Mobilizing During the Covid-19 Pandemic: From Democratic Innovation to the Political Weaponization of Disinformation

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Abstract
Political scholars express concern for the continued resilience of democracy in the face of multiple crises. In times of crisis, social movements articulate grievances and make demands of political leaders and policymakers. In contrast to the wave of pro-democracy movements following the 2008 global financial crash where protesters demanded accountability from elites, mobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic has defied expectations in several key ways. First, the expectation for protesters to mobilize primarily online in the face of the restrictions and risk associated with large gatherings has not been upheld. Instead, we have witnessed widespread “offline” mass protests. Second, despite high mortality rates and significant disparities in the effectiveness of national public health responses, we have not witnessed widespread mobilizations demanding governments do better to protect citizens from the virus. Instead, we have seen two radically different responses: At one extreme, veterans of “pro-democracy” movements have “pivoted,” using their skills and experience to either make up for weak government responses to COVID-19 (Hong Kong) or to reinforce government efforts to contain it (Taiwan). At the other extreme, “antidemocratic” and predominantly far right-wing movements have mobilized against public health measures, circulating COVID negationist and conspiracy messages. Indeed, the political weaponization of disinformation has been a notable feature of pandemic mobilization. I analyze these contrasting trends, highlighting the challenges they pose for the effective handling of the pandemic, and their broader implications for democratic legitimacy and resilience. In so doing, I call attention to the ways that mobilization during the pandemic challenges scholars to revisit some of our

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assumptions about the dynamics of social movements in times of crisis, and how they can foster or erode democracy. The analysis also suggests that scholars analyzing the impact of information disorders on democracy need to pay careful attention to offline protest as well as online transmission.

Keywords
protest, social media, Covid, information disorders, democracy

Introduction

Political scholars share a deep concern for the state of contemporary democracy and its continued resilience in the face of multiple crises (Della Porta, 2013; Rosanvallon, 2008). Despite continued commitment to democracy as a value, many Western liberal states are facing legitimation crises as democratic deficits become increasingly visible in times of crisis (Della Porta, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2017, 2020a). In addition to a global public health crisis and a global economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic that swept across the world in early 2020, like the global crisis following the financial crash of 2008, has revealed the crisis of legitimacy facing contemporary democracies as trust in government slides in many countries (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). Periods of crisis are seen to be particularly propitious for democratic innovation by social movements because crises destabilize political institutions, opening them to critique and making the public more receptive to alternative explanations and remedies for their grievances (Langman, 2013).

In times of crisis, social movements articulate citizen grievances and make demands of policymakers, revealing central social conflicts (Touraine, 1988). Yet in contrast to the wave of pro-democracy movements that swept the globe demanding greater accountability from political and financial elites following the global crash of 2008, mobilization since the emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic has defied expectations in several key ways.

First, given restrictions on social distancing and lockdowns, and the high risk associated with participating in large gatherings, the expectation for social movements and protesters to mobilize primarily online has not been upheld. Although protest activity overall fell across the world (Barrett & Chen, 2021), we nevertheless have witnessed widespread mass protests. Notable examples include global Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd’s murder by the U.S. police; Poland’s protests against abortion restrictions; Thailand’s student demands for political reform; Lebanon’s demands for an end to corruption; and widespread anti-lockdown protests in the US and Germany (Flesher Fominaya, 2020b; Rachman, 2020). With very few exceptions (e.g., Israel, see Lieberman and Schwartz, 2020), these mobilizations have not been socially distanced.

Second, in the face of high mortality rates and significant disparities in the effectiveness of national public health responses, we have not witnessed widespread mobilizations demanding governments do better to protect citizens from the virus. Instead,
we have seen two radically different responses: At one extreme, veterans of pro-democracy movements have transferred their skills to either substitute for weak government responses to COVID-19 (e.g., Hong Kong) or to directly contribute to government efforts to contain the virus (e.g., Taiwan). At the other pole, “anti-democratic” and predominantly far right-wing movements have mobilized demanding the easing of restrictions and have circulated COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Indeed, the political weaponization of disinformation has been one of the most striking features of mobilization during the pandemic to date.

In this article, I analyze these two trends, highlighting the central social conflicts they reveal and the challenges they pose for the effective handling of the pandemic, and for democratic legitimacy and resilience more broadly. In so doing, I call attention to the ways that mobilization during the pandemic challenges scholars to revisit some of our assumptions about the dynamics of social movements and the role they can play in either fostering or eroding democratic resilience in times of crisis.

**Democracy in Crisis: Two Movement Responses**

Scholars of democracy have noted the crisis of confidence and trust in democratic institutions and representatives (Della Porta, 2013; Norris, 2014) and increasing ideological polarization in the public sphere (Crouch, 2004). This longer term decline in trust, legitimacy, and satisfaction with democratic regimes was exacerbated following the global financial crisis of 2008 (Norris, 2014) and risks becoming further eroded in the context of the current pandemic (Edgecliff-Johnson, 2021). Indeed, the Edelman Trust Barometer (2021) reveals “an epidemic of misinformation and widespread mistrust of societal institutions and leaders around the world” following “a year of unprecedented disaster and turbulence.”

Economic/financial crises provoke legitimation crises when elites are perceived as having caused and benefitted from them and having failed to protect citizens against their worst effects (Flesher Fominaya, 2015, 2017, 2020a; Langman, 2013). As the world faces the second global financial crisis in little over a decade, it also faces a public health crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage populations, with staggering death tolls and many failed attempts to effectively contain it. The coronavirus crisis has also made visible existing social inequalities (Artiga et al., 2020), with people in poverty least able to practice social distancing and stay at home (Tharoor, 2020).

