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Habermas with a Whiff of Tear Gas: Nonviolent Campaigns and Deliberation in an Era of Authoritarianism

Abstract

Authoritarianism is gaining around the world. Statistics show that deliberation shrinks when authoritarianism grows. In the face of authoritarian repression, directly promoting and organizing deliberation is likely to fail. However, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan (2011) find that nonviolent campaigns have a strong record of success against authoritarian states. Although nonviolent campaigns are not themselves deliberative or aimed at building deliberative democracy, I argue that some of the reasons that make them successful also stand to benefit public deliberation. Thus the most promising strategy for expanding deliberation in an increasingly authoritarian world is to support nonviolent campaigns and to reinforce strategies of nonviolent confrontation that also yield deliberation. Jürgen Habermas anticipated this argument in his defense of social movements. Revisiting that aspect of Habermas' thought challenges interpretations that treat him as a theorist of calm, rational discourse.

Author Biography

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Keywords

social movements, deliberation, authoritarianism, Habermas

Authoritarianism is Rising

Deliberation is worth defending and promoting—not to the exclusion of all other political values, but as a component of any good society. Some activists promote deliberation *directly*. They may organize actual discussions of various kinds (Gastil, 2018). A related strategy is to persuade significant institutions, such as schools and colleges, newspapers, courts, and legislatures, to use more deliberative processes and to teach habits of deliberation. And a third approach is to demand laws or policies that require deliberation. Vijayendra Rao and Paromita Sanyal (2009) cite the 1992 Indian law that requires every village to allocate resources in open public meetings as the “largest deliberative institution in human history” (Rao & Sanyal, 2009). This reform expanded the *scale* of deliberation (involving two million people per year) as well as its *impact*.

These direct strategies are likely to fail in the face of powerful political actors who don’t *want* society to be deliberative. Anti-democratic governments are ascendant today and are increasingly effective at suppressing or co-opting and marginalizing all forms of democratic politics, including deliberation (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2016). According to Freedom House (2018),

Democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades in 2017 as its basic tenets—including guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—came under attack around the world.

It is unlikely that organizing deliberation or teaching deliberative skills and values can counter this trend. I argue instead for an indirect strategy: using contentious but nonviolent social movements to *force* discussion in a society as whole and to create free spaces for deliberation within the movements.

I find support for this approach in a perhaps unexpected quarter. Jürgen Habermas has a reputation as a theorist of calm, rational public reason and is often cited to legitimize experiments with deliberative democracy. He also emerges as a foil when such experiments are criticized for being naïve about power and exclusion (e.g., Young, 2001, p. 690). But Habermas seems uninterested in the direct strategy of promoting deliberation by organizing deliberations. He ends his two-volume magnum opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, with a strong (if idiosyncratic) defense of nonviolent, contentious social movements. I argue that Habermas is on the right track, although the application of his view to the current situation in the United States raises some novel problems.

What is Happening to Democracy?

Freedom House's claim that democracy is in decline deserves unpacking. Its formula combines several ideals (freedom, elections, rule of law) that may not fit neatly together in practice. It's not obvious why Freedom House mentions some rights instead of others. And the statement never defines the alternative to democracy: what is gaining at the expense of the basket of values that Freedom House endorses.

One possible answer is populism, defined as a problematic phenomenon.¹ In the influential definition of Jan-Werner Müller (2016), populists are politicians who . . . claim that they and they alone represent the people. All other political competitors are essentially illegitimate, and anyone who does not support them is not properly part of the people. When in opposition, populists will necessarily insist that elites are immoral, whereas the people are a moral, homogeneous entity whose will cannot err. (Müller, 2016, p. 101)

In fact, a wide variety of political actors appeal to the public as a homogeneous entity. Some define "the people" in racial or ethno-national terms. That tendency seems more accurately described as racism or xenophobia than as populism, especially if anti-racists like Venezuela's Hugo Chávez count as populists. Sometimes champions of democratic institutions use rhetoric that looks populist according to Müller's (2016) theory. For instance, Jimmy Carter presented himself as an ordinary American (a peanut farmer and a Christian, not a Washington politician) who could best reflect the values shared by all Americans (Johnstone, 1978, pp. 241-249). Carter invoked a unitary public and promised to connect directly to the people, unmediated by interests and organizations. His Inaugural Address could be coded as populist rhetoric, in Müller's sense of the word (see Carter, 1977).² Yet Carter was committed to constitutional limits, respected his critics and the opposition, and made the promotion of democratic freedoms a centerpiece of his agenda.

Thus it is not clear that searching for Müller-style populist rhetoric will identify actors who are hostile to democratic institutions and processes. There is an upsurge of repression around the world—and it is not limited to racists and xenophobes—but there is a better word for it than "populism."

¹ But some authors, such as Boyte (2010) and Grattan (2016), define populism as a positive force that is fully compatible with deliberative democracy.

