

Donatella della Porta: Mobilizing for Democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011

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Most scholars of democratization have either ignored movements altogether or regarded them as with suspicion as dangers to democracy, while most students of social movements have focused on fully mature democratic systems and ignored the transition cycles that place the question of democratization on the agenda and work it through to either democratic consolidation or defeat (Tarrow 1995: 221–222, quoted on p. 1).

In her new book, *Mobilizing for Democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011*, Donatella della Porta (Professor of Sociology at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy) departs from the gap in literature, as identified by Sydney Tarrow in the quote above, and sets out to study various “episodes of democratization through the lens of social movement studies” (p. 1).

Without taking for granted that democratization is always the result of processes from below, she singles out various paths – (i) “eventful democratization”; (ii) “participated pacts”; and (iii) “participated military coups” – by looking at the interaction between masses and elites, on the one hand, and protest and bargaining, on the other hand. Among the paths of democratization identified, a particular focus is given to the first one: “eventful democratization, that is cases in which authoritarian regimes break down following – often short but intense – waves of protest” (p. 1).

The unique power of some transformative events is contextualized within broader processes of mobilization, which include various often less visible, but still crucial acts of “resistance”.

Della Porta writes:

While in eventful democratization protests develop from the interaction between growing resources of contestation and closed opportunities, social movements are not irrelevant players in the two other paths.

First of all, when opportunities open up because of misalignment in the elites, participated pacts might ensue from the encounter of reformers in institutions and moderates among social movement organizations. Protest, although rarely used, is nevertheless important here as a resource to threaten or use on the negotiation table (p. 2).

She continues:

If in particular pacts a strong (or strengthening) civil society meets emerging opportunities, more troubled democratization paths ensue when very repressive regimes thwart the development of any associational form. In these cases violence often escalate from the interaction of suddenly mobilized opposition and brutal regime repression. Especially when there are divisions in and defections from security apparatuses, skills and resources for military action contribute to coups d'état and civil war dynamics (p. 2).

By comparing different cases within two waves of protests for democracy in Central Eastern Europe in 1989 and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, respectively, della Porta describes and, in particular, seeks to theorize casual mechanisms and conditions as they emerge in the three paths of democratization. The overall aim of the research is thus to theoretically understand “democracy from below” (p. 14). Protest events are, following Mark R. Beissinger (2002: 12), defined as “contentious and potentially subversive practices that challenge normalized practices, modes of causation, or systems authority”.

Inspired by Anthony Giddens (1979), della Porta argues that various protest events “are rooted in structure”. Put differently, there exists “an intrinsic relation between structures and actions, as agency is inherent in the development of structure and structure influences, to a certain extent, action”. Therefore, “[i]t is ... important to consider the influence of structures, including political opportunities, as well as the capacity for agency in participation from below in the different stages of democratization processes” (p. 14; cf. pp. 2–14; see further della Porta and Diani 2006; Rossi and della Porta 2009).

In order to achieve her chief aim, which is to build “actor-structure sensitive” theory of democratization from below, della Porta, as indicated above, seeks to “bridge insights from two field of the social sciences

– social movement studies and transition studies – building upon empirical evidence collected on a (relatively large) number of cases” (p. 23, 24). By tradition the former field has given priority to structure over agency, while the latter field has done the very opposite: given priority to agency over structure (pp. 4–14). But in order to understand transition, transformative moments and democratization from below, an approach that moves beyond these traditional approaches and looks at the relationship between structure and agency are, however, necessary (p.1). The crucial bridging of structure and actions can, according to della Porta, “be observed through a focus on protest events during episodes of democratization” (p. 17). In this regard, the language of mechanisms is central; “mechanisms are categories of action that filter structural conditions and produce effects” (p. 18). By this, the approach suggested by della Porta is, she writes:

... *relational*, as it locates eventful democratization in the interactions of various institutional and non- institutional actors; *constructivist*, as it takes into account not only the external opportunities and constraints, but also the social construction of their experiential reality by the various actors participating in social and political conflict; and *emergent*, as it recognizes that democratization from below involves the capacity of events to change structures (p. 17–18, italics in original).

Departing from this social theoretical foundation, della Porta addresses “mobilizations for democracy, mixing most similar and most different research designs” (p. 23; see further della Porta and Keating 2008). More concretely this means a comparison between “the major episodes of democratization in Eastern Europe in 1989 and in the ... MENA region ... in 2011” (p. 23).

Within each area, the case selection has been based on the following assumptions: Firstly, by focusing on eventful protests that led to episodes of democratization. In this regard, “[t]he German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Czechoslovakia are [considered] positive cases of eventful democratization in Eastern Europe; Tunisia and Egypt in the MENA region” (p. 23). These are the cases that are analyzed in more depth in order to understand the specific mechanisms of eventful democratization (p. 23). Secondly, “when moving from agency to contextual constraints”,

della Porta also, with the aim to avoid selecting on the dependent variable – introduces “cases that followed different paths” (p. 23). This is done by considering “all other countries in Central Eastern Europe, the Baltic and the Balkans during the ‘velvet revolutions’ of 1989 as well as MENA countries where relevant mobilizations for democracy developed during around 2011” (p. 23).