Political-economic legitimation crises create openings for new political alignments and transform interpretive frameworks of meaning, “as people withdraw commitment to the social order—creating spaces for alternative views and understandings” (Langman, 2013, p.159). While this can lead to mobilization for progressive transformation, long a focus of much social movement scholarship on social movements and democracy (Della Porta, 2020; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a), the COVID-19 pandemic shows that it can also lead to the resurgence and mobilization of reactionary and regressive agendas.
Mobilizing Against the Pandemic: Pro-Democracy Activists in Taiwan and Hong Kong Fight the Virus

Taiwan: Leading the Way in Social Innovation

Taiwan’s remarkably effective response to COVID-19 would not have been possible without the impact that digital democracy activists have had over the past decade, and the influence their social innovations have had on Taiwan’s current government. The close partnership between the government, activists, and civil society is the result of the innovations of decentralized civic hacker communities advocating for open source and open government (g0v, pronounced “gov zero”) emerging from Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement in 2014. G0v builds open-source tools and other civic-tech services to facilitate a public dialogue with government (Fan et al., 2019), and the adoption of these tools has enabled a constant flow of ideas and information between civil society and government, leading to increased public trust and the potential to harness ideas and information from multiple sources in an open way (Lee et al., 2020; Leonard, 2020; Tang, 2020; Tworek, 2020).

Indeed, the government’s almost immediate response to the threat came about as a result of a senior health official noticing a heavily “up-voted” post warning about the virus on the PTT Board (Taiwan’s open source bulletin board system) on December 31, 2019, making Taiwan one of the first countries in the world to detect and respond to the virus (Lee et al., 2020; Nabben, 2020). Suspecting human-to-human transmission of the Wuhan virus being discussed, it notified the World Health Organization (WHO) and implemented enhanced border control and quarantine measures. The WHO did not declare a global health emergency until a month later.

Under the leadership of Audrey Tang, Minister of Digital Affairs, g0v tools were harnessed for civic technology innovation, including the vTaiwan and the Join platforms for public policy participation. Once the threat was recognized, Taiwan’s civic tech community got to work creating open data projects with live maps and citizen and pharmacy-updated information on stock levels to enable all citizens to avail themselves of free masks. Meanwhile, Tang and her collaborators set about tackling one of the most pernicious COVID-19-related problems, designing a humour-based counter disinformation unit to combat “rumour with humour.” Their remit is to combat all COVID-19-related disinformation by providing a memetic response following a 2:2:2 rule: in 20 minutes, in 200 words or less, and with 2 images. Memes are used to convey all key information on public health as well. Tang believes that digital social innovation builds democracy, and should be fast, fair, and fun in order to be effective, build trust, and help defuse anxiety in trying times. Taiwan’s use of innovative information technology, which works with the National Health Insurance system and the national Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC), has been critical to its successful deployment of contact tracing, testing, and quarantine measures to control the pandemic. All CECC daily briefings are live streamed and open to public input (Leonard, 2020; Tang, 2020). As a result, 91% of Taiwanese are satisfied with the CECC (Nabben, 2020).

The Taiwanese response to COVID-19 is deeply integrated into a digital democracy/social innovation civic tech culture that owes a great deal to the open source
“hacker ethic” of the movement communities from which it emerged. As a result, Taiwan’s CECC and the civic tech activist communities that support its efforts are mobilizing key principles of that ethic, such as crowd-sourcing ideas and information, encouraging citizen participation in deliberation and decision making, listening to citizen concerns, sharing information, working to improve on other’s work, working for the collective good (commons thinking), and encouraging participatory collective action (Fan et al., 2019; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a).

**Hong Kong: Fighting the Pandemic When Government Failed**

In stark contrast to Taiwan, in early 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic began to sweep across the world, Hong Kong’s leadership failed to react swiftly to adopt effective containment strategies. In the face of a leadership deficit, Hong Kong citizens mobilized in record time to coordinate an effective response to contain the spread of the virus. Hong Kong’s citizen innovators were veterans of the pro-democracy “Umbrella” movements that formed part of the global wave of protests following the global financial crash of 2008 (Lee et al., 2015). They used Telegram, online forums, and the many tools and resources they had developed during their previous pro-democracy protest activity to respond to this new pressing health crisis. Hong Kong had outlawed the wearing of face masks in 2019 in response to pro-democracy protesters use of masks to avoid surveillance, arrest, and retribution (Hartley & Jarvis, 2020). Early in the pandemic, Hong Kong’s chief executive refused to wear a mask and ordered her executive to also abstain (Hartley & Jarvis, 2020, Chung 2020). When Hong Kongers responded *en masse* by adopting surgical masks as soon as reports of the new virus surfaced (Bradsher et al., 2019; Hartley & Jarvis, 2020; Tufekci, 2020) they were not only critiquing government inaction but also defying the earlier ban intended to silence pro-democracy dissent. Some pro-democracy activists imported face masks and distributed them to the poor and elderly, while others began to produce and distribute masks free of charge as demand rose (Cheng, 2020; Chow, 2020; Hartley & Jarvis, 2020; Tufekci, 2020). Communication networks kept citizens informed with the latest WHO information. Armies of volunteers installed and distributed hand sanitizer, and digital maps tracked and traced outbreaks (Cheung, 2020; Tufekci, 2020). When the government refused to close the border with China, 7000 medical workers went on an unprecedented strike, demanding closed borders and Personal Protective Equipment (Tufekci, 2020). Hong Kong’s citizen response to the coronavirus was remarkably effective despite the government’s delayed response, and it is an outstanding example of how the “afterlives” of social movements, that is, the tools, knowledge, networks, and resources developed in them, can lead to democratic innovation designed to correct democratic deficits when movements are faced with new challenges or opportunities.