² "This inauguration ceremony marks a new beginning, a new dedication within our Government, and a new spirit among us all. A President may sense and proclaim that new spirit, but only a people can provide it" (Carter, 1977).

That word is authoritarianism, which I would define as a system that relies on the arbitrary will of leaders. It is a government by rulers without (many) rules. An authoritarian leader can say, “Do this,” and can evade any explanation other than, “because I said so.” Authoritarian leaders typically undermine precisely the values that Freedom House lists: fair elections, minority rights, a free press, and rule of law. Some do so openly and proudly, in which case they may take cover in the populist trope that they directly reflect the will of the whole authentic people. But some authoritarian states are not particularly enamored of populist rhetoric. They simply suppress discussion, criticism, and opposition.

Authoritarianism is the opposite of “non-domination,” in Philip Pettit’s sense (Pettit, 2000, p. 22). A system without domination is one in which, although citizens must follow rules and face restrictions, nobody can simply tell anyone else what to do. Pettit argues that non-domination was the core value in the long tradition of *civic republicanism* that began in antiquity and flourished in the Italian city states, the English Revolution, and the American founding. His framework suggests a spectrum that runs from an absence of domination (republicanism) to pervasive domination (authoritarianism).

Within the republican tradition, there is room for debate about democratic processes. Do democratic institutions (such as popular voting) prevent domination or create opportunities for majorities to dominate? There is also room for debate about liberal rights. For example, do property rights prevent or enable domination? Pettit (2000) is a democratic, liberal, and egalitarian republican, but other flavors are possible. The advantage of the republican ideal is that it is defined as the direct opposite of authoritarianism, and the metric is pretty clear: to what extent are governments compelled to explain and justify their decisions?

By this definition, authoritarianism is ascendant around the world today (Kasparov & Halvorssen, 2017). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project asks 2,800 experts many questions about specific countries in specific years. Almost all the nations of the world are included (Coppedge et al., 2018). From the V-Dem database, I have selected two variables as proxies for authoritarianism. One is the degree to which the executive branch (which typically controls the state’s instruments of violence, such as police and prisons) respects the constitution of its country. Note that this variable doesn’t capture the content of the constitution, which may be more or less democratic and more or less liberal. The question is simply whether the executive branch honors constitutional constraints, whatever they may be. It is an important example of rule-of-law. A second variable is the degree to which free elections are held without intimidation. I chose this variable because regular and fair elections often provide a check on arbitrary rule, and also

because a typical tactic of an autocrat is to interfere with elections, if they occur at all. The two variables correlated in 2016 in the countries that held elections that year (Pearson's $r = 0.62$).

These two variables show substantial recent declines in many of the countries that are frequently discussed as examples of rising authoritarianism, including Brazil, India, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela (see Levine, 2018). In the United States up to 2016, there was a decline in freedom of elections, albeit from a high baseline, but no decline (yet) in presidential respect for the constitution.

How Authoritarianism Relates to Public Deliberation

Especially for the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, it's important to ask how deliberation fits into this scheme of republicanism versus authoritarianism. One can imagine a society free of domination, where, thanks to the rule of law, no politician can arbitrarily control any citizen, yet where public deliberation is rare. Perhaps the country is homogeneous and prosperous and there is not that much to discuss. Or one can also imagine a society with a fair amount of arbitrary rule that also produces vibrant discussions. There was arguably a richer conversation about justice in coffee shops in France under the absolute monarchy of Louis XV than in many liberal democracies since then. Isaiah Berlin once observed that “integrity, love of truth, and fiery individualism”—which are ingredients of a lively conversation—“grow at least as often in severely disciplined communities . . . or under military discipline, as in more tolerant societies” (Berlin, 1959, p. 13).

It's also possible for an authoritarian state to embrace deliberation. China provides an example. The People's Republic is a complex and evolving system that incorporates elements of rule-of-law, market freedoms, and shared decision-making within the Communist Party. It would therefore be a simplification to call China “authoritarian.” But it is certainly no democracy, and under Xi Jinping, it reflects trends toward centralized, discretionary power that are characteristic of authoritarianism around the world. Thus it is interesting that China is implementing local deliberative processes at a large scale. The Communist Party may view organized public deliberations as a means of blunting criticism and improving satisfaction with its regime (He & Warren, 2017). Meanwhile, Caroline W. Lee (2015) has argued that organized deliberations co-opt resistance in the United States; and Cristina Lafont (2017) worries that deliberative fora can delegitimize regular democratic processes, such as elections, by making them look so inferior that they don't deserve protection.

In short, it is not self-evident that deliberation belongs on the republican end of a scale that runs from republicanism to authoritarianism, where the metric is the degree of domination. It's also not clear that the goal should always be to increase the scale and importance of deliberation, without regard to values that may compete with it, such as privacy, rule-of-law, and perhaps expertise and efficiency.

