

Innovating Democracy against Democratic Stress in Europe: Social movements and democratic experiments

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We investigate the interaction between democratic innovations and social movements in the context of the growing stress on representative democracy in Europe. In particular, we focus on citizen-led democratic innovations that emerged from popular protests against national political systems. We explore the crowd-sourced Constitutional Reform in Iceland and the G1000 in Belgium and consider three different stages: the onset of these innovations, their execution, and their consequences. These innovations respond to a need for radical democratic reform. The extent to which the state might (or might not) be involved is a matter of paramount importance in the implementation of these experiments. Collaborating with institutions might provide valuable resources. At the same time, it might marginalize the role and demands of civil society actors that instigated the processes in the first place. Rather than aiming at policy change only, citizen-led innovations might be in a good position to impact public spheres and to inspire similar initiatives in different contexts. We call for greater attention to the role of mobilization in democratic innovation processes. This is particularly necessary at a time when democratic experiments grow in importance within social movements and in mainstream politics

Introduction

The current age is characterized by a stark tension between profound challenges to liberal democracy and a renewed interest in citizen participation. In Europe, particularly after the Great Recession, there have been dramatic manifestations of both tendencies. On the one hand, the legitimization crisis of advanced capitalism has been observed by several commentators (della Porta, 2015). Politics and governments have diminished capacity to intervene on the market and have been often conquered by privileged elites, while welfare state—the product of the mid-century compromise between capital and workers—has retrenched, face to anti-egalitarian conceptions (see Crouch, 2004). On the other hand, citizen participation is emerging with vigour as a way to pursue a democratic renewal that finds little expression in traditional representative institutions. This latter phenomenon, which this paper contributes to understand, has two important dimensions. First, there has been a surge in popular mobilizations with the stated goal of claiming democracy back and with a manifest interest as well as ability to engaging in participatory and deliberative practices (Della Porta, 2013). Second, an increasing variety of participatory and deliberative innovations oriented to empower citizens, and in some cases led by citizens and activists, have sprung across Europe and beyond (Smith, 2009, Font et al., 2012).

Social movements' mobilizations for democracy and the rising tide of innovative democratic experiments across Europe have received substantial scholarly attention (Della Porta, 2014). However, these two forms of participation have been understood as largely unrelated phenomena. Attention to the interaction between them has been limited and often grounded in an institutional perspective. Whilst social movements and democratic innovations contribute to democratic life in distinct ways (Felicetti, 2016), today grassroots actors are increasingly interested and engaged in deliberative and participatory practices, not just internally but also as a means to engage with

society at large (della Porta and Rucht, 2013). Unfortunately, we currently lack a good understanding of what happens when activists are involved in processes of democratic innovation. This is problematic since the development of a synergy between social movements' mobilizations and democratic innovations might provide an important yet overlooked resource to address a form of democratic stress, which is currently experienced across many European countries. That is, the growing tension between democratic demands of the public, on the one hand, and unresponsiveness of representative institutions, on the other.

In the broader context of the special issue, our article relates to what Giovannini and Wood call the 'institutional' type of democratic stress. This type refers to stresses on parliamentary and governmental systems that are created when non-traditional forms of participation 'spill over' and become salient to those who are invested in the traditional institutions. While not creating a 'crisis' as such, Giovannini and Wood are interested in the conditions under which democratic innovation can be cultivated as a positive means to engage citizens.

Against this backdrop, in this paper we ask what are the main challenges and opportunities for social movements when they engage in citizen-led, innovative forms of participation. Answering this question is a crucial first step in order to understand how movements and democratic innovations can successfully interact to promote greater democratic involvement in an age of participation (Polletta, 2016).

Whilst the contemporary landscape of democratic innovations is different from the past one and is necessary considering it in its own specificity (see Smith 2009), it is worth remembering that progressive social movements have been often actors of democratic innovations. In the historical evolution of existing democracy, the labour movement, the women's movements and movements by ethnic minorities have been pivotal in the struggles for enfranchising and the achievement of

universal suffrages as well as for the acquisition of civic rights, including the right to resist (della Porta 2013, chap. 2). Also more recent movements provided public spheres for debating and experimenting with different conceptions of democracy. The protest movements of the late 1960s were already interpreted as an indication of the widening gap between parties and citizens – and indeed of the parties’ inability to represent new lines of conflict (Offe 1985). The 1968 movements called for a widening of civil rights and forms of political participation. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the European student movements it inspired shared an anti-authoritarian view that was articulated in claims for “democracy from below”. Council democracy and self-management were also discussed in the workers’ movement in several moments in its evolution (della Porta 2013, chap. 2). Beyond the widening of forms of political participation, the student movement as well as new waves of women’s and labour movements experimented with new democratic practices, considered as early indications for the realisation of non-authoritarian relations (Della Porta and Diani, 2015). Also the so-called new social movements of the 1970s and the 1980s promotes alternative forms of democracy “variously defined as classical, populist, communitarian, strong, grassroots or direct democracy, against a democratic practice defined in contemporary democracies as realist, liberal, elitist, republican or representative democracy” (Kitschelt 1993, 15). The new social movements of the 1970s, including urban movements, were carriers of a participatory approach to democracy which criticised the monopoly of mediation through mass parties aiming to shift policy making towards more visible and controllable places (Baiocchi et al., 2017).