In Hong Kong and Taiwan, strong pro-democracy movement networks were quickly repurposed to address an immediate threat to citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic, like the global crisis following the financial crash of 2008, has revealed the crisis of legitimacy facing contemporary democracies and the important role that
Mobilizing Against the “Plandemic”: Disinformation, Misinformation, and Covid Negationism

Made in the USA

In stark contrast to the mobilization of pro-democracy activists to fight the pandemic, shortly after the global outbreak of COVID-19, far-right protests against “stay at home” orders and mask wearing swept the United States, organized or attended by a mixture of right wing anti-government militias, white supremacists, conspiracy theorists, and neo-fascists such as the “Proud Boys” (Mathias, 2020). These far-right extremists kickstarted what would become a transnational ripple of protests against the “plandemic”: demanding an end to lockdown restrictions and mask-wearing measures, and spreading conspiracy theories that denied the virus’ existence or attributed it to a global “Jewish cabal,” Bill Gates, 5G, or the “deep State.” Protesters were sometimes armed and engaged in activities such as verbally abusing healthcare workers and blocking ambulances (Mathias, 2020). Most protests had a clear pro-Trump far right-wing agenda, with Proud Boy hate groups mobilizing “against the Democrat-driven unconstitutional lockdown.” The protests were fueled by social media communities rife with conspiracy theories and disinformation about the virus, such as QAnon groups and groups run by grifters (Mathias, 2020; Stanley-Becker & Romm, 2020). In the run up to the 2020 Presidential and congressional election, Trump supporters and antimask conspiracy theorists believed (or argued) that the data on COVID-19 deaths had been manipulated to hurt Trump politically. Trump also did his part to fuel resistance to the public health measures advised by his own experts, firing off tweets such as “LIBERATE MINNESOTA!” “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!” “LIBERATE VIRGINIA,” and declaring support for the protesters (McIntire & Roose, 2020).

While the mix of extreme right-wing mobilization, “plandemic” conspiracy theories and resistance to “Democrat driven” public health measures made (political) sense in the context of a U.S. pre-election scenario, more surprising was the spread of the protests to countries in Europe after the U.S. protests waned. As the pandemic developed, anti-mask, anti-lockdown and COVID negationist protests took place in Berlin, London, and Madrid, taking inspiration from QAnon and Breitbart after organizers shared conspiracy theories and photos of the U.S. protests on Telegram and other social media sites (Belenky, 2020; Niño, 2020). Support for Trump carried over into demonstrations targeting European national governments and their health policies, demonstrating continuity from one sphere of influence to another, yet protest messages were aligned to particular local and national political agendas and framed within national political cultural contexts, demonstrating the elasticity and flexibility of COVID-19 “resistance” narratives across contexts.
Resisting the “Plandemic” in Spain

Spain has witnessed the spread and intensification of protests over the course of the pandemic and provides a good example of the transnational continuity of core mobilizing frames, as well as their mobilization to advance particular national political agendas. Early resistance to lockdown emerged in May 2020 in one of Madrid’s wealthiest neighborhoods, spurred in part by disinformation about alleged police repression of people wearing the Spanish flag spread on social media sites aligned with far-right wing party Vox. According to the census, 90.5% of the inhabitants of the protest location voted for the three right wing parties in parliament, and comprise the 1% wealthiest socio-economic bracket (Grodira, 2020). Many of the 100-odd protesters were draped in Spanish flags, a few carried Make America Great Again signs, and they chanted against the “dictatorship” of the PSOE-UP (Socialist/Left) government, banging on pots and pans, and demanding “freedom.” Although they were protesting against lockdown (by defying lockdown), and supposed police repression against people not maintaining social distancing, most of the protesters were wearing masks (many with Spanish flags), and the protests were not characterized by COVID-19 negationist narratives (Grodira, 2020).

Far right party Vox played a key role in fostering Covid-19 related anti-government protests. The party has voted against government proposals to address the pandemic, called for protests in front of parliament to reject them, and directed their office holders to support protests against government COVID-19 policies (González, 2020). Vox officially called for a “caravan of freedom” protest on May 23, 2020, demanding the resignation of the government. In Madrid, some 6000 vehicles created a huge traffic jam in central Madrid, and once the traffic came to a standstill people left their Spanish flag festooned cars (including a few pre-constitutional flags from the dictatorship) and gathered on the streets, most wearing masks but not socially distancing. The protest was purportedly oriented to the government’s response to COVID-19, but the messaging was vague and contradictory. Protesters spoke of being “forced” to buy masks, but argued the government should resign because it had not handled the pandemic well. The main frames, however, were not directly related to the COVID-19 response, but centered around the notion of an “unworthy government,” and outrage at being denied the right to protest in the pandemic, proof that the government was a “dictatorship.” The protest itself was both a purported defiance of lockdown, but also a manifest denial of the very claim they were making, as the protest was authorized by the government. Reporters covering the event were accosted, including a reporter from the far-right newspaper La Razón, who was beaten and whose camera was smashed (González, 2020).