Republicanism and deliberation are not connected as a matter of definition or logical necessity. Yet they have often gone together—and for important reasons. Encouraging discussion helps prevent arbitrary decisions. When people are expressly asked what they think about laws and rules, and when leaders must answer queries and challenges, a law is less an instrument of domination and is less likely to be capricious. Pettit, citing the historian Quentin Skinner, emphasizes that “one of the central themes” of the civic republican tradition is “belief in dialogical reason” (Pettit, 2000, p. 189).

That is a theoretical point, but I would also cite empirical evidence. V-Dem asks several questions that serve as proxy measures of deliberation. First, “When important policy changes are being considered, how wide and how independent are public deliberations?” The scale ranges from zero (“Public deliberation is never, or almost never allowed”) to 5 (“Large numbers of non-elite groups as well as ordinary people tend to discuss major policies among themselves, in the media, in associations or neighborhoods, or in the streets. Grass-roots deliberation is common and unconstrained”).

That item is about bottom-up deliberation. V-Dem also asks whether government leaders consult a wide range of diverse stakeholders before making decisions, a measure of top-down deliberation. These two measures of deliberation are correlated at the national level (Pearson's $r = 0.83$).

V-Dem data show a strong correlation ($r = 0.77$) between these measures of deliberation and the executive branch's respect for the constitution (a proxy for rule-of-law and non-domination). Respecting the constitution and having a broad, free discussion in civil society are correlated at $r = .73$.

That is cross-sectional evidence that deliberation is generally less present in authoritarian regimes. One explanation may be that political leaders tend to model deliberation in societies where they also respect constitutional limits, and they fail to do so when they turn authoritarian. Or it could be that when publics are organized and motivated to demand discussion, they also block authoritarianism.

Another source of evidence comes from plotting trends in the two measures of non-domination cited above (respect for the constitution and free elections) along with the two measures of deliberation for specific countries. Fig. 1 shows those four trends in Turkey as an example. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, prime minister from 2003-2014 and president since 2014, is widely seen as the leader of an increasingly authoritarian government, and this graph makes that claim specific. Rule of law and deliberative values have fallen in tandem.