Theoretical and empirical research showed that the establishment of a positive relationship between democratic experiments and social movements faces two general challenges. First, the construction of institutions featuring desirable procedural characteristics, be it from a participatory

and/or deliberative standpoint, might not allow for the pursuit of ideas of social justice (Fung, 2003b, Van Parijs, 2011). That is, the prospect of citizen democratic empowerment through forms of institutional participation and deliberation, on the one hand, and the project of creating a democratic counter-power, on the other, are two different matters, which might or might not be combined. Following Fung and Wright's seminal analyses (2003, 2001), this problem has attracted substantial theoretical and empirical attention (e.g. Uitermark et al., 2012, Nicholls and Beaumont, 2004, Earle, 2013). Several studies point out differences in the type of process and in the political context as important factors deeply affecting the potential for a successful interaction with activists. Against this backdrop, our focus on citizen-led democratic experiments in contexts of deep political crises contributes to fill an existing gap in the literature (see also: Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2018).

Secondly (and relatedly), social movements engage in a raft of activities including, among others, protests, boycotts, and demonstrations. For them, as for other partisan actors, institutional participation is just one of the many options on the table and they engage in it only if they deem it worthwhile. When movements do not altogether shut out participation in democratic experiments – because, for instance, these are perceived as at risk of co-optation (Selee and Peruzzotti, 2009), manipulative or simply poorly designed (Parkinson, 2006) – they have to engage in a complex 'dual strategy'. That is, movement activists have to make the most of the institutional platform without sacrificing their views or reducing the attention to alternative forms of engagement (Polletta, 2016). Overall, the possibility of forging a synergic relationship between social movement activists and democratic innovations, whilst potentially beneficial to the prospect of democracy, should not be taken for granted. Our investigation aim at singling out how these

general tensions manifest themselves when during the interaction between the promoters of citizen-led democratic experiments and social movement activists.

In studying the strengths and weaknesses of activists and democratic innovations, we adopt a social movement perspective in order to address three different stages in the evolution of democratic experiments: the onset of the innovation, the implementation process and its outcome. With respect to the first aspect, we argue that the rootedness of citizen-led democratic experiments in popular mobilizations shapes their nature in profound and little explored ways. With regard to the implementation of these projects, we argue that social movements might play an important role in empowering democratic experiments. Finally, in terms of outcomes, collaboration with institutions is not a necessary condition for success. Citizen-led innovation might indeed be capable of affecting the public sphere, spreading democratic innovations across different countries and contexts.

In our analysis we draw for illustrations upon some of the most important European cases in which democratic innovations and movements have interacted closely. All the cases we consider in this paper have attracted substantial scholarly interest. Yet, attention to the role of movements in them has been limited. We refer in particular to two experiments: the Icelandic Constitutional Reform (ICR) and the Belgium G1000. We selected these two European cases for four reasons. First, both of them, even though in very different ways, represent highly innovative forms of bottom-up political participation. Second, both cases stem from and take place in contexts characterized by a clear democratic crisis affecting the entire political system, starting with political institutions. Third, despite both cases have been studied as exemplary instances of citizen-led democratic innovation, the role that activists in particular played in them has received limited attention.

Finally, both processes provide insightful illustrations of how the relationship established between movements, the public and institutions shapes the outcome of democratic innovation processes.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we discuss how the synergy between movements and democratic innovations can help addressing the democratic stress in Europe. We also introduce the main concepts and cases we discuss in our analysis. In the following section, drawing for illustrations from real-world experiences, we look closely at the way citizen-led democratic experiments are introduced, implemented and to their outcomes. We end the paper by drawing some conclusions from our case studies that help advancing our understanding of the relationship between movements and democratic innovations in the context of the democratic crisis in Europe.

The coming together of social movements and democratic innovations

Activists, practitioners and scholars of democracy have long seen in greater popular engagement an antidote to the erosion of democracy in Western societies (Dryzek, 1996, Della Porta, 2013). In particular, social movements and democratic innovations have progressively gained centrality in the debate on democracy. At the same time, these forms of participation have also grown in importance in real life. In fact, as democratic innovations have increased steadily since the turn of the century, a wave of mobilizations for democracy has run across most European countries, particularly since the Great Recession (see Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2016).

