Protest and the Democratic Order
A Research Perspective

Danniel Gobbi, Laura Gorriahn, Daniel Staemmler, and Christian Volk

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Abstract: The introduction of this special issue elaborates a research perspective on the meaning and function of political protest in the context of democratic orders. Starting from the consideration that protest and democratic orders form a close interrelationship, we ask how and to what extent democracy is imagined, negotiated, and problematized within protest, and how democratic orders and politics shape the formation of protest. To this end, we argue for a combination of Democratic Theory and Social Movement Studies. Interweaving these two traditions allows for empirically saturated and theoretically sound interpretations of recent episodes of contention. With this research perspective, we not only gain a deeper understanding of protest dynamics, but also of contemporary social and political transformations within modern democratic societies.

Keywords: democracy, democratic theory, protest, social movements, social movement studies

Protest is a "defining trope of our times," *Time Magazine* asserted when it named "The Protestor" its person of the year in 2011 (Anderson 2011). From the Arab Spring to the Indignados, from Occupy Wall Street to the Umbrella Movement or Nuit debout, a wave of protest swept through the world. People in different parts of the globe occupied public squares, demanding that democratic principles be realized. These uprisings took different trajectories. The camps were mostly dissolved, but movement parties entered into parliaments and new civil society initiatives put grassroots democracy into practice. Nevertheless, protest remains in the public spotlight. Contemporary iterations of long-standing social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Fridays For Future, or Ni Una Menos challenge democratic politics and institutions. They insist on greater democracy as they fight for alternative futures and to protect precarious lives. Despite their opposing aims, hashtags, demonstrations, and riots have also become prevalent methods for reactionary movements,

Democratic Theory
doi: 10.3167/dt.2022.090201
Volume 9, Issue 2, Winter 2022: 1–10
ISSN 2332-8894 (Print), ISSN 2332-8908 (Online)

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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such as the neo-confederalists or the Identitarian movement. However, in demanding the fallacious return to a homogenous people, they assault basic principles of democratic ordering. Political protest materializes in many different forms, but it always carries a certain promise of democracy.

This introduction to the special issue[1] presents the foundation upon which the articles within it are to be understood: as an effort to advance an interpretive research perspective for the analysis of political protest in the context of democratic orders. Such a research perspective not only aims to establish a deeper understanding of protest dynamics; it also seeks to provide insights into social and political transformations within modern democratic societies. Indeed, as we demonstrate in the following, protest and democratic orders form a close interrelationship. By democratic order, we mean the institutional, legal, and social formation of democratic constitutional states that forms and reproduces a certain kind of democratic experience and provides a distinct normative horizon. It is this specific versatile constellation that constitutes the context of political protest in democratic societies.

First, we elaborate on the interrelationship of protest and the democratic order. The democratic order facilitates the formation of political protest and lends a vital point of reference for the agency of protest movements. Protestors exercise their fundamental rights when they mobilize criticism against the democratic order's normative horizon. Second, against this backdrop, we argue for interweaving democratic theory and social movement studies. This enables combining strong theoretical interpretive categories with empirically sound research approaches. Finally, we give an overview of the articles included in this special issue and how they highlight several aspects of this approach.

The Interrelationship of Protest and the Democratic Order

When people act collectively for social and political change, they are motivated by a sense of possibility that transcends the status quo. In modern societies, collective actors develop shared interpretations of the world, locating themselves in relation to the social order, norms, and institutions they encounter. On that basis, they "enact a parallel world" (Volk 2019: 112).

The democratic order provides a relatively advantageous arrangement in this regard. It simultaneously consists of the constitutionally enshrined ensemble of democratic institutions and the experience of the indeterminacy of democracy itself, fostering contentious politics and

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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fueling the promise of a democratic order to come. Thus, for political collective action, the democratic order bestows an imaginative horizon as well as an institutional counterpart.