By this, the author claims that “rather than sampling a few cases based on theoretical assumptions” she aims “at covering all critical cases in two specific waves, in different historical moments, geopolitical conditions, and with different regime types and socio-economic structures”. “In particular”, she considers “together with GDR and Czechoslovakia, also Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Albania for Eastern Europe; and together with Tunisia and Egypt, also Libya and Syria in the MENA region” (p. 23–24). In addition to these cases, della Porta also introduces “some references to the Baltic States, former Yugoslavia, Yemen, Morocco, and Turkey” (p. 24). More in detail, she analyses GDR and Czechoslovakia as well as Egypt and Tunisia as “cases of eventful democratization”. Hungary and Poland, which are contrasted with Morocco, Yemen and Turkey, are considered as cases of (more or less) “participated pacts”. Romania and Albania, but also Libya and Syria are discussed as examples of “participated military coups” and the Baltic and the Balkan areas are compared as examples of evolution of democratization processes when other “nationalist social movements dominate the scene” (p. 24).

The overall impression of the research design, considering the results presented, is that it appears somewhat too complex and warped. A complex research design is, of course, not something that should be avoided *per se*. It should be as complex as necessary given the task that the researcher sets out to solve; neither more nor less. In this particular case, however, the conclusion that is presented does not fully answer to the advanced research design that is constructed.

Given the initial statement, which is to look at the relations between structure and agency (within transformative moments), I find that the social theoretical basis, on which the author theorizes on the substantive or operative level, leaves something to be desired. As it stands now, it seems more like an ambitious expression of will rather than a serious attempt to combine agency and structure.

In addition to this, I am not totally convinced that it is a good idea to treat the three identified paths of democratization as uneven, as is done in this book. It might have been a better idea to either focus on only one path – eventful democratization – or, at least, treat the three identified paths more equally. As it stands now, the two less highlighted paths leave the reader with a sense of having been shortchanged. All in all, the book appears somewhat unfocused and concentrates more on width rather than depth; this is an impression that is further strengthened by the fact that in all chapters, including the final, the author introduces references to other cases rather than the one that has been analyzed more thoroughly. The commendable aim for doing so, to discuss the external validity of the findings (p. 26), unfortunately contributes to the impression of fragmentation and lack of focus.

The book, which primarily relies on historical comparative analysis, is based on extensive empirical material that is derived partly from analysis of existing studies (in particular on Central Eastern Europe) and in part from fieldwork (chiefly on the MENA region). On all cases, della Porta has:

... relied upon research reports ... commissioned from country experts endowed with relevant linguistic knowledge, as well as [her own] secondary analysis of existing research and conversations with experts. All reports were written by social movements scholars using a common analytic scheme to investigate episodes of mobilization for democracy. To case reports [della Porta has] ... added the collection of systematic evidence on protest events, derived from various media sources (p. 24).

Besides the potential problem that the empirical material is uneven because different individuals collected it, there is also a problem due to time. The material regarding Central Eastern Europe is older and hence, it can be assumed that, it is more processed and, by extension, more accurate and complete than the material on the MENA region.

This problem is acknowledged and partly discussed by della Porta who writes – regarding the knowledge gap that exists between the two regions that are compared as well as the problem of potential outdated of the used empirical material – as follows:

[w]hile it is true that our knowledge of the recent upheaval in the MENA region is ... shallower than the one we now have on the 1989 “revolutions”, I will focus attention not so much on outcomes, which are still open, but rather on the characteristics (frames, organizational structures, forms of action) and dynamics of the past episodes of mobilization. As we do not know where these countries are going in terms of democratization, I focus on the insurgent moments rather than their long-term outcomes. Even if it still uncertain to which extent (some of) the Arab Spring protests will bring about democratic consolidation, we can already study them as episodes of mobilization for democracy (p. 24).

It is true that della Porta’s research focus is not so much on outcomes but rather on characteristics and dynamics of the past episodes of mobilization. But the book was published in 2014 and by then the radical turn in the MENA region, from an Arab Spring to an Arab Winter, was clear for most observers. The key question then becomes: do the shattered hopes for democracy in the MENA region undermine the potential to compare the region with the 1989 “revolutions” in Central Eastern Europe after all? Put differently, are the two regions, given the actual development we have witnessed, still comparable? If yes, should the regions be compared in a different way from that which has been done by della Porta? These questions are important, however (still) difficult to answer.

The book is organized as follows: The Introduction (Ch. 1) formulates the research problem, scans the literature on transition and social movement studies, as well as identifies some key contributions that could be useful in understanding the process of democratization from below, and then presents the research design and the structure of the book. Chapter 2, by comparing in-depth GDR, Czechoslovakia, Tunisia and Egypt, looks at the eventfulness of some episodes of democratization by singling out relational, cognitive and affective mechanisms within them and particularly focuses on the relevance of events as producers of opportunities. The focus of Chapters 3 and 4, which discusses the same cases as Chapter 2, is the resource mobilization and the collective framing of social movements, respectively. Chapter 3 concludes two things.