While the term democratic innovations has been used in different ways, we consider them as ‘processes or institutions developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence’ (Elstub and Escobar, 2017: 25). Sometimes also referred to as democratic experiments, they point at the effort

of citizens to imagine and create new ways of engaging in politics. Our emphasis is on the citizen-led democratic innovations. By citizen-led innovations we refer to those democratic experiments that were, in their origins at least, promoted by civil society organizations, even though this does not imply that institutional actors play no role in them, in the implementation of the process or in taking up its outcome.

At their roots, both democratic innovations and progressive movements' mobilization can be intended as efforts to counter the crisis of legitimacy of democracy in late capitalism (della Porta, 2015). Reinstating legitimacy to democracy, face to the growing disappointment with the representative model, has been a main purpose of democratic innovations to date (Fung, 2003a, Zittel and Fuchs, 2007). This is often the case in Europe where democratic innovations are growing in scope and number across polities from the local to the EU level (Font et al., 2012, Sintomer et al., 2008). These innovations aim at bridging participatory and deliberative democracy—with, however, also some tensions in theorization and practices of democracy (e.g. Young, 2001, Pateman, 2012).

Face to challenges to the legitimacy and efficacy of representative democracy, social movements' repertoires of action, such as the Forum of the Global Justice Movements and the camp of anti-austerity protesters, represent important experiments of cooperation in settings of deep diversity and inequality (della Porta and Doerr 2018). Empirical research indicates that, over the course of the past century, activists of different generations and in diverse regions have developed different practices of participatory, deliberative and radical democracy, promoting inclusivity, equality and transparency in their decision making. While left-libertarian movements of the 1960s and the following decades have put an emphasis on participation, social movement activists have been also aware of the difficulties of implementing direct democracy. The risks of a “tyranny of the

structurelessness” (Freeman, 1972, see also Breines, 1989) have, in fact, brought about increasing attention to discursive qualities and consensual decision making (Polletta, 2002). At the turn of the millennium, social movements claiming global justice have developed a model of grassroots democracy with participatory and deliberative values opposed to representative and majoritarian models of democracy, seen as in a deep crisis (della Porta and Rucht, 2013, Della Porta, 2015a). The ideas of democracy developed from the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Sem Terra in Brasil, the Picqueteros in Argentina, the indigenous communities in Bolivia, Peru or Ecuador, travelled all around the world, challenging the representative and majoritarian models dominating in the West. Based on the respecting of differences, the World Social Forum process has promoted a large face-to-face experiment of grassroots democracy and deliberation started ‘from below’ (Smith et al. 2007). These have been imported and revised in the more recent mobilizations in the Occupy and Indignados movements.

From the perspective of proponents of deliberative innovations, social movement participation might help addressing some criticism of the original deliberative conception and of its top-down implementation. While classical normative theorists of deliberation favour dispassionate, rationalist ideals of discourse, activists’ normative conceptions have stressed the importance of narratives and emotions within deliberation as well as of the informal relationships on which decision-making and democracy in social movement groups is built (Polletta, 2009).

Critics of the liberal deliberative model of democracy have stigmatized the exclusionary nature of the public sphere, especially as conceived in the early Habermasian proposal. As Nancy Fraser noted, “not only was there always a plurality of competing publics, but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual. Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative

styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech. Bourgeois publics, in turn, excoriated these alternatives and deliberately sought to block broader participation” (Fraser, 1990: 57). Subaltern counterpublics (including workers, women, ethnic minorities etc.) formed in fact parallel discursive arenas, allowing for the formation and re-definition of identities, interests and needs (ibid., 81).

Similarly, Joshua Cohen (1989) holds that deliberative democracy develops in voluntary groups, in particular in political parties, John Dryzek (2000) singles out social movements as better positioned to build deliberative spaces, since they keep a critical view upon institutions, and Jane Mansbridge (1996) argues that deliberation might well occur in a number of enclaves, free from institutional power, social movements being among them. The need for a deliberation inside counterpublics, or enclaves of resistance is instead recognized by the theoreticians of participatory forms of deliberation. Among them, Jane Mansbridge stresses that “democracies also need to foster and value informal deliberative enclaves of resistance in which those who loose in each coercive move can rework their ideas and their strategies, gathering their forces and deciding in a more protected space in what way or whether to continue the struggle” (1996, 46-7).

Interestingly, as recently discussed by Yves Sintomer (2018), the current wave of democratic experiments is often characterized by activists and practitioners coming together to develop a diverse landscape of citizen assemblies, including the Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review, that seems effective in allowing for citizen empowerment. More generally, social movements across Europe have explicitly taken issue with the widening gap between the democratic ambitions of the public and the unresponsiveness of governments. Just to cite some examples, calls for greater popular involvement in political decision-making were articulated in the Saucepan Revolution in Iceland, in the 15M movement in Spain, in the protest against the government stall in Belgium, in

the Syntagma square movement in Greece (Della Porta, 2015b), in Gezi Park in Istanbul (Atak and della Porta, 2017) as well as in the Nuit Debout movement in France (Guichoux, 2016).

All of the above manifestations of popular participation through democratic innovations and social movements speak to two important tendencies. The first one is the growing interest in and ability to engaging in participatory and deliberative practices by social movements themselves. Contemporary social movements are not only better able to develop innovative internal practices of democracy. They are also becoming more actively interested in the promotion of bottom-up forms of deliberative and participatory engagement (della Porta and Rucht, 2013). Second, citizen-led democratic innovations are on the rise. This tendency is especially important in an area, such as that of democratic innovation, in which innovation processes have traditionally been led by enlightened public administrations and political representatives, especially at the local level (Warren, 2009). Importantly, differences among the various models of deliberative democracy also depend upon the characteristics of the political entrepreneurs involved and the support they harvest in the civil society for the democratic innovations. In this respect, relevant questions address first of all the *origin of the arena*: who took the initiative in setting it up? Who has the power to end it? (Fung and Wright 2001).

Overall, the above-mentioned tendencies suggest a convergence towards a form of democratic innovation grounded in the public sphere, rather than led primarily by the public administrations or elected politicians. As Polletta (2016) argues, we live in a participatory age, and the fact that social movements or, at any rate, grassroots actors are taking a central role in it represents an extremely interesting development. The progressive adoption of participatory and deliberative skills by some social movements, on the one hand, and a positive effort towards a more bottom-

up approach to democratic innovations characteristic of many recent democratic experiments, on the other, might be a result of learning experiences by both actors (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2016).

Will the convergence of two pillars of democratic participation, democratic innovations and social movements, bolster the ability to counter the democratic strain we are currently experiencing? In order to answer this question we need to look closely at citizen-led democratic experiments.

In thinking about how citizen-led democratic innovations and social movements interact we suggest looking at three different stages of democratic experiments: the onset of the innovation, the execution of the project and the implementation of its outcomes. Inspired by David Easton's (Easton, 1965) classical distinction between input, throughput and output phases of policy making, the threefold characterization we use has already been employed in understanding democratic innovations theoretically (Bekkers and Edwards, 2007, Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007) and empirically. For instance, Caluwaerts and Reuchamp (2015) used this approach to explore the internal legitimacy of the G1000 and Edwards (Edwards, 2007) to study local forums on environmental issues in the US and the Netherlands (Edwards, 2007). We deem this approach useful also to understand the changing role that movements have in them (See Della Porta and Felicetti, 2017). In particular, as we will discuss in the next section, to different problems characteristic of each stage of the process correspond specific choices for civil society innovators to make.

In our investigation, we draw for illustrations upon cases in which movements have played a proactive role in democratic innovation processes. In particular, whilst we consider several democratic experiments, we will focus upon two major democratic experiments: the Icelandic crowd-sourced Constitutional Reform and the Belgium G1000. The ICR process that unfolded between 2011 and 2012 has its roots in the Saucepan Revolution in Iceland, which was the first of

a series of anti-austerity protests in Europe. Triggered by the 2008 banking system collapse and subsequent economic and financial breakdown, the Saucepan Revolution saw protesters, carrying kitchenware, manifesting in front of the Icelandic parliament against a government perceived as incapable and corrupt. Eventually, civil society networks that had formed during the Saucepan Pans Revolution gave birth to a popular process for reforming Iceland's constitution (Júliússon and Helgason, 2013). The G1000, held between 2011 and 2012, stems directly out of the activities of grassroots actors. In particular, the idea first emerged in 2010 in the context of protests during a parliamentary crisis—which lasted over 500 days – as political parties were unable to install a government and popular trust in government fell dramatically. The experiment sought to engage a vast section of the population and generate bottom-up policy suggestions (Van Damme et al., 2017). Both cases are highly innovative, closely couple activists and democratic innovation processes and also represent empowering and widely influential experiences of democratic participation.

Citizen-led democratic innovations in three stages

Civil-society's home grown innovation

Both the ICR process and the Belgium G1000 are embedded in two collective mobilizations, respectively the Saucepan Revolution and the protests around the Belgian parliamentary crisis. Whilst eminent civil society actors had key roles in steering mass mobilizations and there were differences in the degree of involvement in terms of socio-economic background in Iceland (Bergmann, 2016) and especially in Belgium (Jacquet, 2017, Jacquet and Reuchamps, 2016a), the grassroots participation was at times high. If there is no denial that popular forms of participation (including marching, petitioning, deliberating) might also be affected by forms of exclusion, and

be characterized by different levels of engagement by activists from different backgrounds, both cases we analysed actually featured high degree of popular support, being embedded in mass forms of protest.

In the Icelandic case, protests sprung in 2008 in the aftermath of the banking system crisis. They continued until early 2009 when a grand-coalition government was replaced by a left-wing coalition supporting calls for constitutional change widespread in the public. Against this backdrop, The Anthill, a movement of grassroots organizations, initiated the Constitutional Referendum process by organizing the National Assembly held in Reykjavik in November 2009. In the occasion of this deliberative and participatory event 1,500 people discussed for one day about national values and the future of the country; its discussions were made public to promote the debate among the citizens. The National Assembly embodied the movement's effort to promote grassroots engagement in the face of economic hardship and political leadership failure as well as its desire to reshape the institutional architecture of Iceland (Blokker, 2012, Burgess and Keating, 2013).

Also the G1000 was deeply embedded in activists' mobilizations. To begin with, the idea of a crisis of democracy was at the basis of the G1000 (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014). Moreover, in keeping with a critique recurrent among contemporary social movements, the Belgian activists pointed at the gap between representatives and passive citizens, the growing divide between political agenda and public preferences, the preference for short-termism over far-sightedness and the dysfunctions of electoral politics. Based on the work of volunteers and financed through small donations, the G1000 was intended as 'a grassroots initiative by and for citizens'. Activists reacted not only to the legislative stall but also to the ensuing escalating tensions between the Flemish and the Walloon communities. Protests included the Shame march, The Not in My Name initiative and

the Fries revolution (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014b, Jacquet and Reuchamps, 2016b). Street protest having generated no substantive effect, grassroots actors adopted the G1000 as an additional repertoire to intervene in the context of a political crisis. According to Caluwaerts and Reuchamp (2014a: p. 46-7) the G1000 was ‘the only systematic initiative that truly succeeded in putting dialogue between the communities centre stage on the political agenda’.

Two common and related features of the Icelandic Constitutional Reform and the G1000 are especially important to us. First, both processes are rooted in a context of ongoing mobilization and radical challenge to the status quo. Second, both are born as popular responses to a political crisis. With Offe, we could say that they are ‘novelties by evolution’, which have their origin in grassroots mobilization against the crisis, rather than in a top-down institutional process (Offe, 2015: p.157). To be sure, also top-down democratic innovations can stem in the context of profound change (e.g. Constitutional reform) (See: Reuchamps and Suiter, 2016). The experiments under examination, instead, result from the generative power of mobilization in times of crisis (see also: Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2016, Eerola and Reuchamps, 2016). Citizen-led democratic innovations are in fact owned by and responsive to the needs of mobilized activists: they are devised by civil society actors to respond to a popular need for countering a profound political crisis. This aspect affects these experiments deeply and makes them substantially different from democratic innovations concocted at a distance from popular protest – for instance, through administrative agencies or government actors that hardly ever have radical political ambitions potentially involving challenges to vital interests of sponsoring parts (Font et al., 2012).

In light of the above considerations, citizen-led democratic experiments call for an appropriate understanding of the role of movement activists, which are rarely present in top-down approaches (see Sintomer, 2018). Actually, as Carolyn Hendriks (2006) showed, the role of movements and

civil society actors in democratic innovations has been discussed mainly in terms of the different ways in which these actors might or might not fit into participatory or deliberative processes, or how they might be perceived by political representatives (Niessen, 2019). While in some extreme cases investigated by John Parkinson (2006) organizers perceived movements as threats to deliberative experiments, generally, the possibility that activists might play a proactive role in beginning these processes and in fostering their democratic qualities has been overlooked. Insights on the appropriate stages at which to invite movements' active participation or to restrain them to an advocacy role, on whether and to what extent to give them scrutiny powers or include them in steering committees or advisory boards, on the degree to activists' own modes of expression should be accommodated in deliberations all tend to be premised on an institution-centric understanding of democratic innovations (della Porta and Felicetti, 2019). In citizen-led democratic innovation, instead, the problem is not whether or not and in what ways to involve social movements as, along with other civil society actors, movements are the co-producers of these experiments. Thus, the key question is rather whether, to what extent and in what ways democratic experiments should involve the representative institutions. As we will see below, the Icelandic and Belgian cases suggest that different answers can be given to the above question. In Iceland, institutional collaboration was central to the experiment. To the opposite, in Belgium activists avoided too close an interaction with state actors.

