

Immigration and civil society

New ways of democratic transformation

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Abstract

In this special issue, we consider it essential to understand the potential of “democratic transformation”, fostered by civil society, not as a transition to democracy but as a way of deepening democracy. In our understanding democratic transformation is based on the power of organized civil society actors to challenge the institutional order rather than an achievement measured against the main characteristics of representative democracy. The seven papers which constitute this special issue all deal with different aspects of immigration, civil society and democratic transformations. Together they offer insight into different national cases by describing and analyzing immigrant mobilization in Denmark (Jørgensen), France (Suárez-Krabbe), Italy (Ambrosini), Portugal (Abrantes), Spain (García; Suárez-Krabbe), Sweden (Ålund et al.), the Netherlands (Suárez-Krabbe), and United Kingdom (Suárez-Krabbe).

Keywords: Democratic transformations; civil Society; migration policies; social change.

Introduction

Debates in the political field about “democratic transition” or “democratic transformation” have been related to the shift from authoritative regimes to incipient democracy, especially to account for changes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and, to some extent, Africa and Asia. Both terms are used to designate the idea of democratization of countries.

The Arab Spring in 2011 strongly activated the notion of democratization. Civil society’s strong contestation of dictatorships opened, unexpectedly, a way to democratization – but which sort of democracy? Here it is relevant to distinguish more precisely between “democratic transition” and “democratic transformation”. The former entails a change on the basis of the legitimacy of the political system (by means of free elections, new constitution, institutional reforms, etc.) whilst “democratic transformation” “expands the horizons of democracy to popular participation, and inclusive and diverse political modes of participation” (El-Khawaga, 2013).

In this special issue, we consider it essential to understand the potential of “democratic transformation”, fostered by civil society, not as a transition to democracy but as a way of deepening democracy. In our understanding democratic transformation is based on the power of organized civil society actors

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to challenge the institutional order rather than an achievement measured against the main characteristics of representative democracy.

Searching for a suitable definition of “democratic transformation”, which is not only restricted to regimes in the process of democratization, we build upon what Rancière (2010) calls the “democratic paradox”. According to the French philosopher, democracy means both “democratic government” and a form of social and political life, an excess which is manifested in the extremes from freedom (deriving into mass-individualism) to the power of the people. The paradox consists in the fact that the government needs to reduce both excesses to remain in power. Rancière therefore proposes an alternative way of conceiving democracy.

Derrida distinguishes between a democracy which has reached itself (liberal democracy), and a democracy to come, an infinite openness, the time of a promise, which can never be fulfilled. Rancière accepts this distinction but points out that something is missing: democracy as practice, meaning the political process of subjectivization. Referring to his own work, Rancière offers the following definition:

Democratic practice as the inscription of the part of those who have no part - which does not mean the “excluded” but anybody whoever. Such an inscription is made by subjects who are “newcomers”, who allow new objects to appear as common concerns, and new voices to appear and to be heard. In that sense, democracy is one among various ways of dealing with otherness (Rancière, 2010: 60).

Our conception of “democratic transformation” coincides with the idea of democratic practice in the sense that new political subjectivities, alliances between civil society actors, and everyday forms of resistance challenge and change the politics of the democratic governments and broaden the democratic field of social struggle. The practices of social movements and individuals attempting to change policies entail a fight in the name of democracy and create new scenarios for democratic transformations.

The economic crisis, which has affected the European countries severely, albeit to different degrees, has had large consequences in the field of immigration. The impact is clear in countries where economic growth has depended on immigrants, including the informal economy of Southern European countries. Governmental policies are constrained by the politics of austerity (basically reducing spending and cutting public services with the hopes of creating the conditions for future economic growth). Immigrants have experienced higher levels of unemployment than before, the flows of migration have been drastically reduced, and, in the political sphere, radical right-wing parties are gaining terrain in the national parliaments on the basis of blaming integration models and even immigrants for the crisis (Collet, 2011). Following from this development distinctions between deserving and undeserving – who provides a value for society and who does not – are being strengthened and rearticulated across Europe. On the political level this can be seen as a response from governments to appease immigrant-skeptical voters. The growth of anti-

immigrant sentiments may also lead to counter-mobilizations from the multitude of actors who challenge this form of exclusion. Such mobilizations and struggles are increasingly transnational and transnationally founded. For example, a demonstration in Hamburg is held in solidarity with the social revolt in Greece (e.g. Contrainfo, 2013).

The turn towards migration policies is exemplified by British Prime Minister David Cameron, who wants to toughen migration policies in order to strengthen the British economy. The solution to the crisis would be to reduce the number of immigrants as well as their rights “by stopping our benefits system from being such a soft touch; by making entitlement to our key public services something migrants earn, not an automatic right; and by bringing the full force of government together to crack down on illegal working” (Cameron, 2013). This position is not an exception and it reflects how governments are influenced by the increasing power of populist parties and movements and their positioning against immigration. A disturbing example is the growth and appeal of the Greek Golden Dawn Party, which has ideological links to neo-Nazi groups and is gaining transnational recognition (Smith, 2012; 2013). On a European level the fact that policies have been adjusted but not substantially changed during the economic crisis (Koehler et al., 2010) confirms the previous tendency towards migration control and stricter measures within national borders.

