

Direct Democracy in the Era of Crisis:

The Politics of the Squares Movement

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Abstract:

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 were occupied in Athens and other Greek cities by a very massive and promiscuous “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 the mainstream political forces. On the contrary, it put a particular emphasis on the, so-called, “prefigurative politics”, which refer to its attempt to create “Here-and-Now” the political, social and cultural relationships that are compatible with its collective imaginary. 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: Despite the relevant rhetoric and decentralized structures, power relations were practically reproduced in the interior of these loose networks sketching their operational and theoretical limits. It is exactly these limits and perspectives of prefigurative politics this paper wants to explore, based on participant observation and discourse analysis of several self-published documents of the squares movement.

Key-words: prefiguration, cooptation, square movement, multitude

Paper:

1. Theoretical framework

We would like to begin with the critical concept of “prefiguration”: This term describes all those models of political organization and social relations which are projecting in the present, “Here-and-Now”, the future society that the agents of a political group or movement are aiming for. This projection consists of an effortless incorporation of all the desires, practices and interactions into the present, thus constituting “an image from the future”, a foretaste of it.

According to David Graeber (2008), this procedure is nothing but the construction of a new society into the shell of the old one, instead of a direct subversion of the latter. Richard Day (2005), in his work *Gramsci is Dead*, approaches the politics of prefiguration through anti-hierarchical / anti-constitutional organizational structures that he calls “affinity groups”. The main characteristics of these groups are anti-hegemony, direct democracy, absence of transaction with the authorities via the “politics of demand”, and the actualization –“Here-and-Now”– of structures

alternative to the present sociopolitical reality. Day identifies the essence of the affinity groups with the values and practices of the, so called, new and newest movements which, in turn, draw on May '68 and the premier of the anti-global movement in Seattle in 1999.

However, “prefiguration” seems problematic as a term since its very etymology refers to an indefinite future, instead of the present. Therefore, the values and practices of this, so called, “Here-and-Now” are not fulfilled but in a future situation which, in the end, undermines the spontaneity of the present action. Hence, such movement practices of the “new” inside the existing walls of the “old” cannot escape the continuous dead-ends and contradictions created by their effort to bloom within an absolutely “hostile” reality which is still in force.

Another concept we are going to discuss is that of “cooptation”. This term describes the interaction between social movements and the central political scene which leads to the cooperation of the two, even to the integration of the former by the latter. However, this term conceals a dynamic which is not visible at once. In his article “The Problem with ‘Cooptation’”, Pablo Lapegna (2014) also discusses an alternative to the usual perception of this term, as absorption of the movements by the dominant political scene. Instead of considering the movement to be ineffective, due to the decisive effect of the political parties, we can also acknowledge the big pressure these movements exert on the parties, resulting in changing, to some extent, their policies).

2. From the “December 2008 Revolt” to the “Squares’ Movement”

A prominent expression of collective action in the era of crisis was this of the “squares movement”. From May to August 2011, the Syntagma Square, as well as several smaller squares in Athens, was occupied by a crowd of people who remained

there for sixty-five days. Similar incidents took place in thirty-eight other cities throughout Greece. The term “Aganaktismenoi”, which seemed to prevail, mainly because of its persistent adoption from the Mass Media, comes from a rough translation of the Spanish term “indignados” – which literally means “outraged”, “angry”. The self-determination of this movement is summarized, according to Maria Papapavlou (2015), to the term “Squares Movement”, which, among other things, may include a broader spectrum of emotions and practices.

According to several researchers (Kiouпкиolis 2014; Panierakis 2013; Roussos 2014), the “squares movement” was fueled by the political culture formed and socially diffused during the December 2008 revolt. Indeed, by looking into this movement, we can spot qualitative characteristics that, at first sight, refer to the spirit of “December”, like the opposition to both the political system and the intermediation of the official Media, as well as the extended use of non-hierarchical organizational models and new technological media (Metropolitan Sirens 2011).

Apart from the horizontal practices and the social networking, Papapavlou (2015) highlights, among other things, how the everyday life of the participants changed, the wide repertoire of action which included innovative means of expression, as well as the intensively improvising character of collective action. Moreover, focusing on the musical dimension of the squares mobilization, she showcased the improvising character of the artistic events as a direct reflection of the collective cultural improvisation which is necessary for the gathering of various and incoherent subjects that try to distant themselves from established identities, parties and cultural features.