With respect to the origin of citizen-led democratic experiments, these are forged by popular protest, often in the context of radical critiques to the status quo. The importance of this insight should not be overlooked by democratic innovators. As the work of Baiocchi and Ganuza documents, the spread of Participatory Budgeting from South America to Western countries, and Europe in particular, has often corresponded to a watering down of its radical and democratic

potential. Originally developed thanks to a convergence over a new democratic model of participation by radical activists and the rising Workers Party in the Brazilian City of Porto Alegre, the Participatory Budgeting has lost its original potential as a ‘a tool of emancipation’ when it has been adopted as yet another ‘technical solution’ to the problem of participation (Ganuza and Baiocchi, 2012 , Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2016: p. 151, see also: Sintomer et al., 2008). We are not claiming that interaction with institutions in itself jeopardizes the democratic qualities of citizen-led innovation but rather that these emerging forms of citizen-led democratic experiments cannot be understood through the same lenses traditionally adopted for top-down democratic innovation. Retaining the rootedness of citizen-led democratic experiments in civil society is thus necessary in order to ensure that they remain sensitive to political and social problems as perceived by the public and to give it a way to address these problems democratically. Below, we observe what conditions might better allow for such processes.

Implementation and the role of the state

Social movements remain important also in the implementation of citizens-led democratic experiments as they can keep the process from derailing, given adversaries’ moves. This is visible in both of our illustrative cases.

After the National Assembly in Reykjavik, in June 2010, the Icelandic parliament began a process of constitutional revision characterized throughout by a highly innovative crowdsourcing-based approach to constitutional drafting with unprecedented openness to public input in the deliberations (for a detailed account see: Fillmore-Patrick, 2013). A constitutional committee appointed then another National Assembly composed of 950 randomly selected citizens to draft the guidelines for the work of a future elected Constitutional Assembly. However, through a highly

contested choice, the Icelandic Supreme Court invalidated the election process of the Constitutional Assembly due to technical problems; in response, the government, in a controversial move, appointed representatives elected through the contested vote as members of a Constitutional Council (Bergmann, 2013). The Constitutional Council thus developed a reform proposal subjected to a consultative national referendum. With a turnout slightly below 50 per cent, voters approved the proposal, which, however, the government eventually dismissed along with its plans for constitutional reform (Landemore, 2015).

The G1000 process took a radically different form than the Icelandic case. The process was articulated in three stages: public consultation, large-scale citizen summit, and an in-depth citizen panel. Agenda setting was developed via public input. In online public consultation anyone could suggest themes and issues for discussion at the G1000 summit. Participants were selected through sortition and targeted recruitment. About 700 attended the summit in Brussels, which was modelled after the model of the Town Hall Meeting. For the summit, 32 participants were randomly selected for further deliberation about the final propositions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in light of its lack of institutional connections to representative institutions, the G1000 did not attain any direct political effects (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014b).

The above mentioned processes speak to important dynamics occurring when citizen-led democratic experiments converge towards state support or, to the contrary, they remain within civil society. Whilst no alternative is obviously better than the other, it is important to consider the extent to which citizen-led innovation is coupled (or not) with the action of institutions because this generates different challenges for innovators. Indeed, this aspect should receive greater attention than it has been granted so far. In general, in order to contribute to framing innovation in democratic ways, movements are often expected to take a more active role in participatory

processes and a somewhat secondary advocacy status in public deliberation. However, it is important to notice that both cases under examination feature a mix of deliberation and participation, as is very often the case for contemporary democratic innovations (Elstub and Escobar, 2017). In light of this, insights grounded on the participatory versus deliberative distinction though important should be supplemented by attention to the role played by interaction with the state.

By looking at how interaction with the state affects citizen-led democratic innovations at least two relevant elements emerge relating to the type of involvement of state institutions and the quality of the process. Social movements developing democratic innovation processes with institutions should expect the latter to take the lead. As the ICR process shows, as the government proposed the constitutional referendum, movements lost their centrality and an administrative logic was imposed on the process. In particular, the stages of timing of the process started to be dictated by administrative logic over which social movements have little or no power. . Nevertheless, as Bermeo and Bartels (2013: 316) noted, the most important aspect of the Icelandic constitutional reform resided in the way in which the process was carried out, in iteration between the public at large and the Constitutional Council. This iteration was possible also thanks to activists favouring civil society actors' involvement in the process (see Fillmore-Patrick 2013). While far from perfect, the process promoted direct popular participation. Furthermore, elements of descriptive representativeness fostered engagement by disadvantaged groups. In this respect Landemore remarked that "a concerted effort was made to ensure some descriptive representativeness, for example through a degree of gender parity" (Landemore 2015: 178-9). Indeed, though the Constitutional Council was not "descriptively representative in a statistical sense, it was arguably more inclusive of different perspectives and thus more representative of the Icelandic people's

views than more conventionally formed constitutional assemblies”. In fact, “the drafting process took place under the almost constant and openly solicited watch of the people” (ibid. 179-80). Transparency, which was deliberately pursued by organizers and promoted through extensive use of digital media, granted procedural legitimacy and some degree of epistemic reliability to the process.

