

Direct Action and Democracy: Histories and Transformations

Institut für soziale Bewegungen, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany
11-12 June 2025

The concept of 'direct action' crystallised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a challenge to parliamentary democracy. The advocates of 'direct action' included anarchists opposed to the state, radical proponents of independent trade unionism, and disillusioned followers of the parliamentary road. They promoted the transformative potential of participation in strikes, militant demonstrations, boycotts, and sabotage. They imagined these actions as forms of 'revolutionary gymnastics' that would radicalise working-class consciousness, and thereby serve as a prelude to revolution. They argued that even within bourgeois democracy, external pressure through radical contention was a more effective means of winning reforms than reliance on elected representatives. They developed detailed criticisms not just of bourgeois democracy, but also of the institutions of social-democratic politics, most famously in Robert Michels' analysis of *Political Parties*.

The first propagandists of 'direct action' were frequently scornful of 'politics' and explicitly opposed to 'democracy'. Yet this stark opposition was increasingly undermined by a more contested and variable relationship. Even in the first years of the twentieth century, leading figures in the labour movement sought to combine the force of direct action with the procedures of formal politics, theoretically and practically. Over time, groups denied full citizenship deployed forms of direct action in pursuit of civil and political rights (such as in the cases of the Suffragettes and desegregation in the US) and in the cause of decolonization (as seen in the nonviolent campaigns led by Mohandas Gandhi as well as for a period, Kwame Nkrumah). Subjects of authoritarian governments in Eastern Europe and Latin America turned to forms of direct action to sustain dissidence and to seek transformation. Protesters engaged in range of campaigns, such as those asserting bodily autonomy, opposing militarism, and defending the environment used direct action to challenge government policy, and to shift public opinion. Formulated as a critique of parliamentary democracy, forms of 'direct action' came over time to be widely understood also as tools to win inclusion in the polity and as a supplement to established political practice. At the same time the concept continued to pose a challenge to conventional politics, through being combined with network-based politics and horizontal decision making, as well as concepts such as 'direct democracy' and 'participatory democracy'.

Yet if the relations between 'direct action' and 'democracy' are generally understood as variable and contested, historians have been slow to closely examine these shifting ties, to consider their tensions, or to explain their transformations. While many studies have offered close up portraits of direct-action protests, fewer have sought to probe the implications for the making and remaking of democracy. Fewer still have sought to compare multiple episodes, or to explain how a doctrine strongly critical of parliamentary democracy has also been extolled as a necessary feature of a healthy democratic polity.

This conference aims to stage a sustained dialogue on the relationship between direct action and democracy. Organisers welcome papers on this topic, broadly conceived, including the following themes:

- Direct action as a form of direct democracy and an alternative to representative forms of democracy.

- Forms of democratic decision making within direct-action movements.
- Concepts of democracy in the work of direct-action proponents and thinkers.
- The use of direct action to influence and overthrow dictatorships and secure rights to political participation.
- The uses and limits of direct action in influencing publics, as well as decision makers in government, business, and elsewhere.
- State responses to direct action within representative democracies.
- The context of representative democracy and the remaking of direct action over time.
- The changing place of direct action in the conceptualisation of democracy.

Organisers particularly welcome comparative studies on these topics and on the broader conference theme.

We plan to publish a selection of papers after the conference, and will seek revised written papers by November 2025.

Organisation

The conference will be held at the Institut für soziale Bewegungen, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany, **11-12 June 2025**. The conference language is English. Papers will be twenty minutes in length followed by discussion. The conference will be conducted solely at the location, and not online. There is no conference fee.

Those interested in delivering a paper should draft and send an *abstract of 700 words or less* to conference organisers by **31 July 2024**. This should be accompanied by a *brief biography of no more than 100 words*. Abstracts should be sent to: sscalmer@unimelb.edu.au.

Acceptances will be conveyed by **30 September 2024**.

The conference forms part of a research project funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung (2023-26) on the topic of 'Direct Action and Democracy: Utopia, Experience, Threat'.

Conference organisers have received funding to support the conference, but do not currently possess sufficient funds to meet costs of travel and accommodation for all participants. They do plan to seek additional funding in the second half of 2024 to meet all travel and accommodation costs, but the funding bodies to which they will apply first need to consider a full conference program. In the interim, conference organisers therefore request that applicants indicate their capacity to fund their own travel and accommodation costs.

Conference Organisers:

Professor Stefan Berger, Institut für soziale Bewegungen, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany.

Dr Iain McIntyre, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Professor Sean Scalmer, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia.