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What Does Democracy Mean?

Activist views and practices in Athens, Cairo, London and Moscow

1 Introduction

Democracy as a form of governance appears to constitute one of the great paradoxes of our age. In established democracies, the recurring eruption of protest movements ranging from Occupy to the indignant movements of the Mediterranean to most recently *Nuit Debout* in France and the Democracy Spring movement in the US, coupled with low voter turn-out, low approval of political institutions, and the rise of populist parties have caused some to proclaim a “crisis” or “decline” of democracy¹ while others argue that we are experiencing an “interrelated” crises of global capitalism and representative democracy.² Despite these prognoses of crisis, democracy remains an “enduring idea”³ that continues to appeal to protestors in authoritarian settings, so much so that even after the apparent failure in most countries of the Arab uprisings, from Hong Kong to Harare, they continue to take great risks to achieve it.

While much research on the state of democracy rests on surveys or on analyses of voter turn-out and political party membership, we sought to shed light on both the discontent with and the appeal of democracy by interviewing activists who took part in sustained street activism (often occupying a square) and/or direct action, either demanding democracy or contesting the defects of their democratic system. Such activists have variously been described as “active”⁴, “critical”⁵, or “insurgent”⁶ citizens.

We conducted research with activists in Athens, Cairo, London, and Moscow in April-August 2013. It has been five years since the squares movements emerged and three years since we conducted our interviews with some follow-up interviews with key informants in 2014 and 2015. The movements that emerged in 2010 have changed political debates by

drawing greater attention to issues of inequality, debt, social justice and the shortcomings of representative democracy, yet it is clear that they have fallen short of bringing about more fundamental changes in terms of policy and governance. The grievances that initially brought people into the squares and streets in protest, have not been resolved and in some instances (e.g., Cairo), they have been exacerbated. Moreover, drawing on the same sense of discontent with the status quo, populist politicians and parties have grown stronger. Five years on from the height of the Arab Spring, Occupy and anti-austerity movements, we insist that the deeper commonalities we uncovered in the activist conceptions of democracy in the four contexts have lasting implications of which social scientists studying democratization and democracy should take note. Drawing on our research with activists, we discuss two questions. First, what did democracy mean for the protestors in the squares, and were there shared understandings and conceptualisations of democracy across the four contexts? In other words, did the protestors in Tahrir Square have similar understandings to those at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, in Moscow's Bolotnaya Square or in Athens' Syntagma Square? Second, how have activists' understandings of democracy shaped their organisational processes?

We discovered considerable commonalities in understandings and conceptualizations of democracy, despite the cultural, political and economic differences between the four cities, and the ideological heterogeneity of the activists both within and across contexts. We found that the activists almost universally rejected representative democracy as a sufficient model, and set great store by more demanding versions of democracy variously referred to as 'real', 'direct' or 'participatory' democracy. This referred to a process-oriented notion of active citizenship that places strong demands both on the citizens themselves and on those, at all levels, who govern them. With variations, the activists in all our field sites argued that democracy means having a voice, a right, and even a responsibility to participate in politics and the public life of the commons. Each in

their own context, they developed more demanding ideas of what democracy should mean, ideas that are not idiosyncratic, but resonate with each other and with certain writings in political theory. Activists saw themselves as engaged in prefigurative politics which sought to foster democratic practices in the internal organization of the movement and, ultimately, in society. Yet they also raised concerns about internal power dynamics, maintaining that the movements did not always challenge existing inequalities within society (e.g., class, gender, race, etc.) and at times even replicated these in the structures and patterns of organization.

After contextualizing our research within the wider literatures on democracy and contemporary social movements (section 2), we examine the activists' critiques of the status quo and their understandings of democracy (section 3). Section 4 critically reflects on how activist understandings of democracy are translated into practices and considers the potential and limits of prefigurative activism. Section 5 discusses the implications of our findings.

2 Our approach

Is there a crisis of democracy, and do the views of activists matter? Some argue how we define democracy determines whether we believe there is a crisis⁷, and point out that citizens remain committed to democratic principles or the idea of democracy, while becoming more distrustful of politicians, political parties and institutions. Those who argue that democracy is in crisis advance competing causal explanations (including the impact of globalization; growing social and income inequality; more informed and less deferential citizens; bad governance, etc.) and propose different solutions . These include improving the governance and accountability of political institutions and elites;⁸ introducing more participatory engagement mechanisms (e.g., referenda, participatory budgeting);⁹ and investing in citizenship education and political literacy programmes.¹⁰ Others contend that the crisis of

democracy will continue until such time as problems created by capitalism and neoliberalism are addressed.¹¹ They warn of the hollowing out or destruction of democracy by late neoliberal capitalism¹² and argue that political democracy must be accompanied by a democratization of the economy so that the “critical and radical power of democracy” is restored.¹³ It is within this context that the protest movements we studied emerged