In cases like the G1000, in which the democratic process is conducted at a distance from institutions, the situation is substantially different. In the G1000, social movement organizations retained a central role throughout the innovation process without the state and public administration taking control. However, as the process developed, social movement organizers could not access the economic and infrastructural resources of the state. Whilst the lack of institutional empowerment does not necessarily imply that civil society actors fail to achieve policy changes, it certainly increases such a risk. Whilst the originality of the G1000 and its high quality in many respects is evident, it also displayed some drawbacks. For instance, the fact that more than one fifth of participants in occasion of the key summit did not attend is a glaring failure that might have been tackled had extensive resources been available to organizers (For an extensive discussion on the quality of the process see Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2015).

Which road should then citizen-led innovations take? Seeking a cumbersome but potentially resourceful collaboration with the state or opting for a freer but potentially constraining action within civil society? A response to this question largely depends on the prospect that the pursuit of either alternative offers to civil society innovators. Like other questions referring to democratic innovation, the answer is bound to be affected by the contextual features in which innovation is carried out.

Both the Icelandic and the Belgian innovators skilfully managed to avoid the two extreme situations. On the one hand, civil society innovators should certainly avoid the risk of being dominated by political and administrative logics that frustrate the original spirit of the project. On the other hand avoiding an institutional collaboration could imply the failure to achieve substantial democratic qualities.

The quest for effectiveness

Affecting policy making has long been taken as a primary sign of effective participatory (e.g. Arnstein, 1969) and deliberative processes (Thompson, 2001). Today, however, there is growing scepticism as to whether impacting decision-making should be seen as a main sign of effective deliberation (e.g. Goodin and Dryzek, 2006) or whether it is desirable at all (e.g. Lafont, 2015). Other forms of societal and political impact, beyond direct effects on policy-making, can be in fact valuable contributions by democratic innovations (e.g. Dryzek, 2009, Niemeyer, 2014). Especially for citizens-led initiatives, important outcome could be in fact found besides policy-making.

When it comes to the impact of citizen-led democratic innovations, three important considerations emerge from our case studies.. First, collaboration with institutional actors might well be a necessary condition for these innovations to directly affect policy making but it is by no means a sufficient one. As the ICR process shows, collaboration with the state is not simply a resource to secure even the highest type of impact (i.e. constitutional change). The state actually exposes democratic experiments to legal, political and administrative dynamics that might halt the process of change. Here we do not refer to the compliance with demanding legal provisions, which should be expected for constitutional change in democratic systems. Rather we refer to issues such as, for

example, the tension in the Icelandic case between the Court and the Government over the procedures through which representative for the Constitutional Council were to be elected or the political decision of the ruling party to abandon the constitutional reform process for partisan calculations. These issues which, as seen, brought to a halt the project of constitutional reform, were beyond the reach of the democratic innovation experiment. They occurred despite activists and citizens had developed a genuinely democratic and innovative approach to constitutional drafting. The G1000, instead, did not seek any substantial collaboration with institutions, a choice which jeopardized the possibility to affect policy making. However, citizen-led democratic innovations might well aim to sensitizing the public, rather than policy makers. So, far from automatically seeking support of political institutions, innovators might well opt for working throughout at a distance from institutions.

In fact, affecting the public sphere is a very important outcome that citizen-led democratic experiments might be well placed to attain. In the Icelandic case, within only a few months from the first protests, the anti-austerity protests had succeeded in their goal to introduce constitutional change in the country's political agenda by having society and politicians debating over the topic (Júliússon and Helgason, 2013). What is more, social movement organizations promoted the idea that a new start for Iceland was tied to the problem of democratic participation, which was found lacking in the old model (Gylfason, 2012). As to the G1000, it also fared well in terms of influencing the public agenda. As it was in organizers' intentions the process effectively stirred public opinion about its ideas, methods, quality of democracy and citizenship (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014b). Furthermore, the G1000, contributed to spreading the debate on democratic innovations in Belgium. As Caluwaerts and colleagues (2016: p.20) argue, following the G1000's lead, 'most political parties now advocate some form of participatory and deliberative democracy'.

The ability of social movements to affect public debate in the cases under observation suggests that citizen-led democratic innovation might have important societal impact. In particular, their rootedness in citizens' demand for democratic engagement as a means to address pressing political problems is in stark opposition to democratic experiments projected within restricted circles of political actors and practitioners often lacking connection with the public altogether.