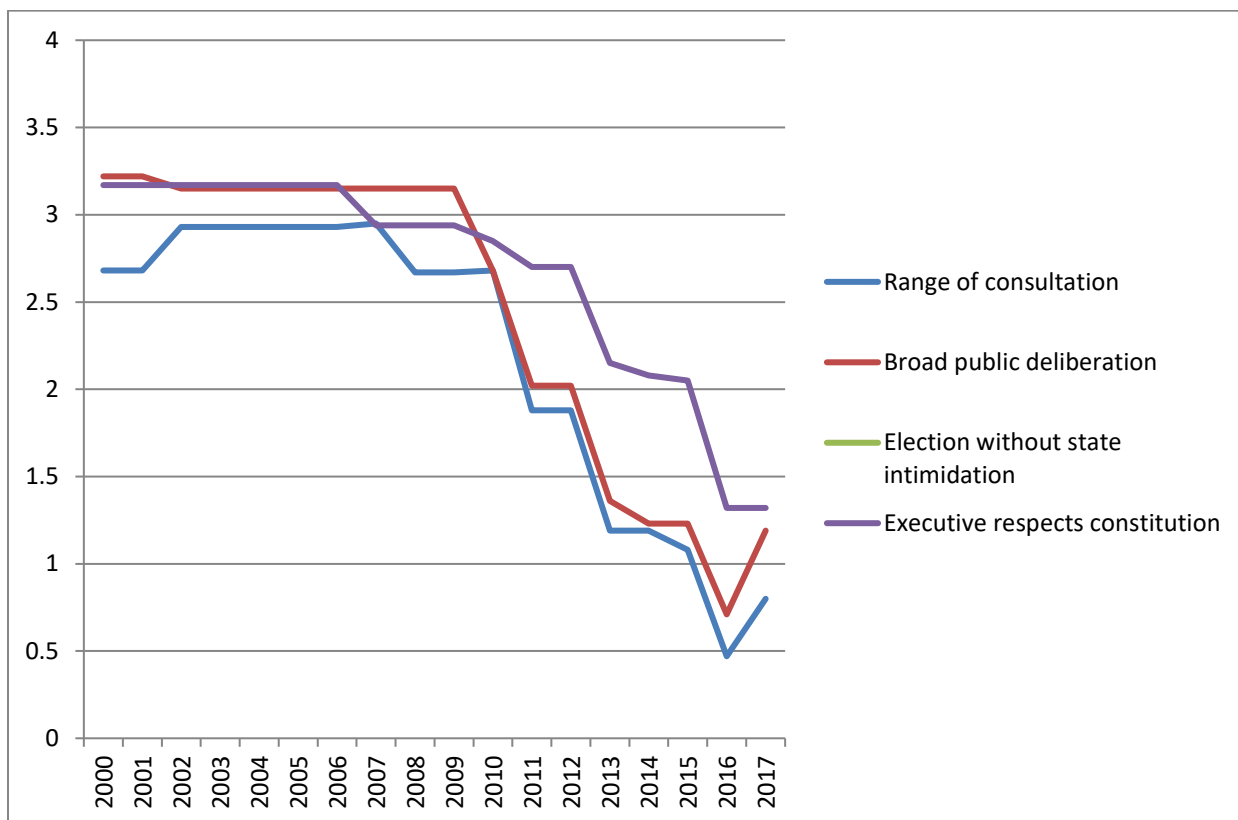


Fig. 1: Growing Authoritarianism in Turkey

In Brazil, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, and Venezuela, the declines are also pronounced. These trends illustrate what we mean when we say that democracy is in retreat.

Is it Possible to Expand Deliberation at the Expense of Authoritarianism?

For proponents of deliberation, the question is whether we can inject more “reflection and choice” into a world increasingly dominated by “accident and

force,” as Alexander Hamilton puts it in *Federalist* No. 1. Expanding the scope and impact of deliberation at the expense of authoritarianism is fully compatible with also safeguarding private spaces and individual liberties.

When openings arise, it is certainly worth trying to expand deliberation directly. In some cases, it is even plausible to interpret radical political change as the fruit of deliberation built up from the bottom. John Adams reflected in 1818 that

The [American] Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution. (Adams, 1818)

In turn, the colonists’ change in sentiments had occurred thanks to avid discussion in newspapers, New England town meetings, committees of correspondence, and other grassroots settings. Deliberation came first. Republican government followed.

And yet, Adams exaggerated. The Revolution was not literally won until General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. It took an army to win independence. Besides, Americans were able to discuss freely and form new opinions because imperial rule was actually quite distant and permissive; white colonial subjects had civil rights. If the crown had employed censorship, intimidation, and violence, it’s not clear that the colonials could have deliberated. Similarly, while free African Americans in the antebellum North publicly debated a wide range of issues within “elaborate institutional frameworks” that they had built, such as newspapers and religious congregations, enslaved people were blocked from developing an equivalent “public culture” (Jones, 2007, pp. 5, 12). In general, authoritarian states and movements have a troubling record of smashing or co-opting deliberative institutions. Authoritarian regimes tend to view the kinds of organizations that encourage, defend, or fund grassroots deliberations as enemies of the state, particularly if they have any foreign ties. Enacting pro-deliberative reforms in countries with authoritarian leaders seems a remote prospect. Deliberation, by itself, does not confer power.

The Role of Nonviolent Campaigns

There is another form of grassroots political action that does have an impressive record of countering authoritarianism. In an influential 2011 book, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan find that many *nonviolent campaigns* that target states achieve their objectives. Between 2000 and 2007, 70 percent of these

movements were successful. They have been nearly twice as successful as violent campaigns, and the gap is growing—as is the sheer number of nonviolent campaigns (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Chenoweth and Stephan provide evidence that nonviolence increases the odds of success when other factors are held constant. Thus, their theory is causal, not merely correlational. Moreover, countries that have experienced successful nonviolent campaigns are much more likely to achieve “durable and internally peaceful democracies” than those that have experienced violence (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, p. 351).

Chenoweth and Stephan restrict their study to durable campaigns that have names and goals; they exclude loose or inchoate networks, individual events, activities, and specific organizations. The campaigns in their database employ extra-legal activity, not merely regular elections or lawsuits. We could place nonviolent campaigns in a subcategory within the larger category of “contentious politics,” which also includes revolutions, strikes, terrorist campaigns, and riots (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). They are distinguished from these other examples by being sustained and (relatively) organized efforts and by being nonviolent. At the same time, we could categorize nonviolent campaigns within the larger rubric of social movements. Charles Tilly defined social movements as campaigns that target some kind of authority, that use “performances” like “public meetings, media statements, and demonstrations” to make their claims, and that strive to demonstrate “worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment” or “WUNC” (Tilly & Wood, 2015 p. 4). Within this category, nonviolent campaigns are distinctive insofar as they target states, they use extra-legal methods, and they remain predominantly and distinctively nonviolent, even though some violence may occur around the margins. Finally, nonviolent campaigns belong in the larger category of nonviolence, but some nonviolence does not take the form of campaigns. For example, Thoreau lived at Walden Pond as a nonviolent act, but not as part of a campaign.

Nonviolent campaigns and other social movements are not deliberative fora. They do not purport or strive to represent all perspectives in the broader population. On the contrary, they often try to marginalize a target group. Some take appropriate pride in being based in, and led by, a particular group within the society. They are not predominantly concerned with talking and listening or forming opinions. Often, their basic demands are settled at the outset, and their characteristic behavior is “direct action”—occupations, boycotts, and marches—rather than discussion. As Tilly notes, they gain power from displays of “unity”: marchers wearing the same color and carrying coordinated signs, songs sung in mass unison, or people using the same hashtag on Twitter.