Traditional political scientists appear to have already all but forgotten the global wave of activism starting from the Arab uprisings, and spreading to the Occupy movements, the anti-austerity and pro-public service protests of Europe and Brazil, to again democracy protests in Istanbul, Moscow and Hong Kong, and the most recent manifestations in France and Washington, D.C. The January 2015 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, for instance, in which luminaries such as Carothers, Diamond, Fukuyama, and Schmitter debated whether democracy is (globally) in crisis, barely features protests. They consider the recent protests as inconsequential “symptoms of morbidity” in which there is a lot of “grumbling, dissatisfaction, powerlessness, and sub-optimality.”¹⁴ In so far as they feature, the movements are viewed as being “long on problems [but] short on solutions”¹⁵ and unable to achieve structural or policy level changes.¹⁶ These arguments embrace a “productivist view of social action,”¹⁷ i.e. if no concrete policy impact is accomplished, there is failure. According to these sceptics, democracy functions by means of the ballot box, and participatory, direct or horizontal forms of democratic organizing constitute self-indulgent and naïve practices.¹⁸

We argue that because of its electoral focus, much of the political science literature, whether it focuses on declining trust in established democracies or on “electoral authoritarianism”¹⁹, misses the importance of the views and practices developed by the most committed, active and critical citizens as a potential source of political innovation.

Alongside the political science literature, there is now a growing literature in anthropology, geography, and sociology on the recent protest movements that examines the demands and aspirations of the protestors²⁰, their links to and differences from previous movements²¹, and the ways in which they are part of a posited global communications networks.²² This literature has been less narrowly political in focus, methodologically less systematic, and often rather celebratory in its portrayal of activists and movements. These scholars reject the focus on ‘impact’ and ‘outcomes’ as instrumentalist and reductive, and instead argue that the movements represent a utopian or pre-figurative politics in which the means are synonymous with the ends and where public spaces, such as squares, become “battlefields” for an emancipatory politics²³. They express the hope and expectation that the democratic practices within the movements will bleed outward and upward into societal transformation.²⁴ Some scholars, embracing an anarchist framework, optimistically view recent movements such as Occupy as representing an “opening up of the radical imagination”, and having the potential to bring about a profound moral transformation²⁵. Others strike a more cautionary note maintaining that “if those ‘from below’ perceive those ‘from above’ as unwilling to listen...then tensions will mount and may erupt into violence”.²⁶

Such expectations of eruptions or outbreaks of violence are not new. A third set of scholars, including Holston, Blaug, Bayat and Wolin, assert that activist self-understandings matter, but approach them and their effects more critically.²⁷ They discuss “outbreaks of democracy” in which there is a “sudden recovery of politics, an awakening, a process of political renewal”²⁸ and consider the importance of such “restorative moments” in shaping state-citizen relations.²⁹ In past decades, as now, such “outbreaks” have tended to crack when bumping up against repressive state-market complexes, yet at the same time the latter cannot permanently satisfy a citizenry that has once had a taste of the

(pseudo)empowerment that street activism provides. These scholars foresee a future of frequent crises between bankrupt political systems and insurgent citizens.³⁰

While we draw inspiration from the scholars in the second and especially the third category, they also demonstrate the methodological challenges in studying this global wave of protests. They either generalize from a single movement or country they know very well, or travel the world collecting activist vignettes for a global comparison that is necessarily somewhat methodologically haphazard. We have approached this challenge by aiming for a meso-level investigation. We carried out a qualitative comparative study of four capital cities, aiming for the most different cities as well as for within-case diversity in selecting respondents, but asking the same open questions of all respondents in all cases.

The four settings for our interviews had one important commonality: they all witnessed extensive and sustained mobilization, including street demonstrations and an encampment, in 2011 or early 2012. Beyond this similarity, we chose cities with great variation both in their political and economic system in order to understand the extent to which activists held similar views across such very different settings. On the political axis, Athens and London are stable competitive³¹ regimes, Moscow is stable authoritarian, and Cairo was marked by political instability and crisis. In economic terms, while each of the settings apart from Moscow suffered from the global financial crisis, the cities chosen represent a financial centre (London), a post-communist natural resource economy (Moscow), an open aid-dependent economy (Cairo), and an economy in the midst of instability and crisis (Athens).

London <i>regime type:</i> stable competitive <i>economy:</i>	Moscow <i>regime type:</i> stable (semi-) autocratic <i>economy:</i>
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financial centre	resource-exporting
<p>Athens <i>regime type:</i> (semi-)stable competitive <i>economy:</i> crisis, instability</p>	<p>Cairo <i>regime type:</i> crisis, instability <i>economy:</i> aid-dependent</p>

Figure 1: Table of regime and economy types.

We conducted field research in Athens together, developing a definitive interview guide that was used in the other three cities.³² In each city, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15–20 respondents, most of whom were core activists in square occupations or other forms of direct action, while some were journalists, representatives of NGOs, trade unions or political parties. In this article, we draw solely on our 54 interviews with activists. In each city we had one or two key local contacts who helped identify and put us in touch with activists. ‘Activist’ is a slippery term, but drawing on the social movement literature, we understand being an activist as a collective identity linked to participation in a social movement or collective action.³³ For the purposes of this article, we operate with a much narrower definition, considering core activists those who have taken part in sustained street activism (often occupying a square) and/or direct action since 2011. We interviewed only those who had been deeply involved in the protests, for whom activism was an important time commitment and part of their identity, rather than occasional demonstrators.

Following the initial contact, we selected interviewees via a snowball sample, but selecting for the greatest possible variety in political views, age, gender and class to reflect the much-noted diversity in the street protests. In Cairo for instance, we made sure to interview various shades of liberals, leftists and Islamists, young and old, male and female, English speakers and Arabic-only speakers. None of our respondents self-identified or were identified by others as ‘leaders’. In the sections below, we present the views of the activists about the meaning of democracy (section 3), their actual practices (section 4) and

the implications of our findings (section 5).

3 The Views of Activists

3.1 Representation is not enough – a new awakening of political consciousness?

Across the four cities, activists were very clear that democracy was much more than participating in elections. Many challenged the hierarchical and exclusionary models of representative democracy in which elites manage and control participation. According to Lucy³⁴, a London activist, “for me true democracy, a word that is bandied about and abused [is] about real freedom and not someone representing you. I have had enough of representative politics. Lots of people across Europe, they don’t want to be represented by anyone”. Other activists rejected representative democracy in equally strong terms. Human rights activist Rania in Cairo said: “Let’s start with what democracy does not mean to me. It doesn’t mean to me a ballot box to go to every four years. So this is the smallest part of democracy that I can imagine. And democracy has been described for so long as this ballot box.” Athanasios, an activist from Athens similarly explained: “One thing I am sure is it does not mean that you can elect your government every four years”, while Fred, a veteran London activist, called representative democracy “an obsolete system”. In Moscow we heard that “for me democracy should not be representative democracy. It is clear that there are many problems in representative democracy” (Alyona). All this requires some contextualization of course: in Athens many activists felt betrayed by politicians who they believed to be co-responsible for the financial crisis; in Cairo we interviewed during the Morsi period and there was great unease with the way the Muslim Brotherhood had interpreted the revolution as being only about the ballot box. And in Moscow there is a problematic heritage of election manipulation and criticism of democracy as a Western import.

Despite these contextual differences, the arguments that representative democracy

“is not enough” were repeated by many of our interlocutors. Across Athens, Cairo, London, and Moscow we heard that “people realize that the parties and the unions are part of the corrupt system so no one believes in them” (Aiketerina), that the media manipulates public opinion (Mahmoud; Mohab; Ibrahim; Salim; Antonis; Panagiotis; William), that there is a lack of accountability (Panagiotis; Vasilis; Jake; Alekos; Adham), that the “police, courts and other bodies do not uphold the rule of law” (Ivan) and “the same law is applied differently to a poor person and to a rich person” (Alexandros).

Yet despite the wide-ranging criticism of representative democracy, almost no one argued that it should be abandoned. Representative democracy was seen as a necessary but insufficient minimum. For instance, in Cairo, Osama said, “there is this trend that... representative democracy is not working, elections are not working. That does not mean that we should not do it, no, on the contrary, this is the only opportunity for us to practice, and we should practice, but it is not enough.”

Alyona, the Moscow activist quoted above, identified herself as anarchist. She characterized Occupy Abai in Moscow as resulting from a new recognition of the importance of having a voice. She said,

People who were new to politics decided to do something in their lives. It [Occupy Abai] wasn't a movement of special interests, but it was to change the situation when you are nobody in political life to have some voice.... So there were normal people and also people from different political movements and even fascists and anarchists.

Alyona's reference to “normal” people participating in political life alongside the more experienced activists indicates a process of politicisation within societies, which another activist in Moscow, Sofia referred to as an “awakening”. This process of politicisation was also taking place in Athens according to Athanasios. He explained how in recent years, “people have become more active, more involved in the political process, they have come off the couch; they believe much less what the mass media says. Some have become involved in local assemblies, some have joined Syriza, or Golden Dawn, some went to demonstrations

when they never had done before.” Aiketerina also described how the crisis in Athens had “reached unexpected places” leading people who might never have become involved in political organising or collective action to “self-organise.” Adham, in Cairo, explained how people came to see themselves as rights-bearing citizens and political subjects. He said, “Our age, we call it the age of people or citizens, the unpoliticized persons who were absent have been given the chance to engage with each other”.

Alongside these concerns about elitism, media manipulation, lack of accountability, or lack of equality before the law, discussed above, activists in all four contexts expressed concerns about the implications of contemporary global financial capitalism. As we elaborate elsewhere³⁵ (Ishkanian and Glasius forthcoming) in all four cities, respondents identified the current economic system as one of the main obstacles that stood between them and the more demanding vision of democracy they envisaged. Some, but by no means all, of our respondents explicitly formulated the view that their conception of democracy was incompatible with the current global capitalist system.

What we have discussed in this section is a two-fold process. First, there is widespread dissatisfaction with representative democracy. Second, activists spoke about a process of “awakening” which consists of rising political consciousness and engagement among formerly unpoliticized people. In the next section, we consider activists’ aspirations i.e. what they define as more meaningful versions of democracy.

3. 2 Creating a culture of democracy: voice, participation, and responsibility

In describing their preferred understandings of democracy, activists often used adjectives like direct, real or participatory, but more important perhaps are the nouns they used. Three connected elements stood out throughout our interviews in all four settings democracy means: 1) having a **voice** that is not just tolerated, but listened to; 2) **participation** in decision-making; and 3) **embracing the responsibility** to take part in the life of the

commons. Lucy, quoted above on her disaffection with representation, explained what “real” democracy meant for her: “I want to have my own say and allow other people to have their say. It's about being able to be an individual within the collective, not in a neoliberal alienating and isolating way, but to be organised in a better way where we live differently as a collective.”