Vox called for another car caravan protest in October 2020, this time without asking for government authorization. Vox’s leader’s attacks on the government were wrapped up in conspiracy language aimed to increase distrust in the government:

The lies about the pandemic, and the use of the mechanism of the state of emergency to attack communities unaffected by the pandemic, lets us know in no uncertain terms in
whose hands we are, and that this government will go to any lengths to remain in power. (RTVE, 2020)

Anti-Covid-19 measures protests resurged in the summer, but the content of the protesters’ demands shifted significantly, mirroring the increased influence of conspiracy theories noted by researchers (e.g., Argentino, 2020). In Madrid, on August 16, 2020, in the Plaza de Colón (a favorite spot for right-wing protests) an estimated 1000–2000 people, most of whom were not wearing masks, gathered to chant slogans and wave signs (see Table 1).

The slogans combined demands for “freedom,” with messages denying and affirming the existence of the virus. One protester said she had never felt so oppressed in her life despite having lived through the Franco dictatorship.4 Another expressed a generalized distrust in “shameless politicians, shameless police and corrupt journalists” (Video in Belenky, 2020). Some protesters also carried pro-Trump signs, showing additional continuity from the QAnon conspiracy messages in the earlier U.S. protests. News outlets reported that journalists covering the protest were insulted, called terrorists and mercenaries, and had water thrown at them (Huffington Post, 2020).

Protests later spread and intensified in late October and early November 2020 across Barcelona and Burgos; this time accompanied by property destruction and rioting in some areas, and with a much more visible presence of extreme right-wing activists (Carranco & Navarro, 2020), although they included a heterogenous mix of COVID-negationists and anti-lockdown activists. Although Vox didn’t officially organize them, they amplified and supported their messages, while blaming the destruction of property and rioting on left-wing “extremists” and immigrant minors (González, 2020).

Table 1. Slogans in Chants and Signs (Selected), Madrid August 16, 2020.

| Chants                                                                 |                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| We want to see the virus!                                            | No fear                                                        |
| Hands off the children                                               | Stick Bill Gates’ vaccine up your ass                           |
| Fake tests, fake positives                                           |                                                                |

Signs:  
No vaccines, NO 5 G, No Masks  
No to the New World Order, PCR Tests give a lot of false positives-get informed!  
Resistance!, Covid has a cure but it is forbidden, wake up, they don’t want to protect you  
I heart humanity, Born to Be Free (in English)  
Investigate, reflect, there is another reality that has been hidden from us, yes to kisses, yes to hugs, yes to happiness, no to fear!  
Multinationals have the license to kill us slowly, no to the compulsory COVID-19 vaccine  
I decide about my body, no to the vaccine, let them experiment on each other!

Source. Translated from Spanish by author.
“Lateral thinking” in Germany

In Germany, anti-lockdown protests have been even stronger than those in Spain and they have attracted a much more heterogeneous support base, although the presence of the far-right is also prominent, and QAnon is thriving (Bennhold, 2020). In November 2020, the German group Querdenken (“lateral thinkers”) organized two rallies which attracted some 10,000 people in Berlin and some 20,000 in Leipzig to protest measures to contain the pandemic.

Videos of these protests show that most protesters were not wearing masks or socially distancing, and one of the leaders of the Leipzig protest was hospitalized with COVID-19 8 days later. Researchers have concluded that these two German anti-lockdown protests led to as many as 21,000 infections (Sugue, 2021). As anti-lockdown protests continue, German leaders and states have moved to ban the protests out of concern for public health (Berry, 2020; Mazumdar, 2020) and surveil a Querdenker group opposed to coronavirus-related restrictions (DW, 2020).

Like the activists in Spain, Querdenker adherents, which include Covid-19 sceptics, claim containment measures infringe on civil liberties, but critics argue support is mostly driven by right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists (Mazumdar, 2020), an assessment borne out by research (Jarynowski et al., 2020).

Observers have also noted the ideological heterogeneity of the protesters in Germany, which encompassed everything from climate and peace activists to evangelical Trump supporters wanting to make America great again, to Neo-Nazis (Vock, 2020). As in the United States and Spain, protester concerns encompass a mélange of conspiracy theories (including numerous QAnon signs), anti-vaccination stances, COVID-19 negationism, and demands for “freedom” (France 24, 2020). One young woman gave a speech comparing herself to Nazi resister Sophie Scholl, the student executed in 1943, a claim all the more bizarre given her willingness to march with neo-Nazis. The video of her speech reached more than a million viewers and sparked indignation in Germany (Euronews/AFP, 2020).

As we have seen, Covid-19 “resistance” narratives are highly elastic and can be mobilized across a range of political contexts where they are shaped by local and national political history and culture (the connection to fascism in Spain and Nazism in Germany) in aid of specific local and national political agendas (e.g., Trump in the United States, Vox in Spain and various right-wing, and other groups in Germany). Despite their localized agendas, these protests share some common characteristics transnationally: protesters tend to have extreme political orientations (mostly right-wing but also left-wing); strong rejections of scientific and expert knowledge about the virus and the pandemic; and a proclivity for conspiracy theories.

These protests raise serious concerns for the effective management of a global health crisis but are also an expression of the broader problem of the weaponization of disinformation to advance anti-democratic political agendas. Effective political mobilizations combine interdependent online and offline strategies to mainstream alternative narratives (Castells, 2012; Tarrow, 2011) and this is the case for progressive, regressive, and extremist movements (Cammaerts, 2018; Karl, 2018). Despite
representing a “fringe” or minority view, they have still attracted significant numbers. The extent to which these protests influence public opinion and the impact their distortion of the information landscape has on the public’s decisions to ignore or actively counteract government-led public health messaging and expert scientific advice is still an open question. In November 2020, for example, German polls showed that 85% of people opposed Querdenken beliefs (Vock, 2020). Yet in the context of a lethal pandemic where compliance with public health measures is imperative, that still leaves an alarming number of people (some 12.45 million) subscribing to them. Research shows popularity for their views on social media in Germany is growing (Jarynowski et al., 2020). Given that research has shown that conspiracies about the pandemic cross over into other issue areas (McQuillan et al., 2020), the question of the protests’ impact and spread becomes all the more important.