Therefore, even though nonviolent campaigns have an impressive record of challenging authoritarianism, they do not seem likely to enhance deliberation. But this is where the explanatory aspect of Chenoweth and Stephen is relevant. After all, *why* do nonviolent campaigns achieve their goals much more often than violent movements do? Didn't John Adams and his colleagues need the Continental Army to defeat George III?

One reason is *scale*. Chenoweth and Stephen argue that nonviolent campaigns are less costly and dangerous to join than violent struggles, so they draw many more people. Although a few participants typically take prominent and perilous roles in a nonviolent campaign, there is also plenty of room for modest acts of support that can preserve the participants' anonymity and safety. Campaigns sometimes achieve critical mass, when the sheer size of the protests makes it safe to join—and possibly dangerous not to. Chenoweth and Stephen find a clear pattern that bigger movements are more likely to achieve their goals. To be sure, some people are drawn by the political potential of violence, the romance of armed struggle, or the sense that being willing to fight confers solidarity and dignity. But the people attracted to violence tend to be young and male, and a broader base is necessary for victory (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2016, pp. 839, 812, 892, 769).

A second advantage is *diversity or pluralism*. Nonviolent campaigns draw “robust, diverse, and broad-based membership.” This diversity is an asset beyond sheer numbers. For one thing, when protests are diverse, the authorities can't “isolate the participants and adopt a repressive strategy short of maximal and indiscriminate repression.” Although violent state crackdowns reduce the chance of successful resistance, they also increase the gap in the success rate between nonviolent and violent campaigns. In other words, if the government is going to attack its own citizens, that is bad news, yet the citizens' smartest move is to remain nonviolent.

What's more, diverse campaigns typically generate a whole range of messages, tactics, and strategies; and such “tactical diversity” allows some options to succeed even if others don't. In contrast, violent campaigns tend to make irreversible strategic decisions that prove fatal if they fail.

A movement with diverse members is more likely to include people who have personal ties to the security forces, the government, or the business class, so it is more likely to fracture the opposition. Sixty percent of the larger nonviolent campaigns achieve “security force defections.” “Fraternization” is an ingredient of many campaigns' success (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2016, pp. 351, 892, 1098, 1421, 1040, 1995).

A third explanation for the success of nonviolent campaigns is *unity*. Chenoweth & Stephen cite “achieving *unity* around shared goals and methods” as a “crucial determinant” of success. For example, the failure of the Palestinian leadership to achieve consensus during the First Intifada is the reason they offer for its defeat (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2016, pp. 910, italics added; 2666). Tilly had cited “unity” as a characteristic of social movements, but Chenoweth and Stephen suggest that it ought to be *e pluribus unum*, unity that is forged from great deal of diversity (see Keyes, 1981).³

A fourth explanation is *depth*. Social movements, including nonviolent campaigns, deeply transform some of their members, changing their values, goals, skills, networks, and identities. Those leaders become essential for success. This fourth explanation is much less explicit than the others in Chenoweth and Stephen (2016). They note that movements recruit people who already have valuable skills; they do not discuss movements as venues for developing skills.⁴ But the transformational impact of nonviolent campaigns is well documented in other sources. In *Why We Can't Wait*, Martin Luther King (1963) observes,

Human beings with all their faults and strengths constitute the mechanism of a social movement. They must make mistakes and learn from them, make more mistakes and learn anew. They must taste defeat as well as success, and discover how to live with each. Time and action are the teachers. (pp. 34-35)

That is *depth* in a nutshell. Similar accounts echo in the 19 case studies collected by Adam Roberts and Timothy Garten Ash (Roberts & Ash, 2009). Overall, it appears that social movements are educational—teaching skills highly relevant to deliberation—and grassroots educational institutions (such as Freedom Schools and the Highlander Folk School in the American Civil Rights Movement) play essential roles in making social movements succeed (see Horton & Freire, 1990).⁵

³ C. F. Keyes (1981) notes that “giving unity the keys to the kingdom does tend to risk everything on a single fragile factor. As Adam Roberts said in apparent counterpoint, making a 'fetish' of unity 'means that the chain of resistance is no stronger than its weakest link'. ... I suggest that the center of gravity might better be identified for the aggressor and defender alike — as morale. Let unity be impaired if it comes to that. But let the parties bearing the burden of defense carry on with morale unshaken, and ... integrity will remain intact. If unity frays, let it be; I would not admit defeat. But if morale collapses, all is over.”

⁴ Chenoweth and Stephen's (2016) book focuses on contrasts between violent and nonviolent struggles. Both kinds of movement develop skillful leaders. That may be why this aspect of nonviolent campaigns does not interest them.

⁵ Miles Horton and Paolo Friere debate the relationship between social-movement organizing and education in a rich and complex exchange (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 115-127).

