

IPW LECTURES

They Don't Represent Us? Prefiguration and Political Representation in the Age of "Audience Democracy".

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Abstract:

In 2011 and the ensuing years, the world witnessed a global wave of protest movements that, notwithstanding the many differences between them, seemed to share at least a number of key characteristics. Rather than to negotiate or engage with the existing public institutions or established political parties, these movements typically tried to *prefigure* the alternative social or political order that they sought to realise on a grander scale. The distinctive, prefigurative repertoire of these movements (and of *Occupy* and the Spanish *Indignados* in particular) is often assumed to manifest a strong disdain for any form of political representation. My aim is to argue that these recent protest movements *did*, in fact, play a distinctive, representative role. They should be read not so much as critics of representation per se, but rather of the political inactivity that characterises representative democracy in its current state. What is more: as indicated by these movements' most prominent slogans – such as “we are the 99%” or, paradoxically, “*They* don't represent *us!*” – any prefigurative politics already presupposes a particular, populist, form of representative claim-making. Departing from the work of Ernesto Laclau, I seek to reconstruct this form of political representation and finally ask the question what we today can still learn from these movements.