Other respondents in London, including Alice and Oscar, both Occupy activists, echoed this view of democracy as the ability to be “included in the decision making [process]” (Alice) and to have “control over the way life is lived in general” (Oscar). In Athens, Eleni, who was involved in the Syntagma Square protests and later helped establish a local community self-help group, said: “Democracy is a high value issue and a big thing in our lives, but especially during the last few years’ democracy is under fire in Greece ... We want to re-create real democratic procedures at the grassroots level. Like open democracy [and]the agora”.

Athanasios, from a different local solidarity group, argued that democracy meant the freedom for people to “decide for themselves” and, he maintained that for this to happen, people should participate in the “commons on a daily basis”. In Cairo, prior to the return to authoritarian rule, many respondents described their views of democracy, in terms very similar to those expressed by the activists in Athens and London. For example, according to Mariam, democracy is “about participation of all the members ... There should be a deep sense of equal ownership”. Salim, a Cairo activist who had participated both in the Tahrir Square protests and in Occupy Wall Street, stated: “...democracy is that people really run their own daily lives on all levels. On the municipal level, they would control their food, their prices, and on the higher level the governorate would do their policies”. In Moscow, Igor described the growing desire for political participation among middle class Russians “not in

big politics, but in small politics. Like we want to solve the issues in our localities. We want to accept some responsibility for something.”

Activists in all four cities recognised the gap between their aspirations and existing political and social realities and spoke about the need to create a culture of democracy from below. According to Sasha, an anarchist from Moscow, democracy is “a responsibility” which demands “hard work” and “constant struggle”. Pavel, an Occupy Abai activist said: “...the notion of responsibility is central. We must not think that institutions are external to us; we are responsible... [but] to change the world, we must change institutions... if you change the political regimes without changing the institutions, it does not work.”

The idea that democracy is not an end, but a continual process was expressed by a number of activists. Oscar, who had been involved in environmental activism before Occupy London and later, joined an anti-austerity group, explained, “...there is always an aspiration of democracy, it's never perfectly realized.” Menna, from Cairo, similarly hypothesized that “democracy is a culture, an obligation. At the popular level we use democracy for formulating our revolution in the family, in the streets. [The population] hasn't been educated to practice dialogue and democracy. I think the absence of democracy at the formal level is a result of the absence of democracy at the popular level.”

As evident from the above discussion, activists have high, perhaps too high, expectations of what is needed from the people to achieve democracy. Thomas, an activist from London explained, “The best things in life are family, love and having meals and friends, this is the stuff of life. I mean who wants to think about how sewers or lighting should be sorted out. But if you leave those decisions to other people, you will get into corrupt states [sic].” Eleni, from Athens, also saw political participation as a responsibility and a fight. “Democracy comes from all of us. From the government and municipality, but if we want to give democracy real meaning it has to start at the grassroots and society must

fight for it. It's not a gift, but something that you have to fight for.”

In this sub-section we discussed how throughout the four contexts, whether democratic, unstable or (semi)authoritarian, activists viewed democracy as the ability to participate in making decisions that affected their lives, not solely through participation in elections, but in a more demanding and consequential manner. Activists discussed the importance of self-organisation, participation in decision-making, and the responsibility to engage in the life of the commons. But they did not consider it self-evident that such a state of affairs could actually be achieved without constant vigilance or struggle. These formulations give a new, more confrontational meaning to the ancient notion of ‘civic duty’, one which puts the emphasis on active participation and effort. This helps us understand why contemporary activists attach such value to internal democracy as part of a broader project of transforming society, and then formal politics.

In our next section, we will turn to how activists assessed their own internal practices and processes in relation to their conceptions of democracy. We will demonstrate that, even according to the activists’ own assessments, their record is much more mixed than some of the scholar-activist literature would have us believe. We consider the relation between experimentation and effectiveness, the prevalence of participatory versus more traditional practices, and the movements’ dealing with diversity.

4 Democracy within the movements

4.1 Experimentation and effectiveness

According to much of the recent literature³⁶ we should see the contemporary movements as “prefigurative” (a concept going back to anarchist writings³⁷): they not only demand things from governments and other institutions of power, but translate these “claims into concrete local practices and actions with prefigurative activism, seeking to implement direct democracy in local public spaces”.³⁸ Prior to the focus on prefigurative activism within

social movement studies, scholars tended to examine tensions and conflicts that emerge from balancing inclusive, participatory approaches with organizational efficiency in terms of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’.³⁹ The scholars who have highlighted the role of prefiguration made an important contribution, making clear that social movements are voluntarist and deeply normative enterprises, and a straight comparison with other forms of organization can be reductive. That said, they have tended to skate lightly over the challenges involved in dealing with diversity. Two exceptions are Choi-Fitzpatrick, who argues that despite the “appearance of inclusive engagement” the voices of African American and Latino participants were “often not heard” in recent social justice and democracy movements in the US, while the “Anglo participants” dominated the programme and conversations; and Martinez Palacios, who finds that the participation of women was restricted in practice in the Spanish 15M movement.⁴⁰ Likewise, we urge a more critical examination which examines the intersectionality within movements. Movements often claim to be inclusive and yet, upon investigation we discovered that age, class, gender, race, and religion can affect organizing and mobilizing within movements. We asked our interviewees, in all our four locations whether they really saw themselves as ‘doing democracy’, and how well they thought they were doing it. We systematically asked our respondents ‘Do you think the movements are democratic?’ often with a qualifier relating to the movements in which they themselves were most immersed. Responses in our four field sites were mixed and far from self-congratulating.

There is undoubtedly a pre-occupation with internal democracy: many activists describe their movements as trying (Aiketerina; Alexandros; Ibrahim; Mustafa; Harry; Fred), learning (Rania; Thomas; Jessica; Alice), experimenting (Salma, Alice) or fumbling (Sophie) to be democratic, but, they also describe them as suffering from “childhood illnesses” (Fred). Three of our respondents, all experienced activists, from Athens, Cairo, and London

respectively, reported being turned off by processes of trying to hear everyone's voice, and came to find it ineffective. Aiketerina, who had been involved in the Syntagma Square occupation and many subsequent local movements, said:

Some movements have tried a lot to be very democratic but with some it didn't succeed... being effectively democratic because they took the approach to listen to everyone's opinions. And this took a long time.....If in your mind democracy is to listen... and to hear everyone, then this leads to things not happening.

Malak believed that deliberative decision-making "works very well on smaller scales. But you don't have that all the time. So I don't think in this regard. Part of the problem is in the logistics and the running of such organizations. So it's not a disregard for democracy, but more about the difficulty of running such a movement." Fred also objected to the consensus model:

They take it sometimes in a very dogmatic way, which can lead to very long discussions and can be frustrating and can hinder the process of decision-making... Many people ended up leaving Occupy because they were frustrated by the inefficiency of this model.

We did not find these sentiments to resonate with most of our respondents. But we did find that the position that contemporary movements are prefigurative in character and thereby implement democratic practices requires two other major qualifications: first, we discovered that deliberation and consensus-building do not prevail in all the movements. They coexist with more traditional structures. Second, we found that, despite the best intentions, at times the movements replicated, rather than confronted, existing social and structural inequalities and power relations relating to gender, race, age, experience, and class.

4.2 Traditional practices

The emphasis on democracy as a participatory process in activist conceptions of democracy, might lead to the conclusion that they all revolve around plenaries that engage in deliberation and consensus-based decision making. We discovered that in all contexts, such experiments

lived side by side and sometimes clashed with more traditional structures, some of which were deemed democratic, others not.

Decision-making via deliberative structures appears to have most become the norm in Athens. According to Athanasios, who ran a social centre, this was understandable because “all the traditional ways have failed, especially during the crisis, that is why people turned to Indignados or other forms of self-organisation, to overcome their lack of political power”. Nonetheless, our interviews give us reason to believe that commitment to deliberative decision-making is not universal. Those who did not engage in participatory practices, such as communists Nicholas and Manos, think-tanker Panagiotis or feminist Athena, would deflect our question about democracy within their own movements and return to their pet cause. Athena for instance claimed that “yes, we have been democratic. But it is so difficult to have democracy because people are so psychologically down.”

In London we found much reflection on organisational practices, but also a wide array of alternatives to the deliberative plenary. As Jake explained, “Something we got into tussles about initially was whether we should have any structures at all. And democracy is about bypassing the tyranny of 'structurelessness' where loud white men get loads of airtime because they shout the loudest.” Lucy explained how in her anti-austerity group, “consensus decision making is important” and described how they took “collective decisions” through “allowing people to speak and allowing them to be heard”.

In Cairo, respondents pointed out that the political and cultural past impeded internal democracy. Zeyad pointed out that “we suffered a lot from the kind of penetration ... [people] working with the security and joining the organization and participating in the elections and making clashes and destroying it”. Moreover, according to Rania for instance, “there's still a kind of cultural aspect of having someone at the top who's the decision maker. This definitely still exists. And it's always hard to get rid of, even if you believe in total

democracy”. More often than in the other contexts, our question regarding ‘democratic practices’ was interpreted as constituting electoral practices, i.e.: “from the experience in my party we had elections” (Zeyad); “we have elections every six months for the local groups or one year for the coordinators” (Karim). In the midst of the ill-fated struggle for democracy at the national level, many movements, secular and Islamist, were experiencing internal struggles for democracy. According to Omar, this is generational: “the youth movements are more democratic ... they transition in a more collective way and give more space to the members ... except the ones that have old leaders. Those are less democratic”. Ibrahim had been deeply committed to the Muslim Brotherhood, but to the question of democratic practices he answered “no, whatsoever, no. . . And this is one of the great problems. I was fired from the Muslim Brotherhood for that. I had another opinion and point of view. But they are very good at making it feel democratic”. Karim, a founder of a secular youth movement, perhaps unwittingly reported similar tensions: “we have a democratic process inside the movement, but also, because it's so vague in Egypt right now, the group of founders make evaluations every two or three months and talk about ideology and values ... But also we have founders protected against [challenges].”