Scale, Pluralism, Unity, and Depth (SPUD)

I have listed scale, pluralism, unity, and depth (SPUD) as assets that nonviolent campaigns use to achieve success. Unfortunately, they are in tension. Plurality makes unity more difficult to accomplish. Scale and depth trade off because resources must either be spent recruiting lots of newcomers or developing a relatively small number of leaders. Fig. 2 illustrates that these goods trade off along two axes.

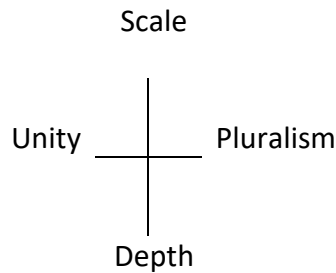


Fig 2. SPUD

For a familiar example of an organization that offers SPUD, consider the global Catholic Church. At 1.3 billion members, it has scale. For some Catholics—clergy, devoted faithful, saints—it offers great depth. Its unity is reflected in a single leader, a catechism, a shared calendar, and many other expressions of concord. Yet it encompasses a great plurality of culture, context, and even liturgy and theology. Catholicism demonstrates that the SPUD components can all be achieved, albeit with tensions and challenges, and (in this case) as a result of two millennia of hard work.

Consider also the Civil Rights Movement in the US between 1955 and 1965. The Movement could draw a quarter of a million people to Washington, with many more active supporters; but it also deeply transformed its core activists. It could coalesce for moments of unity, yet it also offered much pluralism in the form of components that differed in demographics, agendas, organizational formats, and strategies. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was a coalition of pastors; the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was an insurgent party; the

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was an all-male union; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had chapters in virtually every Black community and a carefully crafted litigation strategy; and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was founded by college students involved in direct action. These components of the movement (and others) not only differed; they often disagreed. One reason for the Movement's success was "spread-betting": various actors tried a range of strategies, and some ideas turned out to work (see Teles, 2010, p. 20).⁶ If the Movement had coalesced around a single strategy, the odds are it would have failed.

Nonviolent Movements Must Embrace Internal Discussion

If nonviolent campaigns are the best tools for checking authoritarianism, and if nonviolent campaigns succeed because of SPUD, then nonviolent campaigns should strive to be spaces for discussion. SPUD involves a set of tradeoffs, and it requires extensive talk to address them. It is by discussing that diverse participants can form temporary unity. It also takes discussion for committed leaders to engage large numbers of followers, and vice-versa.

When nonviolent social movements go wrong, it is often because they fail to deliberate *enough*. For example, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 began as truly diverse, encompassing religious revolutionaries, secular Marxists, merchants hoping for economic liberalization, civil libertarians, and even a Hippie drug counterculture. To achieve unity along with all that pluralism, the movement settled on the Ayatollah Khomeini as a leader, not because they all agreed with his positions but because he seemed uniquely viable as an alternative to the Shah. In fact, there wasn't much discussion within the revolution itself about what Iran should look like after the government fell. This weakness proved fatal once the Shah was deposed, the Ayatollah gained power, and he and his allies ruthlessly destroyed all the internal opposition. This was a case of too much scale and unity achieved with too little discussion (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2016).

There is a long tradition of social movements in general—and nonviolent campaigns specifically—developing innovative venues for internal discussion, what Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte (1986) call "free spaces," or "environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue." They observe that "a prelude to democratic movement, visible in different times and settings, has been the emergence of avenues for wider sociability;" and they name,

⁶ I borrow the term and concept from Teles (2010, p. 20), although his subject is not the Civil Rights Movement.

among many other examples, “female abolition networks” in antebellum America, ethnic associations that built steelworkers’ unions, “labor education schools” in the 1930s, the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Movement, “and the alternative institutions of the women’s movement” (Evans & Boyte, 1986, p. 17, 191-2). These are places in which people use talk to turn plurality into unity.

Embracing differences and promoting discussion within social movements is easier to recommend than to accomplish. Participants in nonviolent campaigns are often dramatically diverse, and conversations can be emotionally challenging, especially under duress. Soon after Donald Trump was elected president, organized protests challenged his executive order to block entry from selected countries (all of which had Muslim majorities). Protesters completely filled Boston’s Logan Airport international terminal. They included many people who were new to protest and who had generally positive relationships with public institutions. The Boston police were helpful, directing the protesters and managing parking. The city’s mayor and both of the state’s senators appeared in person to support the protest. But the organizers were seasoned activists who had been confronting the Boston police and city government for years. They tried to get the crowd to denounce the police and the politicians who spoke. Without the organizers, there would have been no protest. But without many newcomers, the protest would have been small and easily marginalized. The ideological, demographic, and emotional gap between the two components of the movement was palpable.⁷ Chenoweth and Stephen (2016) would suggest that only by bridging that gap would the movement succeed. But that is hard work. Perhaps movement leaders will be encouraged to focus on this problem if they come to understand that SPUD is a condition of victory. Talk is time-consuming, even draining, but it helps movements to win.