Social Media, Information Disorders and Anti-Mask/Anti-Lock Down, and Covid-19 Negationist Protests

Research shows that pandemic disinformation in groups such as QAnon is spreading across social media, with preference for QAnon concepts converging on both ends of the political ideological spectrum (Breland, 2020; McQuillan et al., 2020; Thomas & Zhang, 2020). Various news outlets have highlighted the mainstreaming of fringe COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Breland, 2020; DiPlacido, 2020; Illing, 2020; Rosenberg, 2020). One study showed a drastic increase in 179 QAnon Facebook groups’ membership following lockdown, skyrocketing from 213,000 members in March to 1.4 million by July 2020 (Argentino in Breland, 2020).

Crucial to the spread of these protests has been widespread disinfection and misinformation about the origins, causes, spread, preventive measures, and treatments of the virus, as well as denial of its existence, circulated widely on social media, and through the internet. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) show that content that plays on people’s emotions is most successful because it drives resharing among people wanting to connect with their online communities. The pandemic creates an environment in which people are experiencing anger, fear, and anxiety, in response to the pandemic, as well as increasing isolation (due to lockdown, remote working, and other restrictions), and are turning to social media as a way to stay connected and informed. This creates conditions that are very favorable for the widespread circulation of disinformation (Argentino, 2020; Reichstadt & Fourqet, 2020), and for specific political actors to channel the disinformation and the emotions inspired by it to their preferred agendas. While this is at times directed at government public health measures, in some countries like Brazil and the United States, COVID-19 disinformation comes from government, rather than against it (see Falkenbach & Greer, 2020). In the United States, for example, Trump fanned the flames of conspiracy by publicly discrediting public health messaging from his own administration, flouted the guidelines by not wearing a mask or maintaining social-distancing rules, and advocated harmful or ineffective treatments (bleach and hydroxychloroquine) (BBC News, 2020; Crowley et al., 2020;
Mystal, 2020). Trump shared conspiracy theories in at least 1,710 of the tweets posted on his personal Twitter account (McIntire and Roose, 2020).

Research has linked conspiracy theory beliefs to anti-democratic attitudes, less commitment to democracy as a value, distrust in government, prejudice, and non-normative political behavior (IFOP, 2019, 2020; Sternisko et al., 2020). Studies have shown that belief in conspiracy theories is associated both with social media and with more extreme political views, notably far right, including anti-Semitism. A study in France by the Jean Jaurès Foundation noted that conspiracy theories were already gaining ground in April 2020, with 26% of French people subscribing to them (Reichstadt & Fourquet, 2020). Belief in conspiracy theories was far greater among supporters of Marine Le Pen’s far-right Rassemblement National Party (Quinn, 2001). A later study of 1000 online “anti-maskers,” found that they strongly tend to distrust government and institutions relative to the rest of the population, tend to be more right-wing, tend to get information from the internet, and are very prone to conspiracy theories (Willsher, 2020). Most worrying was that 94% of that French sample said they would refuse to get a vaccine if it were available. France has one of the highest rates of anti-vaccine sentiment in the world, a position closely tied to mistrust in government (Pailliez, 2020). An Ipsos survey (2020) of 15 countries showed only 54% of French would have a COVID vaccine if one were available, compared to 64% in Italy and Spain and 79% in Britain (although global numbers have risen since then). The implications for the effective management of the pandemic are clear, creating an additional challenge for governments.

The role of social media is also clear in fostering distrust in science and expert information. A recent study by researchers at King’s College London and Ipsos MORI (2020) found that social media is being used to amplify harmful and unfounded claims, and that one in three people in the UK report having been exposed to Covid-19 anti-vaccination messages, with Facebook being the leading source by far. Some 40% of respondents who get their information from WhatsApp and YouTube believe the real purpose of the vaccination program is to track the public. In a worrying resurgence of widespread myths about vaccination (Davidson, 2017), 42% of respondents did not know whether Covid-19 vaccinations would lead to autism in children and expressed high levels of uncertainty about other COVID-19-related health conspiracies.

As with the widespread effects of information disorders more generally, the most worrying impact of the circulation of disinformation and misinformation is not that a notable minority of people believe conspiracy theories about the vaccine (which is troubling enough), but that they begin to doubt the veracity of information in general (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In the UK study, while relatively few people believe conspiracy theories about the direct health impacts of vaccines, large numbers say they are not sure if they are true or false. It is this doubt that makes people receptive to other conspiracy theories which can then be aligned with particular political agendas.

In this process of alignment, the particular affordances of social media also play an important role. Facebook and YouTube algorithms direct people to increasingly extreme content, and also direct traffic in such a way as to gather diverse groups of people in a shared space, creating filter bubbles (see Faddoul et al., 2020). Thomas and
Zhang (2020) argue that small groups of conspiracists can potentially influence recommender algorithms to expose new unsuspecting users to their views. Research on QAnon shows that online groups are populated by people motivated by a range of religious, spiritual, environmental, and health concerns who then become politicized in QAnon spaces via a shared concern about COVID-19. QAnon messages also act as a topical “bridge” between far left and far right channels, traversing from far right issues to other causes such as climate activism (McQuillan et al., 2020).