The role of civil society is currently being discussed in different settings and the importance cannot be underestimated. Civil society engagement even became a key issue at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2013 (World Economic Forum, 2013a). Mobilizations and contestations are interpreted as a “new” response: as a “breakdown in trust in established institutions” and transformation and restructuring of the established channels is perceived to be problematic: “if we think that the solution is to rebuild trust in those same institutions, we may be missing the signal” (World Economic Forum, 2013b). Former Chief Editor of the Observer, Will Hutton, depicts the ongoing protests as follows: “Capitalism’s dead end requires intellectual challengers, social movements and trade union leaders prepared to dare to reimagine their role. We need ferment and protest in civil society” (Hutton, 2013). We argue that the “ferment and protest” pointed to in different contributions of this special issue of *Migration Letters* can be interpreted as attempts to challenge consensus and spur democratic transformation(s).

In contrast to the policies adopted by the governments and a progressive closure, at the social level, of the possibilities of thinking an alternative, it is, in our opinion, relevant to look at democratic transformation undertaken by civil society. In a more open or veiled opposition to government policies, these practices of civil society aim towards a more inclusive, plural, equal or participatory sphere and towards achieving more rights or expanding the notion of citizenship. All of them share, in our opinion, a common vision: improving democracy by *doing* democracy. In this conception of democratic transfor-

mation the distinction between migrants and nationals is blurred since both can be part of it.

The six papers in this special issue all deal with different aspects of immigration, civil society and democratic transformations. Together they offer insight into different national cases by describing and analyzing immigrant mobilization in Denmark (Jørgensen), France (Suárez-Krabbe), Italy (Ambrosini), Portugal (Abrantes), Spain (García; Suárez-Krabbe), Sweden (Ålund et al.), the Netherlands (Suárez-Krabbe), and United Kingdom (Suárez-Krabbe). Hence, they offer a brief overview of different forms of activism, modes of contestation and mobilization in both Southern and Northern Europe.

The ongoing crisis is addressed by several of the papers. Through different cases they show how the economic crisis has intensified social exclusion and the precarization of various groups in society, including migrants (García). The analysis of the Italian cases moreover shows that exclusion not only, or no longer, takes place on a national level but that there are “local levels of exclusion” (Ambrosini).

Most of the papers discuss the importance of political opportunity structures for immigrant activism. Aleksandra Ålund and her colleagues examine the conditions for civil society agency for social inclusion among “associations founded on ethnic grounds” (AFEGs). Their article focuses on the associations’ access to public voice and on opportunity structures for cooperation between AFEGs, public institutions and other actors within the field of social integration in Sweden.

Martin Bak Jørgensen examines new strategies, alliances and modes of resistance as both constituting new political subjectivities and spurring democratic transformation. His argument is that political closure of the established political channels has led to new forms of participation comprising a multitude of actors (both migrants and non-migrants) who in the particular case are rearticulating a radical critique of the post-political society.

Maurizio Ambrosini shows how restrictions in Italian immigration policies at both national and local level have met active opposition from a broad range of civil society actors. He looks in particular at how immigrants’ rights are defended by civil society organizations consisting of Italian actors, as immigrant organizations are characterized as fragile and underequipped for entering this type of struggles.

The combination of immigrant and non-immigrant actors is also in focus in Óscar García Agustín’s article. He examines the politics of civility performed by undocumented immigrants in Madrid. He shows how the mobilization on the one hand seeks to transform the legal framework and on the other hand seeks to transform the political order in a broader sense in the fight for democracy. This struggle has become possible due to a new window of opportunity opened by the social contestation led by the *indignados* and the M-15 movements.

Manuel Abrantes examines two immigrant organizations engaged in mobilizing and representing domestic workers in Portugal. His analysis leads to reflections on the struggle of underprivileged to act collectively. Drawing on a public sociology he offers a critical reflection on a detrimental outcome of the social movements' engagement as their emancipatory rationale would be that immigrants reject domestic work. He examines what the struggle for *dignification* of domestic work looks like in practice and how this constitutes political subjectivity.

Julia Suárez-Krabbe likewise points to a critique of the existing political order and shows how four decolonial social movements offer a response to racist exclusion in contemporary Europe by promoting a "democratization of democracy and humanization of human rights". The four organizations contribute to an alternative thinking of transformation in each their way.

These articles show that the range of action repertoires has broadened. Social movements today work within and in cooperation with the political system but increasingly also outside making use of civil disobedience and extra-parliamentarian forms of contestation.

The social dynamics identified in the articles can be linked to studies of new social movements, of contemporary anti-austerity movements and to social revolt on a global scale. What characterizes these short papers is the individual and joint attempt to interpret and translate immigrant and non-immigrant activism and mobilization in the civil sphere into a meaningful vocabulary of political action and contestation. Ferment and protest – both in more institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms – may be necessary to bring about social change and spur and facilitate democratic transformation towards equality and inclusion. Not all struggles in civil society have positive outcomes; some may even be detrimental to inclusive democracy. Nevertheless the papers in different ways turn out to be empirical illustrations of Chantal Mouffe's (2000) claim that democracy has to be defended and not taken for granted.

There are also three regular papers, alongside the articles guest-edited for the special issue, included in this volume. Papadopoulos and colleagues examine the challenges of immigrant associations and NGOs in contemporary Greece. D'Agosto and colleagues focus on the role of human capital in FDI's effect on migration flows while discussing how FDI's may be seen as a deterrent for emigration. Kulu-Glasgow and Leerkes examine the national policies in the Netherlands and Turkish couples' coping strategies while they argue that marriage migration has become the most common form of immigration from Turkey to the Netherlands. Finally, Basu and Bang examine the ways in which the probability of sending remittances and the level of remittances sent are influenced by immigrants' desire to insure against uncertainty among Latin American immigrants.

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