Habermas’ Argument about New Social Movements

Jürgen Habermas may be the most significant theorist of deliberative democracy. Despite its formidable density and length, his *Theory of Communicative Action* alone has been cited 26,913 times, according to Google Scholar. Habermas has shown relatively little interest in experiments with deliberative forums. He has certainly advocated constitutional provisions for the Federal Republic of Germany and the European Union that would support deliberation, such as free speech rights.⁸ But more prominent in his work, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, is an embrace of what he calls “The New Social Movements.” Much as I have proposed that nonviolent campaigns against authoritarianism may create space for

⁷ Author’s observations, Jan. 28, 2017.

⁸ The theme of Specter (2010) is Habermas’ engagement with constitutional issues in the Federal Republic.

deliberation as a collateral benefit, so Habermas hopes that deliberative democracy will arise as a byproduct of social movement politics.

Since a social movement is not an idealized deliberative body but rather a manifestation of contentious politics that unites relatively like-minded people in opposition to an opponent, Habermas' embrace of social movements complicates the stereotypical reading of him as a deliberative democrat. He sees a place not only for civil discussions but also for democracy with a whiff of tear gas. For example, he writes appreciatively of antiwar demonstrations that "drew an entire city into the rhythm and whirl of an expressive, enthusiastic, mass event carried by subcultures" (Habermas, 1985, p. 98).

In 1981, Habermas chose to list the following New Social Movements that were then active in Germany: "the anti-nuclear and environmental movements," "the peace movement"; "the citizens' action movement"; the "alternative" movement that included urban squatters and new rural communities; movements of "minorities (the elderly, homosexuals, disabled people, etc)"; support groups and youth sects; "religious fundamentalism"; the "tax protest movement"; "school protests" by parent associations; architectural preservation and other forms of "resistance to modernist reforms"; and "the women's movement" (Habermas, 1981, p. 34; also Habermas, 1985, p. 393). This was a German list, but an American at the same moment would have added Black Power, the Chicano Movement or El Movimiento, the American Indian Movement (AIM), and other such efforts by people of color.

Some of these movements might be classified with the left, and others (notably, tax protests and religious fundamentalism), with the right. Some used extra-legal methods, such as squatting, and some stayed carefully within legal bounds. One way to describe them all would be as versions of "identity politics," on the ground that they tended to emphasize personal identities—such as gender, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation—in contrast to the distributional issues that had been more common in "Old" social movements, such as socialism and trade unionism. An extensive debate on the advantages and limitations of identity politics arose in the 1980s and persists today.⁹ For his part, Habermas uses the word "identity" only in passing,¹⁰ and identity politics does not seem a helpful category for environmentalism, historical preservation campaigns, or peace movements, which are also on his list of New Social Movements.

⁹ For an overview with a fair presentation of multiple perspectives, see Bickford (1997).

¹⁰ People may use "ascriptive characteristics such as gender, age, skin color, neighborhood or locality, and religious affiliation ... to establish subculturally protected communities supportive of the search for personal and collective identity" (Habermas, 1984, p. 395).

Habermas' Frankfurt School colleague Claus Offe interpreted the New Social Movements not as identity politics but as revolts against aspects of the welfare state. Writing in 1985, Offe observed that European capital and labor had reached a postwar *entente*. Unionized, private-sector employment would deliver prosperity, and workers would be free to develop identities, interests, and memberships during their youth and student years, their growing leisure time, and their lengthy retirements. The issues for politics were growth, economic distribution and security. These were contested within narrow constraints (for instance, everyone in government was a Keynesian) and not expected to occupy much of the public's attention. It would be unjust to call West Germany authoritarian in 1960, but the narrow range of debate meant that many policies were simply given.

The New Social Movements then arose when people critically assessed the patterns that prevailed in the domains that were supposed to be left private, such as childhood, marriage, church, and nature. Activists demanded large-scale change in these domains, but not via direct state action, because they opposed "manipulation, control, dependence, bureaucratization, regulation, etc." (Offe, 1985, p. 829).

For Habermas, any "system" is governed by instrumental rationality. It treats individuals as means to a given end. Both state bureaucracies and capitalist markets are systems. As a democratic socialist, Habermas favors a relatively large state bureaucracy controlled by a popularly elected legislature. But both governmental and market systems are problematic when they extend into the "lifeworld" composed of authentic human relationships. Thus, even as a welfare state like the Federal Republic of Germany neared success at the "old" goals of eliminating poverty and narrowing gaps of wealth and power, it risked colonizing the lifeworld by turning everyone into a consumer and an employee, employer, or welfare client and then regulating their behavior accordingly. Habermas proposed, "at least cursorily," that all the New Social Movements represented "resistance to tendencies to colonize the lifeworld." That was true, he thought, of the conservative movements as well as the radical ones. To apply his thinking to an American context, we might say that whether you moved to Vermont to go back to nature or to New Hampshire to live free or die, you were opting out of systems seen as instrumental in order to live more authentically. Habermas concluded that even if the New Social Movements were "unrealistic," they offered symbols of resistance to the "colonization of the life-world" (Habermas 1981, pp. 35, 37).