Distrust in science in right-wing populist narratives is designed to erode trust in democratic institutions and its representatives, and following the emergence of COVID-19, to sow panic (Bodner et al., 2020). Distortions of information landscapes as a result of social influence can cause people to ignore or even counteract public health policies and expert advice (Bodner et al., 2020), and conspiracy theories can inflict serious damage when they enter the realms of politics and public health (McQuillan et al. 2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these narratives have found expression in protests that combine anti-mask, anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination, and COVID negationist narratives with calls for refusals to comply with government public health measures to contain the pandemic, fueling the crisis of confidence in science, government, and expert systems.

Rethinking Social Movements and Democracy in the Context of Covid-19

Mobilization in the pandemic has not only defied expectations but has also unsettled a number of categories of analysis frequently used by social movement scholars. I focus here on three related but distinct issues: risk and the moral imperative, the role of information disorders, and the role of movements as knowledge producers, highlighting the broader implications for social movements and democracy and how the specific nature of the Covid-19 crisis impact on these.

Risk and the Moral Imperative

The first category is risk and its relation to the moral imperative to protest. The conscious assumption of risk, especially to bodily integrity, has traditionally been associated with a strength of commitment to a cause, potentially lending moral legitimacy to the act. At the more extreme end of nonviolent high-risk protest, we can find hunger strikers, activists who chain themselves to dangerous machinery, or those who engage in other high-risk activities such as hanging off bridges or blockading ships at sea. Common forms of potential risk associated with protest come from repression by police or other forces of order, violence from counter-protesters, arrest, incarceration or high fines, or other sanctions (see, e.g., Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001). In the context of the pandemic, however, offline protest involves the assumption of a personal risk to health through contracting the virus through interpersonal contagion if the protest is not socially distanced (commonly the case).
We do not yet know how or to what extent individual protesters calculated and evaluated the risk from COVID-19 in their decision to protest, nor how that risk played into audience interpretations of the moral worth or legitimacy of the protests. Yet, there are at least two ways this affects our usual understanding of risk in social movement groups. The first is that activist assumption of risk in the past has often been associated with belonging to an affinity group in which one has deep bonds of trust and solidarity (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001), and with socialization factors affecting decisions to undertake high-risk activity (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991). These bonds offer the possibility of some protection during potentially violent confrontations, the assurance of legal support if arrested, help with bail and fines, and even guarantees of caring for family if activists are harmed or incarcerated. None of this applies in the case of potentially contracting COVID-19 as a result of protesting, and in fact the protester has as much probability of infecting someone else as being infected by them. Protesters can and do take precautions but cannot guarantee other protesters will do the same.

The bizarre twist for Covid-19 negationist protesters is that they are exposing themselves to risk precisely in order to deny the risk exists, up-ending the usual assumptions that social movement scholars would bring to the calculation and evaluation of risk for protesters, which assumes some component of rational action in the calculation of risks. For activists in movements such as the U.S. Civil Rights movement, for example (or the many movements around the world for human rights) the assumption of the risk of bodily harm is a conscious decision that elevates the moral imperative and worthiness of the protesters. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter protesters mobilizing in the wake of George Floyd’s murder at the hands of police could be seen to be morally worthy for their willingness to expose themselves to risk of contracting the virus in order to satisfy the moral imperative to protest the injustice of police brutality. No such moral legitimacy accrues for COVID-19 negationists, however, despite the objective existence of the risk to which they are willingly exposing themselves, since they cannot claim to be assuming a risk they deny exists.

Furthermore, normally acts of civil disobedience are a form of defying unjust laws and heightening awareness of them. State repression (if it ensues) then adds potential moral legitimacy to the protest and can help to politicize bystander audiences. In the case of anti-lockdown protests, however, if the state refuses to ban or disband these protests, they would in fact be increasing the risk to public health, potentially alienating law-abiding citizens further. The existence of risk in the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced an ambiguity in the morality of protester and state action that has provided a perfect excuse for authorities to ban protests that make them uncomfortable, muddying the waters between safeguarding public health and opportunistically repressing dissent.

Risk calculations in the context of COVID-19 are not only taken by protesters but also by authorities. The assumption that people will be less likely to protest during the pandemic has also potentially emboldened authorities to crack down on dissent. In Hong Kong, for example, authorities have been arresting pro-democracy activists and leaders during the pandemic. According to pro-democracy leader Lee Cheuk Yan, the
arrests are to ensure pro-Beijing candidates are elected so that they may pass more draconian laws (Davidson, 2020). The pandemic context provides them with a “golden opportunity” as “Hong Kong citizens are very alert to the concern of the infection” and are therefore no longer taking to the streets in response to the arrests (Davidson, 2020; Washington Post, 2020) as they did *en masse* in 2019 (reaching 1.7 million people) (Davidson, 2020). In January 2021, the authorities carried out the largest pro-democracy crackdown yet, arresting more than 50 prominent pro-democracy activists who could face life in prison under the new national security law (Reuters, 2021). Experts have also called attention to the risks posed for human rights as states enact security bills giving states far greater powers under the rationale of needing better ways of controlling the virus. The implications of police powers to detain and isolate potentially infectious people, to cancel elections and ban gatherings, and changes to laws on data protection (all provisions of the UK Coronavirus Bill, for example), for the democratic rights to protest and dissent are clear (Dunt, 2020).