Moscow too was the scene of clashes between those who wanted to adopt the horizontal practices of the Occupy movement and more traditional practices. Dima, a young Occupy activist, clashed with “a Trotskyist organisation, which is more dogmatic ... It was very difficult to discuss with them because all of them had the same position ... It was like they were carrying out orders from their party...[and] were trying to occupy the Occupy movement.” Also during Occupy Abai, liberal opposition leaders appear to have been sidelined. According to Nastya: “when the leaders came to the assembly and wanted to speak, people told them to wait their turn and it was bad for the leaders.” Sergey, an older anarchist activist, also reports that when liberal leader Alexei Navalny came to Occupy, “he came as a

leader and wanted to give orders and to speak. But the Occupy members wouldn't let him and he was not happy so he left." Subsequently, according to Sergey, "when Navalny and others came out of jail, they said, thank you boys and girls, we are out of jail. So now go home". Nastya confirms: "They clearly realised that Occupy is not good for them."

4.3 Dealing with diversity

Activists recognised these challenges and spoke about efforts made to avoid reproducing the "unhealthy and unhelpful" power dynamics and exclusionary patterns of engagement (Charlie). Gender, race, age, sexuality, experience, and class were cited as categories in which the movements struggled to break free from existing hierarchal social relations, but did not always succeed. As Oscar explained, it is an aspiration. He said, "We are anti-hierarchical and operate by consensus. But you get the same hierarchies of power around gender, class, race, experience, and commitment. These were brought to people's attention through Occupy... We say we are anti-hierarchal and that this is what we are striving for."

While some veteran London activists told us that from the perspective of gender equality and inclusion much had changed (Fred; Sophie; Thomas), others pointed out that the squares and general assemblies and were still gendered and racialized spaces. According to a long-time feminist activist in Athens:

In Syntagma we tried three times to have a feminist approach but it didn't pass open assemblies. A feminist approach in this context is that we made a proposition to the assembly to discuss the problem of the impact of the debt on women. It was impossible. They didn't agree to put this as a matter of discussion. One may argue that in the case of Syntagma Square the decision to exclude that particular topic (i.e., the impact of debt on women) was taken democratically; however, such choices are also indicative of latent power dynamics which shape agenda-setting and decision-making processes. While activists such as Alexandros, Aiketerina, and Athanasios discussed how solidarity groups and some NGOs confronted racism and extended support to migrants and

refugees, none of our interviewees mentioned active participation of migrants in the protests or occupation of Syntagma Square. This omission by our interviewees does not preclude that migrants may have participated in the protests and occupation, but it seems unlikely that they were prominent.

In London, Alice emphasized that women or people from minority backgrounds were not “regarded as less capable” nor were they excluded from active participation and public speaking. However, she pointed out that “Occupy London was a very white, male, heterosexual contingent. That was the predominant thing. I don't think by design but that is how it happened...there weren't many people from other ethnic backgrounds.” More specifically, she relates the experience of “a black female friend who came and couldn't see how to join. She didn't feel empowered enough to join and one of the problems was that it [Occupy] didn't give people enough links with how to engage. It created some excluding situations but that was never the intent. I think much more work needs to be done about that”. Like Alice, Oscar and Luke point out that there is no deliberate intention to exclude people, but they also point to the pre-dominant whiteness of the anti-austerity movement. Luke, who was involved in a locally based anti-austerity group in a very ethnically diverse neighbourhood in London, said,

There are some ethnic minorities in [GROUP] but it doesn't reflect the diversity in the community. It's not that we don't want people to get involved, but we don't say, ‘we don't have enough black people, we better go get some more black people’. It's whether they want to be involved... we don't exclude anyone.

Mia's group draws attention to the racialised impact of austerity. She said, “There are more black people working in temporary or casual jobs, so they don't have a steady income so if you are struggling against the everyday racism, then you don't have a lot of energy or time left to go out and do the other stuff.” Yet she also felt that, from the perspective of ethnic minorities, the neither Occupy nor the broader anti-austerity movement adequately

“represent[ed] them and their needs and views”. The response to her group’s challenge has been tokenism:

What we have sought to do is to ensure that black people have a voice in all of the activities that have gone on ... Unfortunately what we’ve seen... is that when we have made a noise and threatened to expose them and to write open letters that is when that they run around and think, ‘Right we need to have a black face around’.

In Moscow, activists spoke about ‘women’s’ and ‘men’s’ spheres of activism. Alyona argued that “in Russia, social movements are women’s sphere and political movements are men’s sphere. By political I mean everything which is connected to elections or questions of power such as political parties are men’s sphere. Women are involved in local politics, but in the middle and higher spheres of politics almost no women are involved. In the social sphere there are more women involved.” Nastya felt a double devaluation, as a young person and as a woman. She said, “It’s very hard. If you are young, no one wants to listen to you and even in left [wing] organisations there are problems... If you are a woman and you come to an organisation you do not feel respected.” With respect to class, Sasha, explained that the issue of social justice “wasn’t popular among the protestors” because “most of them were not from the bottom of society; they were typical middle class people”. Like Sasha, Ivan, Nastya and Sergey observed that both Occupy Abai and the large scale protests in Bolotnaya Square were primarily comprised of middle class protestors.