The New Social Movements were not afraid of contention. They used their bodies to say "no" to policies that they disliked by occupying buildings or lying down in front of vehicles (Habermas, 1985). But behind the scenes, they also created what

Evans and Boyte call free spaces. Habermas (1981) observed that “High value is placed on the particular, the provincial, small social spaces, decentralized forms of interaction and de-specialized activities, simple interaction and non-differentiated public spheres. This is all intended to promote the revitalization of buried possibilities for expression and communication” (Habermas, 1981, pp. 33, 36).

Meanwhile, in the other half of Europe, movements were also struggling against a system—in their case, the single-headed system of state communism. Like the Western New Social Movements, they built up alternative spaces meant to be authentic (“Living in Truth”) and voluntary. “The mainstream of the [Polish] opposition was deliberately and profoundly anti-political,” writes Aleksander Smolar. “Faced with the strategic choice described by Adam Michnik in his letter from prison, the answer of the opposition was clear. The objective was not to defeat the ruling power but to progressively liberate society from its control” by building a better alternative in civil society (Smolar, 2009).

Habermas has hoped that adversarial and contentious social movements will advance deliberative values in contexts like the Federal Republic of Germany, both by forcing overlooked issues onto the public’s agenda for consideration (particularly issues suppressed by the welfare state consensus) and by creating spaces for free discourse within the movements themselves.

The difference between Habermas’ analysis of New Social Movements and my argument—made earlier—in favor of nonviolent campaigns is that Germany has not been an authoritarian state since 1945. Habermas’ New Social Movements struggle against popular norms, not against authoritarian regimes. However, there is a link between the two arguments. As the leader of the Frankfurt School, Habermas inherited that school’s fundamental concern: diagnosing and preventing fascism. In the postwar context, a stultifying consensus could allow fascism to return from its shallow grave. By the 1980s, the “normal prototype” of a society had become a

life-form . . . tailored to the needs of a capitalist modernization process, programmed for possessive individualism, for values of material security, and for the strivings of competition and production, and which rests on the repression of both fear and the fear of death. (Habermas, 1985, p. 110)

The prewar Frankfurt School had understood fascism as an outgrowth of similar values during the 1930s.¹¹ Habermas has looked to social movements to disrupt that consensus in ways that promote critical reflection and discussion in the broader

¹¹ See, for example, Habermas (1984, vol. 1, pp. 369-371) on Horkheimer and Adorno.

society. In short, he has advocated an indirect approach to deliberation via contentious politics.

What Does this Mean for the United States?

I have argued that if you face an authoritarian state (or an authoritarian political movement that is gaining substantial influence over the state), you will not force it to yield by organizing deliberations. You need the peaceful compulsion of nonviolent resistance. It is not the job of social movements to create deliberative fora that statistically reflect the demographics and opinions of the whole population, but healthy movements create spaces for vibrant discussion and disagreement. Social movements are also effective instruments for compelling complacent majorities to consider the concerns of minorities, which spurs deliberation in the society as a whole.

When Habermas published *The Theory of Communicative Action*, West Germany had a tendency toward stultifying consensus that had been countered by the youth movements of the late 1960s, and East Germany was blatantly authoritarian. Hence his call for contentious—but nonviolent—social-movement politics as a path to deliberative democracy. Similar arguments would apply in many authoritarian states today.

However, the USA would not meet most people’s definitions of an authoritarian state. Even if the president has authoritarian instincts, he has confronted effective barriers to his arbitrary power. Some police and immigration agencies use arbitrary power against some citizens and residents, but they too confront resistance. Meanwhile, the United States does not suffer from a deadening consensus about the social contract. On the contrary, the American public is deeply polarized by ideology, region, and demographics, with almost every norm, law, and institution attracting opposition from some quarters (Pew Research Center, 2014). Meanwhile, we have entered a phase in which social movements proliferate and the repertoire of social movement politics is used routinely by an enormous range of actors, from deeply oppressed groups to people who simply want to reinstate a favorite character on a television series. There is a risk that social movements will lose their energy and impact when they become routine in what is called a “movement society.”¹²

These are reasons that social movements may *not* serve the cause of deliberative democracy in the United States and similarly situated nations in the early 21st century—even if they are essential in more explicitly authoritarian states. I

¹² For a review of the literature with nuanced empirical findings, see Soule and Earl (2005).

advocate taking such concerns seriously as we continue to refine and improve social movement politics. To be effective, social movements in countries like the United States must be large, diverse, educational for their own participants, and internally deliberative. When they achieve those characteristics, they have better odds of winning their political struggles. They are also more likely to protect and enhance deliberative democratic values for the society as a whole.

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