**Distinguishing Between Agents of Disinformation and True Believers**

The second analytical challenge presented by the anti-lockdown and COVID negationist protests lies in the difficulty in discerning the motives and political agendas of the protesters, something scholars usually attempt to achieve through survey data or frame analysis (Benford & Snow, 2000). The current media ecology is awash with disinformation and misinformation, a situation that is testing the robustness of democracies around the world as online conspiracy theories, including those related to COVID-19, manifest offline.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) usefully distinguish between *misinformation* (when false information is shared, but no harm is meant) and *disinformation* (when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm). Yet when attempting to analyze anti-lockdown anti-mask, anti-vaxxer protesters, the distinction becomes less clear. As we have seen, these disinformation campaigns have produced armies of true believers, who then propagate and share disinformation as misinformation, since their intention is not to cause harm but to spread the “truth” about a serious global threat. While the political agenda of the political disinformation camp is sometimes clear (by tracing it to identifiable agents with clear political and electoral goals, such as far right VOX party in Spain, or Trump campaigners in the United States), determining who is sincerely misguided and who is weaponizing disinformation for political purposes is difficult, making the potential remedies to these challenges to democracy harder to discern. It raises the question of whether it is possible, or even desirable, to use the same tools to fight against those who willingly and knowingly propagate false information that can cause harm (illness and death) in order to create political instability or to advance anti-democratic political agendas, as to fight against the tide of misinformation propagated by the “true believers.” An answer to this troubling question lies far beyond the scope of this article, but for now we can at least recognize the innovations of pro-democracy movements, such as the civic tech activists in Taiwan, who have been effectively combatting harmful disinformation.
Movements as Knowledge Producers and as Agents of Disinformation

The third area of inquiry that is destabilized by these protests is the role of social movements as knowledge producers. Social movement scholars have long recognized social movements as important sources of knowledge, and their role in building stronger democracies by informing the public about key concerns and issues (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cox & Flesher Fominaya, 2009; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Melucci, 1996). The role of social movements as agents of disinformation, however, is an understudied phenomenon. Pro-democracy movements contribute to democratic innovation not only by producing new imaginaries and practices, but also new norms, useful skills, and practical knowledge oriented toward emancipatory social transformation and democratic regeneration (Flesher Fominaya, 2020a). This knowledge production has been directly harnessed to fight against the pandemic, as we have seen in the case of the contributions of pro-democracy activists in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

In the case of the COVID-19 negationists, and anti-mask, anti-lockdown protesters, however, the opposite is happening. These movements are effectively propagating disinformation and misinformation that is not only harmful to public health but destabilizes government attempts to fight the pandemic and protect the citizens in their care. Movements, therefore, not only produce new knowledge to strengthen democracy, but can have the opposite effect by producing a less informed public, one that doubts the veracity of scientific knowledge and expertise designed to improve citizen well-being. The weaponization of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic through protest suggests that scholars working on the impact of information disorders on democracy will need to pay careful attention to the role of offline protest as well as online transmission. In the case of COVID-19 these protests at least in some cases led directly to increased infections (and presumably death) (Sugue, 2021) because defiance of public health measures formed an integral part of the goal of spreading misinformation about COVID-19.

Conclusions

Touraine (1988) argued that analyzing social movements reveals the central conflicts of our times. This is also true for protests in the time of COVID-19. It is clear that despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic, the battle for democracy is being waged as multiple crises unfold. Protests and social unrest will likely increase as the pandemic is brought under control, restrictions are lifted, and the full longer term political, social, and economic effects of the pandemic are felt (Barrett & Chen, 2021). Mobilization during the coronavirus pandemic has defied expectations in key ways and thereby destabilized some of the categories of analysis routinely drawn on by social movement scholars. Although protest decreased overall worldwide, the pandemic exposed central social conflicts (e.g., racism, inequality) of sufficient force for people to expose themselves to risk to mobilize around them, while some states have used the pandemic as a justification to restrict human rights and increase repression (Davidson, 2020; Dunt, 2020). At the same time the virus itself, and the measures to contain its spread, became
an object of mobilization from two very different types of movement whose mobilization also has drastically different implications for democracy.

Passing effective policies relies “on generating widespread public support and mobilization while effectively countering the communication efforts of opponents” (Nisbet, 2009, p. 14). While the study of strategic social movement and political framing activity is well established, this has long focused on traditional media. The proliferation of user-generated content via social media has transformed the dynamics of framing contests, with serious implications for public opinion formation around highly politicized and polarizing issues, as this analysis shows, contributing to emerging scholarship in this area (e.g., see Ross & Rivers, 2019).

This analysis of mobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how social movements can play a crucial role in either strengthening or eroding democracy. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the many crises it unleashed, pro-democracy movements were able to rapidly “pivot” to mobilize against the virus, to support vulnerable citizens, and to counter government inaction. These movements used the skills and resources developed in previous mobilizations in times of crisis to fight the pandemic, showing how the democratic innovations developed in movements can be crucial in mobilizing against new threats or opportunities (Flesher Fominaya, 2015, 2020a). Activists in Taiwan and Hong Kong were mobilizing not just skills and resources, but democratic movement imaginaries founded on the principles of open-source knowledge creation and sharing, transparency, fairness, hacker ethics, and commitment to commons thinking and citizen well-being in their fight against the pandemic.

