests shows however confidence in the capacity of

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citizens to have an impact on political decisions. Rather than endangering democracy, these protests show that, especially in times of crisis, the very conceptions and practices of democracy are contested. The citizens who protest can contribute, that is, ideas both on how to address the economic crisis and how to improve the quality of democracy.

Not deferent citizens, but critical citizens could indeed become a resource for democracy. In order for this to happen, institutional reforms are required that go in the opposite directions of the ones deployed in recent times.

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