Representative constitutional democracy is commonly understood as democracy *tout court,* but ideas, interpretations, and imaginations of democracy change over time. Protest movements have long been understood as agents and harbingers of such transformations. They challenge widespread assumptions and experiment with alternative forms of democracy. Accordingly, most protest movements operate with some idea of democracy, both in their own organizational form and in their acts of protest (Çidam 2021; Della Porta 2020; Polletta 2002). For example, the alter-globalization movement organized along principles of direct and distributed democracy to promote alternative forms of democracy (Juris 2008). On the flip side, right-wing movements around the globe claim to act in the name of democracy—when allegedly defending free speech (Miller-Idriss 2020) or claiming to be the sole representatives of the people's will (Mudde 2019; Urbinati 2019)—all the while invoking an ideology of exclusion. Nonetheless, institutional and symbolic dimensions of the democratic order structure the agency of protest movements beyond the realm of demands and framings. Protest movements build their activities on certain assumptions and interpretations, i.e., about the public sphere, notions of citizenship, inclusion, and collective identity (Daphi 2017; Treré 2019; Tyler and Marciniak 2015). Naturally, protest cultures remain disputed and change over time. But they still serve as a basis for forms of subjectification within the respective network of movement organizations, groups of activists, and emerging protest initiatives (Baumgarten et al. 2014; Death 2010).

When analyzing protest, it must be taken into account that, under the circumstances of the modern nation state, democracy produces an order that is different from other forms of government. The guarantee of basic rights enables protest as a pervasive and legitimate form of democratic participation (Dalton 2008; Hutter et al. 2016; Norris 2011). Protest movements engage with political institutions on different levels: they demand incremental or radical programmatic changes, they call for the introduction of new political procedures, and they call into question the relation between political institutions and society at large (Anderl et al. 2019; Niesen 2019; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). In some cases, collective action relies on democratic principles for the fight against injustice and reactionary forces, as the Black Lives Matter movement did in denouncing police violence and racism experienced by Black people. Yet, when climate activists seek to prevent infrastructure projects by occupying them, they deliberately challenge decisions which were

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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derived from formally legitimate processes of democratic ordering. In other cases, movements physically attack democratic institutions—for example, in January 2021, when right-wing protesters stormed the United States Capitol to attempt to block the ratification of Joe Biden's election. Democratic state institutions also react in varying ways, ranging from facilitating and cooperating with protestors to policing protests digitally and offline, even through physical clashes in the streets (Della Porta and Filleule 2007; Passavant 2021; Trottier and Fuchs 2015). Protest is a constitutive part of consolidated democratic orders, constraining, reshaping, and contesting democratic institutions. The formation of democratic orders is thus constantly subjected to change and re-interpretation—not least as a result of the interpretative work of activists who advocate for reorganizing the social, political, and economic sphere.

Interweaving Democratic Theory and Social Movement Studies

The analysis of protest should go beyond studying particular demands or forms of organizing. A convincing analytical framework has to take into account that protest often negotiates and points toward fundamental social issues, as well as questions of democratic coexistence. Accordingly, linking social movement scholarship with democratic theory advances the interconnection of two scholarly traditions engaged in the understanding of political protest.

Social movement studies focuses on the conditions favoring the emergence of protest movements as well as their success (Della Porta and Diani 2006; McAdam et al. 2001; Offe 1985). It lays out a range of different characterizations of protest and thoroughly analyzes how protest interacts with and affects political institutions (Bosi et al. 2017; Meyer 2003). Furthermore, social movement studies provides a sharp understanding of the meanings, ideas, and identities that emerge from contentious practices (Benford and Snow 2000; Melucci 1996; Polletta and Jasper 2001). It analyzes how protest developed as a form of political participation and scrutinizes the ways in which it continues to change modern societies. In addition to these structuralist approaches and actor-centered analyses, the cultural turn in the field encouraged greater attentiveness to dynamic conceptions of democracy that emerge within social movements (Della Porta 2013; Flesher Fominaya 2020).

Democracy as a concept and as a specific political form, as well as challenges to democratic politics and societies, are the primary concerns

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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of democratic theory. Consequently, in this scholarly subfield, protest is always discussed against the concurrent conceptual and normative background and its underlying premises. Traditionally, democratic theorists concentrated on the institutional structures of democracy and treated protest as its civil society counterpart (Dahl 1971). But as the critique leveled at established institutions grew and it became evident that modern democracies were changing shape, protest was increasingly viewed as a crucial democratic practice (Ercan and Gagnon 2014; Merkel and Kneip 2018; Thaa and Volk 2018). In light of tendencies of depoliticization, privatization, and individualization, participatory approaches have regarded protest movements as an undeniable indicator of a strong public sphere and engaged self-governing of the people (Habermas 1996; Rollo 2017; Young 2001). Radical and agonistic approaches to democratic theory emphasize how democracy can be perpetually reconfigured and reconstituted. Protest is conceptualized as a prime example of how politics-as-usual—which limits rather than expresses democratic political norms—can be effectively disrupted (Disch 2021; Rancière 1999; Wenman 2013).[2] Thus, democratic theory attempts to offer far-reaching interpretations of the complex relationship of protest with both democratic institutions and democratic ideas.