Primo, unexpectedly for social movement studies, which have in effect considered social movements as a product of democracy, it displays “the rooting of eventful democratization in a growing social movement milieu”. *Secundo*, unexpectedly for scholars of transition studies, who focus on elites, it shows that “the development of civil society is a long-lasting process that shapes – not just catalyzes – the democratization process” (p. 105). Departing from the conclusion that eventful democratization implies a growth in generalization of claims as well as the politicization of claims, Chapter 4, shows the “discursive contexts” that these mechanisms operate under – in particular diagnostic, prognostic and motivational processes (p. 133). Chapter 5, focuses on repression and facilitation, and concludes that:

... eventful democratization seems to have developed in settings in which regimes were far from lenient on protesters, but domestic and international constraints worked to diminish the state’s repressive strength. Police, armies, and militias were all potentially important actors whose structures and choices influenced the dynamics of transition. The regimes’ capacity and willingness to use force were tested during the protest waves, however, with trial and error on both sides (p. 159).

Looking on the appropriation of opportunities, by considering not only the politics, but also the economic bases of political regimes, Chapter 6 clearly displays the advantages of widening the scope of investigation. Put simply, both international and domestic economics (also) matter in the understanding of democratization from below. So does, needless to say, the interaction between economics and politics. In order to “asses the peculiarity of eventful democratization”, Chapter 7, focuses in particular on Hungary, Poland, Morocco and Turkey, and analyzes cases in which, more or less, strong civil societies have opted for bargaining rather than mobilization. In addition, the chapter also highlights the troubled history of democracy in some of the countries discussed. In Chapter 8, a particular interest is paid to cases – including Romania and Albania as well as Libya and Syria – in which strong repression have thwarted civil-society developments. The overall conclusion drawn here is that: “Violent uprisings do not require strong civil society orga-

nizational structures. Rather, they seem to develop when very repressive regimes have long thwarted any development of an autonomous associational life – let alone, of social movements” (p. 264). In Chapter 9, cases in which “nationalism was used in mobilization against democratization rather than for it” are discussed (p. 26) with a focus is on the Baltic States and Yugoslavia. Chapter 10 “concludes” the book not by presenting a theory of democratization from below as might be expected, but rather by highlighting various theoretical insights presented in earlier chapters.

One of the overall conclusions presented in Chapter 10 is on the level of social rather than substantive theory; Della Porta writes:

While both agency and structures clearly influenced each other, democratization from below was an emergent moment, whose evolution was influenced by the (intensified) interactions among different actors and their construction of (a quickly changing) reality. These moments were not only – as literature on regime transition has suggested – structurally undetermined, but also quite complex to address strategically, given the rapid evolution of chances and stakes, with little time and information available to solve difficult dilemmas” (p. 295–296).

As a reader, I had wished that the author had developed this very interesting reflection and elaborated her views on the relationship between actors and structures more thoroughly; that she had developed a “linkage theory”, which ties together actors and structure, and, by extension, in a more elaborated and specific way, shows how the process identified in the quote above actually works. Such a “linkage theory” would substantially strengthen the social theoretical foundation of the approach and thereby increase the possibilities to make intra-area as well as cross-area comparisons and, by extension, to build “theory of democratization from below” rather than only being able to “single out similarities and differences within and across waves of democratization” (p. 296).

The book indeed “addresses several debates in both social movement and democratization studies” (p. 296) and contributes in important ways to the development of a “theory of democratization from below”, but it does not, ultimately, build “theory of democratization from below” as explicitly claimed in the beginning of the book. It would, for example,

have been good if the author had theorized the relationship between the different paths of democratization that have been identified thoroughly. This is of course a lot to ask, but would nonetheless have been interesting to read and strengthen the overall theoretical contribution.

The links identified and discussed in the book between “everyday resistance” (which is performed by the non-movements) and organized protest (which is performed by various social movements) is very interesting and holds large potential for further research (pp. 299–300, 309.) Also of great interest and with potential for further research are della Porta’s discussions on: (i) the ways in which, “small and tendentially scattered – or loosely structured – networks” were developing discourse(s) “capable of resonating with a broad range of political and social groups” (p. 302); (ii) the role of the universities and intellectuals, trade unions as well as the relationship between various secular and religious forces in various paths of democratization (pp. 304, 306); (iii) the importance of regime reactions in influencing which type of paths democratization would take; (iv) the role of economic difficulties; and, not least, (v) the international dimension of democratization from below. della Porta makes interesting interventions in these debates, which all constitute an excellent ground for further and necessary discussions as well as theory building.

In spite of the criticism put forward above, my overall and definite impression of the book is that it is an interesting, impressive and important work that – besides introducing rich empirical material in an innovative way, which is mainly thanks to its ambitious trans-disciplinary approach – substantially contributes to our understanding of transition in general and democratization from below in particular. The book is stimulating and thought provoking, in the best sense of the words. I am really looking forward to future books by the author, in which she hopefully returns to some of the interesting questions that have partly been addressed and discussed in the book under review.

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