Disobedience and support for democracy: Evidences from the World Values Survey

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ABSTRACT

For some time, social movement research and political science have studied protests and activists. However, little empirical research attempts to relate movements to the type of social change they endeavour to achieve. In this paper, we suggest that different psychosocial processes may distinguish between different types of movement and protest. In particular, we cross lines between classical social psychology studies on the individual–authority relationship and studies on protest and social movements. We focus attention on the psychological processes triggered in obedience/disobedience. Our results show that when disobedience is associated with attitudes of inclusiveness, it is also positively linked to prodemocratic individual attitudes and to the enhancement of democracy at institutional levels.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between protest movements and democracy is at times ambiguous and paradoxical. Although studies on social movements often implicitly assume that social movements are a vector of democratization of society, nothing assures that protest movements make society more democratic, even the so-called Leftist-libertarian movements (Giugni, 1999). Results of research on the protest/democracy relationship are sometimes contradictory. Some research shows that protest has a null effect on the state of democracy (Stockemer & Carbonetti, 2010) or only an indirect and not easily measurable effect (Giugni, 2004). In contrast, selected political science literature (Dalton, van Sickle & Weldon, 2010; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Norris, 2002) gives a positive interpretation of protest actions in relation to democratic institutions arguing that protest reinforce substantive aspects of democracy, such as the freedom of speech and thought. In turn, the substantive aspects of democracy influence procedurals ones, enhancing democracy at the institutional level (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1971, 1999).

In this article, we address the question of the compatibility between protest and democracy within a different framework. We suggest that social psychology may give an important contribution to the debate, shifting the level of analysis from institutions and societies to protesters and their psychological processes. As we discuss below, this change of perspective can lead to new and underestimated insights. In particular, if protesters seek to bring social change, the question is to spot those aspects and elements which can predict the direction of change. We argue that the direction of the change mirrors undergoing psychological differences among protesters. In particular, we suggest that democracy is compatible with protest when the latter is held by attitudes of inclusiveness and equality.

2. Types of obedience and disobedience

From a social psychological perspective, protest is linked to a more general psychological phenomenon: the

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relationship between the individual and the authority framed in terms of obedience and disobedience to the authority (Passini & Morselli, 2009). According to some authors (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Levine & Pavelchak, 1984; Martin & Hewstone, 2003), the authority relationship may be conceived as a form of social influence, which serves the purpose of either maintaining group norms (social control) or changing group norms (social change). In this framework, two main conceptions of obedience to authority may be drawn. On the one hand, several studies show that destructive or blind obedience is characterized by a displacement of responsibility from the person to the authority (Feather, 1996; Milgram, 1974). Blind obedience is, therefore, connected to authoritarianism and authoritarian submission (Altemeyer, 1996; Dunwoody et al., 2008; Feldman & Weber, 2008; Passini, 2008). On the other hand, obedience can also represent a sense of responsibility towards the community and shared group values (Bierhoff, 2001; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). Such obedience is not necessarily correlated to blind obedience: people who obey responsibly may decide to disobey the authority, if the authority's demands are not congruent with previously-agreed moral, social, and political principles (Passini & Morselli, 2009).

Passini and Morselli (2009) and Morselli and Passini (2010) suggest that disobedience, akin to obedience, can be described as having constructive and destructive sides defined by different psychological processes. In principle, disobedience is prosocial when it addresses the sake of the whole society, without excluding certain social groups or actors. By contrast, disobedience is antisocial when enacted mainly in favour of specific groups and exclude or damage others. In other words, the level of inclusiveness of the disobedient actions is what determines whether disobedience is pro or antisocial. For instance, although Ku Klux Klan and Civil Rights Movement members sought social change, the former sought the exclusion of certain social categories, preventing them from sharing the same rights of their own ingroup, while the latter demanded equal rights shared by all social categories. In this sense, the KKK's actions and claims may be defined as exclusive (antisocial), while the Civil Right Movements were inclusive (prosocial).

3. Inclusiveness underpinning disobedience

How inclusiveness work at the psychological level? The Self-Categorization Theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) asserts that people categorise themselves at different levels of inclusiveness, and at different levels of abstraction. People might categorize themselves at the same time as member of different groups, and refer to a superordinate category which includes them. The extension of the inclusive category is, therefore, fundamental in terms of intergroup relations because it describes a target outgroup as part of one's own social identity or not: if it is included in the inclusive category, then it is not alien or enemy. For example, the supporters of different football teams oppose one another during the match, but they consider the others as allies within the category of supporters when facing the police (Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, 2001).

Similarly, Mummendey and Wenzel (1999) stress that a restricted categorization is likely to be linked to the devaluation of outgroups and minorities and to a loss of normative restraints against negatively and cruelly treated outgroups. When outgroups are not categorized as prototypical components of an inclusive category, they are also excluded from the moral community of reference and they can be harmfully treated (Opotow, 1990).[1] In this sense, inclusiveness can be conceived as tightly linked to the principles of equity and distributive justice among social groups, which are substantial dimensions of democracy (Christiano, 2003).

As regards protest groups, inclusive or exclusive self-categorization can plays a relevant role in defining the aims and targets of the protest itself (Passini & Morselli, 2009). A protest held by inclusive attitudes (prosocial disobedience) can be addressed for the sake of all social groups, while a protest held by exclusive attitudes (antisocial disobedience) does not care about the excluded groups with the risk, or sometimes the aim, of damaging them.

4. Hypotheses

In this study, we use World Value Survey (WVS) data to test the (H1) hypothesis of prosociality of disobedience according to which prosocial disobedience and democracy should share the same substantive principles. We test whether the WVS respondents can be classified along two axes: protesters vs. non-protesters, and high vs. low inclusiveness. Four classes are expected: high-inclusive protesters, which represent prosocial disobedience; low-inclusive protesters; high-inclusive non-protesters; low-inclusive non-protesters. Therefore, we hypothesize that highly-inclusive protesters are more prodemocratic and less oriented towards blind obedience than protesters with low levels of inclusiveness (low-inclusive protesters).

Moreover, in line with Dahl's (1971, 1999) theory, we expect that the diffusion among citizens of substantive democratic aspects, such as democratic values and attitudes, is the basis for building democratic procedures and institutions. Thus, if prosocial disobedience and democratic attitudes are compatible and positively related, we formulate the (H2) hypothesis of compatibility with democracy according to which the diffusion of prosocial disobedience within a community will not damage institutions, but enhance their democratization. Specifically, we expect that countries where we observe an increment of prosocial disobedience will also show an increment of democracy at the societal level in the following period or, at least, democracy will not decrease.

5. The hypothesis of prosociality of disobedience

To test H1, we apply latent class analysis (LCA) (McCutcheon, 1987). LCA is a technique which assumes that the association between independent variables can be explained by the existence of certain categories of subjects that may not be directly observed and are latent (Geiser,

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[1] For a discussion of factors influencing inclusiveness see Passini (2010).