Combining these two fields of study generates strong synergies for a multifaceted analysis of protest under present-day conditions. Social movement studies provides thorough analyses of beliefs, practices, structures, and performances of protest. Democratic theory contributes a comprehensive understanding of democratic processes within and outside the democratic constitutional state. In that sense, democratic theory accounts for a substantive conceptual and normative reflection of social and political developments.

Leveraging these respective strengths, we argue for a research process that focuses on how democratic norms and ideas are articulated within protest, as well as the way in which protest is negotiated through the democratic order. Interweaving these two approaches enables us to theorize the interrelationship of protest and the democratic order by expanding upon empirical case studies. Building on a strong empirical basis, we can analyze processes of social and political transformation more closely and evaluate the emancipatory (and reactionary) potential of protest for democratic institutions and forms of life.

In this special issue, our aim is to deepen our conceptual understanding of forms of protest and thereby gain further insight into social and political developments within modern democratic societies. Protest aims to influence government and parliament via the formation of communicative power and is complemented by integrative and productive modes of

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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political engagement. These forms of engagement may galvanize or impair democracy—but regardless, they are surely shaped and influenced by democratic ideas and institutions. We are interested in how and to what extent democracy is imagined, negotiated, and transformed within protest, and how democratic orders and politics shape the formation and progression of protest. Looking at contemporary as well as past episodes of contention, we ask: What is the meaning and significance of political protest for modern democratic societies? Under what conditions do we understand political protest as an emancipatory and democratic practice? What are useful concepts to capture the current transformations of democratic orders and protest?

This Special Issue

This special issue assembles articles that engage with the interrelationship of protest and democratic orders from a variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives. The first half of the special issue contributes to the epistemic and normative terms by which protest may be understood and assessed as democratic practice. Erin Pineda (Smith College) traces connections between the civil rights movement and anti-colonial struggles to argue that civil disobedience may be understood as a *decolonizing praxis* that challenges global white supremacy and democratizes spaces, structures, and subjectivities. Bridging two strands of agonist democratic theory, Oliver Marchart (University of Vienna) argues that popular protest is best understood as an awakening democratic sovereign, which may sublimate antagonism into agonism, but may also enact democracy by challenging the very rules of such political conflict. Christian Volk (Humboldt University) offers terms for evaluating the democratic quality of protest—whether reformist, transformational, or emancipatory—and addresses depoliticization as a mechanism of domination within democratic orders, conceptualizing protest that contests this mode of domination as a reappropriation of the democratic promise.

The issue then turns to explorations of both the practical mechanisms and normative implications of protest as democratic practice. Cristina Flesher Fominaya (Aarhus University) looks to recent examples of the 15M movement in Spain, the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, and the Taiwanese g0v (gov zero) civic tech activists to explore the specific mechanisms by which social movements translate democratic imaginaries and practice into democratic innovation, within and beyond the event. José Medina (Northwestern University) argues that public protest is a "central communicative mechanism of dialogic democracy," and that both protests of solidarity and "echoing" protests are democratic

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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obligations, borne in relation to positionality. Finally, Paolo Gerbaudo (King's College London) asserts that, by lowering the threshold of participation to passive reaction, digitalization transforms politics into a model of reactive democracy, pushing us further away from the ideal of participatory democracy.

Jason Frank's (Cornell University) work has been pivotal to contemporary scholarship on democratic protest. His latest book, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford University Press, 2021), examines how popular assemblies during the age of democratic revolutions yielded aesthetic repertoires and imaginaries that still shape democratic politics today. This special issue ends with a symposium on *The Democratic Sublime,* with three esteemed interlocutors (Karuna Mantena, Yale University; Adom Getachew, University of Chicago; Sofia Näsström, Uppsala University), with a response from the author.

Acknowledgement

This publication is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 757452).

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https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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NOTES

1. The special issue builds upon discussions that took place during a two-day international workshop that was held online at Humboldt-Universität Berlin in May 2021.
2. For a critique on the interpretation of political protest in radical democratic approaches, see Volk 2021.

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