At the other end of the spectrum, the pandemic provided opportunities for the weaponization of disinformation about Covid-19 that was tied to far-right political agendas, and anti-democratic narratives. The pandemic was easily incorporated into political disinformation campaigns that predated it, such as QAnon, to prey on citizen fears, anxieties, and distrust of government and public institutions. While certain aspects specific to the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated this issue “bridging,” such as changing public health messaging as experts learned more about the virus, it is not difficult to see how similar dynamics might develop around other global threats to planetary well-being, such as climate change. Indeed, recent research has drawn links between the ontological insecurity provoked by climate change and Covid-19 and its effect on the rejection of expert knowledge (Agius et al., 2020). Because scientific inquiry by nature rejects absolutes, and develops though the testing of competing hypotheses, it becomes an easy target for politically motivated disinformation that preys on many people’s need for simple explanations, absolute truths, and someone to blame for their misfortune (Uscinski et al., 2020).

Ulrich Beck (1992) alerted us to the effects of the crisis of public belief and trust in scientific knowledge, expertise, and institutional authority in his work on the “risk society.” At the time he was writing, Beck could not have anticipated the exponential growth of social media, the attendant contamination of our media ecologies with information disorders, and the effect this would have on democracy. Yet the connection between trust in institutions and the effective management of risk is clear in the context of mobilization during the pandemic. Although trust in government surged early
in the pandemic, it has eroded significantly as the pandemic has dragged on (Edgecliff-Johnson, 2021). Because assessments of risk involve not only rational analytic calculations but also experiential assessments based on an individual’s emotions, interest, and values (Slovic et al., 2004) simply providing citizens with more or better information will not correct the problem of faulty risk assessments by members of the public (Burgess et al., 2018). Instead, public trust in public institutions needs to be restored. It is no coincidence that New Zealand’s outstanding record in Covid-19 management was accompanied by the high trust New Zealanders place in government (83 % in June 2020) (Goldfinch et al., 2021; Wilson, 2020). Trust in government increases the likelihood of compliance with difficult policy changes such as virus containment measures (Goldfinch et al., 2021) and it is likely to increase receptivity to expert and scientific messaging. As Taiwan’s effective response suggests, trust becomes a virtuous circle: the more citizen’s trust the CECC, the greater their compliance, the better able the government can handle the risk, the lower the deaths and infections, the greater citizen trust, and so on. Progressive social movements committed to democratic innovation and regeneration can play a role in this endeavor.

As the coronavirus pandemic shows, the multiple crises confronting contemporary democracies make the need for democratic regeneration that increases trust in government, and democratic innovation that addresses the effects of the crises all the more urgent. The innovative practices of the pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan can offer lessons for citizen driven responses to threats to democracy, including cautionary tales about the role a pandemic context can play in facilitating state repression (e.g., Hong Kong). But the question of trust is by no means straightforward, especially when political leaders are acting as agents of disinformation. Critical social movements can also contribute to democracy by legitimately eroding trust in untrustworthy governments, and exercising monitory functions (e.g., exposing government corruption, surveillance, or human rights violations). Indeed the lack of effective critical movements questioning dangerous and/or corrupt COVID-19 containment strategies, such as in the United Kingdom5 which have arguably contributed to their dismal COVID-19 performance record, highlight the reality that working to increase trust in government will only work to strengthen democracy if it works in tandem with critical demands for effective participatory mechanisms and policies that safeguard citizen welfare.

Mobilizations contesting COVID-19 health measures and negating the risk or existence of the virus reveal the crisis of democratic legitimacy and the erosion of trust in government, expertise, and scientific knowledge. Pro-democracy activists in places like Spain, Hong Kong, and Taiwan would argue that it is not just institutions that need to change to improve citizen trust, but that citizens’ sense of themselves as active invested participants in a common political project needs to be transformed through the construction of a thriving democratic paideia (Fan et al., 2019; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a). As we have seen, where the trust relation between state and citizens fails, and where states fail to safeguard citizen well-being, social movements mobilize to fill in the gaps, whether through fighting the pandemic via a pro-democracy agenda or through the political weaponization of disinformation about COVID-19.
Scholars of social movements and democracy have argued that times of crisis can open opportunities for progressive change and greater democracy (Della Porta, 2020; Flesher Fominaya, 2020a). What mobilization during this pandemic has shown is that crises not only lead to movement innovation but also to mobilization based on conspiracy theories and scapegoating. The analysis here shows that in times of crisis, movements can be agents of progressive change and powerful knowledge producers that help build a democratic *paideia* of critically informed citizens. They can also be agents of disinformation that can directly and indirectly lead to infection and death. This recognition contributes to scholarship studying the relation between conspiracy theories, misinformation, and individual’s decisions to eschew appropriate health-related behaviors (Uscinski et al., 2020).

We are only beginning to understand the effects of COVID-19 on the motivations, dynamics, and impacts of social movements and the ways it has opened new opportunities for social movements and the state to pursue progressive and anti-democratic agendas. This analysis of mobilization during the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that the specific nature of a given crisis shapes mobilization in particular and unexpected ways, but that despite the real limitations on protest created by the COVID-19 pandemic, social movements continue to serve as a *sine qua non* for democracy, as well as a potential threat to it.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Notes**

1. On February 13, 2021, they had a total of nine deaths and 937 cases of Covid-19.
2. Some 4500 vehicles in Sevilla and about 500 in Barcelona also joined the protests.
3. In Spain, protest events require permission that needs to be requested from the Delegate of the Government’s office beforehand. The decision to apply for permission or not to is a factor all movement groups take into consideration.
4. This far right trope is a rhetorical strategy of far right activists who support the Franco dictatorship but oppose the current government “dictatorship.” Some German protesters also claimed Germany was a dictatorship.
5. For more on how democratic deficits contributed to the UK COVID response, see Open Democracy’s investigative journalism coverage, e.g., Fitzgerald and Crider 2020.

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