Finally, a very important outcome of these experiments concerns their ability to inspire further democratic innovations elsewhere and to generate interest in these projects. As for the Icelandic case, the Saucepan Revolution was the first of a raft of protests against austerity and for democracy that, as already mentioned, spread across a number of European countries. Interestingly, the democratic leaning of the Icelandic movement in terms of both internal practices and demands finds correspondence with the wave of protest that followed (Della Porta and Mattoni, 2014). The G1000 has to date inspired similar experiment in Flanders and Wallonia as well as abroad, in Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Van Damme et al., 2017). The resonance of the cases under study testifies for the ability of citizen-led democratic innovations to travel across activists networks. Whilst cross-fertilization of ideas across social movements has received widespread attention, the diffusion mechanisms of democratic innovation has mainly been limited to institutional contexts (e.g. Wampler and Hartz-Karp, 2012). Future research should look deeper into this aspect since activist networks might well represent an important platform for the circulation of participatory projects which might have growing importance in shaping the political context we live in.

Conclusions

At a time when democratic stress in European democracies is mounting, democratic participation offers an important resource for reinvigorating democratic life. Institutional democratic innovations and social movements have long been identified as important in this effort. Yet, these phenomena have usually occurred and have been interpreted as independent from each other. The recent *Gilets Jaunes* mobilization in France and in neighboring countries (Belgium in particular) has dramatically showed how intimately tied social movements and democratic innovations are. The call for more democracy has featured prominently among *Gilets Jaunes* activists (Grunberg, 2019). In particular, a movement, which itself has featured a vast repertoire spanning from deliberation to contestation, has articulated a clear demand for direct democracy (Legris, 2019) but also called for sortition democracy. The protest has been met with a high level of repression, on the one hand, but also, on the other, by an unprecedented effort at democratic innovation. Developed top-down and in a very tense and conflictual environment, the *Grand Débat* did not seem to enable a constructive relationship between the movement and state institutions (Euvé, 2019). To the contrary, the installation by the movement of a *vrai débat* (<https://www.le-vrai-debat.fr/>), an alternative deliberative forum, suggests that activists experienced the government's innovation as a space foreclosing substantial engagement. The well-known difficulty with engaging generally radical positions of activists through citizen deliberation (Mansbridge, 2005) is in fact exacerbated in case of innovation introduced by political leaders in the midst of political turmoil (Carson, 2013). Overall, rather than qualifying as a citizen-led democratic innovation of the kind we study, the *Grand Débat* could be seen as a case of innovation *in reaction* to popular mobilization, which will be worth studying as another important axes along which the relationship between democratic innovation and social movements plays out. As Julien Talpin (2015: 781) has observed:

‘Deliberative democracy and collective action have often been opposed as offering conflicting ways of constructing the common good, based on cooperative discussion on the one hand, and adversarial protest and negotiation on the other. Social movements have however shaped the inception and organization of democratic innovations to a large extent.’

Following Fung and Wright (2003), Talpin (2015: 783) has noted that for citizen-led democratic innovation ‘the involvement of social movements’ organizations in participatory institutions has to face specific obstacles’. As seen, these obstacles can be overcome by appropriate decisions made at each stage of the democratic innovation process. This is necessary for social movements to play a ‘countervailing power’ and counter-balancing the domination of more powerful groups within deliberative processes characterized by knowledge and skills asymmetries (Fung and Wright 2003).

Today, activism and democratic innovations are drawing increasingly closer and we need appropriate lenses to look at the democratic value of this process. Towards this end, in this article we have focused on citizen-led democratic innovations, in which social movements play a most important role. In particular, we have provided illustrations from two particularly important cases: the Icelandic Constitutional Reform Process and the Belgium G1000 and the way these processes have been initiated, implemented and to their outcomes.

Our study suggests that, in each one of the three stages of their development, there are important insights to bear in mind in order to minimize challenges and exploit the opportunities that these experiments offer to foster democratic engagement. First, social movements, together with other civil society actors, are at times co-producers of citizen-led democratic innovations. Unlike top-down democratic experiments, in which institutions and the interests they pursue are of primary

importance, bottom-up ones, which give citizens the central stage, spring from protest and respond to the need for radical democratic reform. Second, the extent to which the state might or might not be involved in these processes is a matter of paramount importance in the implementation of these processes. Involving the state, on the one hand, seems likely to downcast the role of social movements and the radical component of these processes. On the other hand, this option might endow experiments with the resources needed for high-quality implementation of such projects. This trade off should be considered seriously by innovators. Thirdly, rather than having impact on policy making, citizen-led innovations seem to be in a good position to impact the public sphere and to inspire similar initiatives in different contexts.

Returning to the key themes of the special issue, democratic stress can be referred to institutional tensions that create a conflict between the forms of participation required for traditional democratic institutions to work (for example, voting) and the dynamics of citizen involvement in politics (for example through 'alternative' forms of activism). While creating tensions, these forms of activism can generate initiatives that may lead traditional institutions to change. In sum, citizen-led democratic innovations have substantial potential to relieve the democratic stress we are currently experiencing. However, in order to exploit their democratic potential, citizen-led democratic innovations should strive to create fertile ground for the public's demand for democracy, even at a distance from institutions.

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