

“Rethinking the Party/Movement Relationship in the Context of Populist Challenges to Constitutional Democracy”

Jean L. Cohen, Nell and Herbert Singer Professor of Political Theory, Columbia University

The distinction between political parties and social movements has been central to democratic theory although how they do or should interrelate has long been the subject of controversy. The pluralist-consensus school in political science that rose to hegemony in the 1950s in the U.S., together with the collective behavior school in sociology, construed social movements as threats to democracy while deeming interest group and catch-all party politics as rational, moderating, and the only acceptable form of democratic participation apart from voting, by organized actors. With the rise of the new social movements in the 1960s to the early 1980s this consensus was challenged and new theoretical paradigms were devised that analyzed the democracy-enhancing role of social movements (and the wide range of action repertoires they employ). The new “identity - oriented movement politics were theorized and framed in ways that fostered inclusion and challenged illegitimate stereotypes and injustices based on denigrated identities. The role of the new movements in challenging civil privatism, and in mobilizing public opinion and social protest action in the civil and political public spheres came to be seen as a key factor in the further democratization of formally democratic polities, and civil societies.

Yet there were always “fundamentalist” elements in the new social movements (on all sides of the political spectrum) that challenged the procedural and constitutionalist features of liberal (and social democratic) democracies, rejected “the establishment”, and called for alternatives to party politics in the name of movement purity and claimed to speak in the name of the “most oppressed” social identities. Criticizing the “legalistic” “merely” formal character of constitutional and parliamentary democracy and rejecting the power oriented interest-based party politics associated with it, respective theorists and activists portrayed the popular forms of direct participation in their social movement as prefiguring a radical “truly democratic” alternative to the elite interest-group, power politics of parties. But if they remained outside the actual party political system even these fundamentalist factions in the various movements and their oppositional stance could play a democratizing role by signaling new needs, triggering responses of other parties towards inclusion of the excluded and so on.

Some movements however, did participate in the electoral game, but these party-movements portrayed themselves as anti-party parties. As analysts of party-movements argued, these too could play a democratizing role so long as they remained out of power (with other established parties taking up their issues) or, if they were elected and in power, if they abandoned their fundamentalist logic and accepted differentiation between the movement and party political side of their organization along with legitimacy of the opposition. The role of the German Green Party and the issue associated with ecology is a case in point.

We seem to have entered into another round of challenges to ‘establishment party politics’, this time from “left” and “right” populists. But instead of disavowing the electoral game, party politics, or political power, contemporary populist party movements

embrace these; in order become the ruling power in the state. To be sure they challenge establishment parties and party politics and claim legitimacy once in power on the grounds that they speak for the true majority, indeed for the true authentic people. By implication, they challenge the legitimacy of other political parties and movements. Moreover, once in power they tend to challenge crucial features of constitutional democracy, those they label as “liberal” and use legal means to undo constitutionalist and democratic norms. But unlike earlier frankly authoritarian organizations they retain the veneer of democratic legitimacy (the only game in town so it seems). Moreover, these populist parties refuse to differentiate between their movement and party logics claiming the stance of the opposition even when they are the party in power. They thus constitute a new form of party movement and anti-party party, and a distinct mode of relating movement and party logics that, in my view, poses a serious threat to democratic (party) politics, civil society, and to constitutional democracies. The irony is that just when the role of political parties in a democracy is regaining attention by political theorists, their forms, autonomy, mediating and moderating functions are being eviscerated. Like the proverbial owl of Minerva theorists only now begin to appreciate what it is that we may be in the process of losing. New thinking on the action repertoires of social movements is also occurring, especially regarding strategies of civil disobedience, new modes of protest and of accessing the public spheres of civil society, and this too is welcome. But the relation between parties and movements in the contemporary context of structural, and contextual changes should be theorized as well. In my paper this is what I propose to do, by focusing on the American case. I will to explore the theory and practice of “left” and right populism and the threat to constitutional democracy posed by their blurring of the distinctions between party and movement, between civil and political society, between the logics of influence and the exercise of power, and the extremely polarized and authoritarian version of identity politics that goes with it. I will also address the role that contemporary political parties can and should play in relation to movements in the current context, making an analytic and normative argument. My thesis is that we need strong parties and active social movements to ward off the new authoritarianism that is on the horizon in the populist resurgence in all contemporary democracies.