

Direct Democracy in the Era of Crisis: The Politics of the “Squares Movement”

The appeal of Greece to the support mechanism (IMF, EU, ECB) was followed by the “squares movement” (2011), which developed action against the austerity measures imposed by the, so called, first “memorandum”. A significant number of squares was occupied in Athens and in other Greek cities by a very massive and heterogeneous *multitude*, for almost two months. This movement seemed to reject the *politics of demand*, meaning the orientation towards the improvement of the present institutions under the hegemony of the state and mainstream political forces. On the contrary, it put a particular emphasis on the, so-called, *prefigurative politics* (or *politics of prefiguration*), which refer to its attempt to create “Here-and-Now” the political, social and cultural relationships that are compatible with its collective imaginary. It is quite characteristic that concerning the procedures of taking and executing collective decisions, this movement chose to function as a workshop of direct democracy, since it suggested that the consensual modes of horizontal organization can act as a foretaste of the pursued generalized self-management of social relations. In this context, the issues of identity and inequality proved to be of critical importance for the movement’s qualitative characteristics: On the one hand, the “squares movement” argued that political and social identities should not be acknowledged as such within its circles nor should any hierarchies be accepted, but rather called for the overcoming of both in the name of a “real” or “direct democracy”. According to this approach, members of far-left political parties who wanted to participate in the movement’s operation, by disclosing and maintaining their own political identities, were partly excluded from various processes. On the other hand, though, there were several exceptions of this “identity” rejection which brought forward the inner contradictions of this *multitude*. For instance, the invitation of professional panelists seemed to reintroduce the role of distinct identities on the basis of an additional dichotomy, that of the “experts” and the “non-experts”, hence reinforcing the construct and acceptance of informal hierarchies. These contradictions acquire an additional importance in the era of crisis, since the central political scene seems to be in a continuous turmoil, with massive movements, like the “squares” one, challenging and affecting the political status quo. Despite their rhetoric and their decentralized structures, power relations were practically reproduced in the interior of these loose networks sketching their operational and theoretical possibilities. It is mainly these paradoxes and perspectives of *prefigurative politics* that this paper wants to explore, based on participant observation and discourse analysis of several self-published documents of the “squares movement”.

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