In Cairo, many activists describe the 18 days in Tahrir Square that ended in Mubarak’s resignation in almost utopian terms, as a time when people were in solidarity across class, religious and gender barriers. Mahmoud described it as “an amazing time. Tahrir Square was like big utopia. It was self-governed. Everyone was on equal footing. The upper middle class guys sitting next to the very poor farmer”. Ibrahim explained how the physical danger and the common enemy enhanced solidarity: “this situation has a great impact on that you’re talking about one unity of people. The clear enemy. Clear targets. Clear goals. And the

outside pressure. So we are one. Muslim Brotherhood and up to the communists, leftists, and Christians, we are one”. However, both immediately contrasted the utopia to subsequent disillusionment. Mahmoud said: “during the 18 days there was this illusion that we're all one and that we all know our future and that we all know which way to take in order to achieve a better future etc. But no one actually knew what to do. No one agreed upon anything”. And Ibrahim described how in Tahrir, “people were near God... Then it became something like a tribal thing ... I'm a Muslim, I'm a Sunni, you're Sunni, Shia or a Christian.”

The evolution of gender relations in the protests in Cairo is perhaps the most contradictory of the four cities. Activists often spoke about how gender relations were manifested before, during and after the revolution. For example, Karim, a youth movement leader said “...before the revolution [there was] the old tradition that girls shouldn't participate in protests as it's dangerous. But during the revolution the girls and women joined the revolution and demonstrations” (Karim) and the 18 days in Tahrir were described as a period which “broke[n] many of the barriers” (Youssef) and “proved that women are as much capable as men of doing anything. Including fighting, talking, teaching, politics” (Salim). Nonetheless, from the very beginning, sexual violence was being experienced by women and girls on protests. Some saw the lifting of the taboo on discussing sexual violence as evidence of positive normative change (Mohab; Zeyad; Gamal; Youssef). Rania, a human rights activist, celebrated “the ability of women to react every time harassments happen ... their ability to react, to gather a large amount of demonstrators, male and female who are standing just for women's demands and not just for generic demands” and insisted, rather surprisingly, that “this is one of the victorious moments when you have men and women gathering in such large sums [numbers] even though the first women's watch for instance ended in catastrophe. Ended in harassment.” Salma, a social scientist, while seeing signs of societal change, also offered more uncomfortable interpretations of the evolving politics of gender relations in

Egypt. Speaking to us in May 2013, she saw the power struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military as being in part “about women”. She said, “Women became sort of almost the centre of the fight, the easiest target”. She also believed that sexual violence was not random: “the violence and the rapes, and harassment. It was organized to intimidate activists”, just as Salim believed that “the power is using sexual harassment to keep girls out of the protests”. Indeed, in subsequent demonstrations surrounding the military take-over in 2013, sexual violence further intensified⁴¹. The experience of women in the street could be read as a metaphor for the fate of the Egyptian revolution: precisely because their presence signified potential deep transformations in society, they bore the brunt of the dissension and repression that followed.

As we discussed in this section, activists’ understandings of democracy (i.e., including voice and participation by all affected) has led to conscious attempts to foster inclusive and horizontal practices within their own movements. This has meant eschewing leaders, creating spaces to listen to different voices (i.e., through the assemblies), and relying on consensus-based decision making. However, as we demonstrated, such horizontal practices which are informed by and seek to realize what activists consider “real democracy” co-exist and clash with more hierarchical practices of organizing, agenda-setting and decision-making. Moreover, while movements in all four contexts strove to embrace democratic practices and challenge existing hierarchies in society, many activists recognized the gap between their aspirations to ‘be the change’ they desired and the perpetuation of existing hierarchies within the movements.

6 Implications

In examining activists’ views and practices of democracy in four cities, we have demonstrated that regardless of the type of economy or political regime, activists converged

on the point that representative democracy alone is an unsatisfactory system, and that for meaningful democracy to emerge citizens must embrace a sense of responsibility and agency, and fight for inclusion in political decision-making. We draw three conclusions from our research.

First, the insistence by core activists that representative democracy is insufficient, and that citizens have both a right and a duty to be actively involved in decisions that directly affect them, should be taken more seriously by political scientists and by policy-makers, not just as a threat to democracy and democratization, but as an opportunity. The mobilizations of 2011 and 2012, we have shown, were not just economic protests⁴², and not just signs of democratic morbidity⁴³ or authoritarian instability⁴⁴. Instead, activists saw democracy as an aspiration and a process of continual struggle and maintained that it is important to create a culture of democracy. We contend that the conceptions of democracy held by the citizens who were most prepared to invest time, energy and risk in collective action, and their attempts at practicing these ideas, should be considered as sites of political innovation, regardless of the variable outcomes of the square occupations. Whether they found themselves in the context of hollow formal democracies or ideologically bankrupt autocracies, activists shared a deep concern about their lack of voice and ability to influence wider political and policy developments, coupled with a belief that they had the collective agency and the obligation to do something about it.

Second, the organizational practices of the movements and square occupations require serious but critical investigation. Many activists described efforts at being democratic and challenging power relations and hierarchies within movements, just as theorists of prefiguration have claimed. Yet through their own descriptions, we have shown that entrenched inequalities and patterns of exclusion were often replicated. Hence, contemporary social movements should be considered not as straightforward sites of prefiguration, but as

sites of struggle between experimental and traditional forms of organizing, and between attempts at inclusiveness and enduring tendencies to exclude and reproduce existing power differences. If it is true, as prefigurative scholars imply and as some of our respondents also claimed, that a meaningful democratic political system requires a democratization of society, then these struggles should be relevant to the enduringly authoritarian contexts we studied as much as to formal democracies⁴⁵, and to political scientists as much as to sociologists and anthropologists.

Finally, the recent spate of movements have opened up debates around the meaning of democracy, inequality, and the role of the state, but the prospects of activist conceptions of democracy bleeding outward and upward into the transformation of society and of political decision-making are bleaker than proponents of prefiguration would have us believe. The space for protest is declining through repressive legislation, the securitisation of public spaces,⁴⁶ and the criminalisation of protest.⁴⁷ The Brexit referendum and the rise in popularity of right-wing populist politicians and parties demonstrate a growing anger with the status quo and mistrust of mainstream political parties and elites. Setting aside their anti-immigrant rhetoric, populists share demands with the movements we studied, frame them in the language of democracy, and argue for giving people voice and greater control over unresponsive or unrepresentative institutions. Today, the gap between what is – at best – on offer, formal representative democracy within the confines of the global capitalist system, and the culture of democracy activists envisage, is such that no accommodation can be reached⁴⁸. As the movements keep coming up against unresponsive and often repressive state structures, across our contexts and beyond them, recurrent political mobilization is to be expected.

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¹ Bauman and Bordoni, *State of Crisis*; ; Fukuyama, "Why Is Democracy Performing So Poorly?"; Plattner, "Is Democracy in Decline."

² Nugent, "Commentary," 281.

³ Flinders, "The Problem with Democracy," 181.

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- ⁴ Crick and Lockyer, *Active Citizenship*.
- ⁵ Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
- ⁶ Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*.
- ⁷ Merkel, "Is There a Crisis of Democracy?";
- ⁸ Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession"; Fukuyama, "Why Is Democracy Performing So Poorly?"
- ⁹ Schmitter, "Crisis and Transition, but Not Decline," 43.
- ¹⁰ Flinders, "The Problem with Democracy."
- ¹¹ Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*. Nugent, "Commentary "; Della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*; Merkel, "Is Capitalism Compatible with Democracy?", 1 ; Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*.
- ¹² Badiou and Gauchet, *What Is to Be Done?* ; Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*. ; Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*.
- ¹³ Lummis, *Radical Democracy*, 15.
- ¹⁴ Schmitter, "Crisis and Transition, but Not Decline", 43.
- ¹⁵ Haldane, "A Leaf Being Turned" .
- ¹⁶ Fukuyama, "Why Is Democracy Performing So Poorly?": 19
- ¹⁷ Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 143.
- ¹⁸ Bauman and Bordoni, *State of Crisis*.
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- ²³ Springer 2012, "Public Space as Emancipation".
- ²⁴ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*; Pleyers, *Alter-Globalization*: ; Maeckelbergh, "Doing Is Believing" ; Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration".
- ²⁵ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, xv.
- ²⁶ Springer, "Public Space as Emancipation", 554.
- ²⁷ Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*; Blaug, "Outbreaks of Democracy" ; Bayat, *How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*; Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy".
- ²⁸ Blaug, "Outbreaks of Democracy", 148.

²⁹ Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy", 23

³⁰ Bayat, *How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*; Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*.

³¹ We use this term, rather than democracy, to denote 'free and fair elections', since contestation of the meaning of democracy constitutes the object of our inquiry.

³² Anonymised for review, but acknowledgments of fellow researchers will be inserted.

³³ Bobel, "I'm not an activist", 148.

³⁴ All names have been changed and pseudonyms are used to refer to the interviewees. See table of respondents in the Appendix.

³⁵ Ishkanian and Glasius, "Resisting Neoliberalism?"

³⁶ Pleyers, *Alter-Globalization*; Maeckelbergh, "Doing Is Believing"; Graeber, "The New Anarchists"; Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration".

³⁷ Ince, "In the Shell of the Old".

³⁸ Glasius and Pleyers, "The Global Moment of 2011", 557.

³⁹ Polletta, *Freedom is an endless meeting*; Meyer and Rowan "Institutionalized organizations".

⁴⁰ Choi-Fitzpatrick, "Managing Democracy in Social Movement Organizations"; Martinez Palacios, "The Sex of Participatory Democracy".

⁴¹ Tadros, "Contentious and Prefigurative Politics".

⁴² Della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*.

⁴³ Schmitter, "Crisis and Transition".

⁴⁴ Finkel and Brudny, "No more colour!"

⁴⁵ As well as hybrid regimes: see Weiss, 2016 on the interplay between democratic deficits in society and in government.

⁴⁶ Sbicca and Perdue, "Protest through Presence"

⁴⁷ Power, "Dangerous Subjects".

⁴⁸ See for instance Aslanidis and Kaltwasser on the recent Greek experience.