Giannis Theocharis (2016), on the other hand, uses the term “indignados movement” and argues that social networks (Twitter and Facebook mainly) broadened the

perspectival horizon of collective action –based on their low cost and functional potential– since they contributed to the development of self-organized models of protest without the mediation of the traditional political groups, the international networking of the movement agents, the involvement of new subjects, especially a new type of protester without prior movement experience, the creation of an informal –nevertheless, armed and ready– coordination of internet contacts and the reinforcement of the civil society.

Therefore, apart from an aggressive stance towards the official institutions and the Mass Media, similarly to what happened in the “December ’08” revolt, the “squares movement” appeared to be more incoherent (in terms of politics, class and age), also because of its distinctive “time and space” dimensions. By taking place during the summer time and by hosting the assemblies and all relevant procedures in open space, namely in the city centers, the “squares movement” favoured a free, heterogeneous and massive participation (Douzinas 2011). Particularly in the case of Athens, the public argumentation in front of the parliament –which, righteously, implied a semiotic confrontation with the established parliamentary function– declared to be a non-violent democratic mobilization which refers directly to the ancient agora or the roman forum. Leontidou (2012) highlights, among other things, the interesting distinction between the terms “piazzas” and “squares”, with the Mediterranean “piazzas” emerging from “grass-roots” daily relations in public space, and the Anglo-Saxon “squares” resulting from “top-down” procedures, due to the central urban planning.

Hence, contrary to the violent December revolt, which with its erratic outbursts (destruction, looting) and its purposeful clashes is perceived as an overall attack on commercialization and the democratic polity, the “squares movement” is presented as

more mature (Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos 2011), as “the continuation and overcome of December 2008” (Douzinas 2011: 159).

3. The emergence of the “multitude”

In order to describe and interpret this inclusive, heterogeneous and interclass mobilization of “the squares”, several scholars (Douzinas 2011; Kioupkiolis 2014) refer to the term “multitude”, originally used by thinkers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) and Paolo Virno (2004). Hardt and Negri analyze the procedure this “multitude” is produced and particularly the rearrangement of the productive relations towards immaterial labor which is diffused throughout the everyday life, blurring the boundaries between working and free time and demanding the continuous acquirement of new knowledge, as well as the investment of the precarious workers’ innovation, communicative skills and emotional intelligence in favour of the capital’s development. This “multitude” is a pluralistic “flock” which, under certain circumstances, gathers temporarily and in terms of collective action utilizes the ways of its subjectification, networking and the horizontality dictated by the new labor conditions.

The “multitude”, by definition, rejects the political and party identities, since it emerges exactly on the edge of the overcoming of such dividing lines. “We are the 99%”, says the “Occupy” movement in the USA, exactly based on an analysis which argues that such a vast majority participates in the immaterial labor, in favour of an oligarchic elite which is symbolized with the rest 1% (Kioupkiolis 2014). In the case of the Greek “squares movement”, the heterogeneous “multitude” is a multiplicity – inevitably provisional– which does not constitute a single body, since it preaches the

opposition to the established political identities and mediation, excluding all parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties, their symbols and banners.

4. “Cooptation” into the political system

Nevertheless, the explicit renunciation of institutional representation does not entail the absence of interaction between the “Squares Movement” and the political parties. On the one hand, recalling Lapegna’s reverse use of “co-optation” (2014), there is an intense pressure on the PASOK government which, according to Douzinas (2011), almost led the prime minister Giorgos Papandreou to resign and Evangelos Venizelos, who kept a more “square-friendly” profile, to become Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

On the other hand, during the pro-crisis era, SYRIZA tried to develop a bond with the social movements by articulating a political discourse based on the distinction “we and they”, with this “we” including the productive forces, the youth, the precarious, the unemployed, and this “they” referring to the sociopolitical elite, the bipartisanship of PASOK and New Democracy, banks, the rich and the oligarchy (Katsambekis 2015).

What, nevertheless, changes with the crisis is the perspective: SYRIZA shifts from the creation of a sociopolitical opposition to neoliberalism and bipartisanship, to the constitution of a broader coalition which could potentially lay claim to the ruling power. This shift took place through a transvaluation of the above dividing line: From “Left/Right” to “supporters/opponents of the memorandum”. The politically highly-charged call to the “youth”, the “movements” and the “citizens”, was replaced by the obscure call to “the people”, meaning the anti-memorandum “multitude”,

although the old dividing line “Left-Right” was far from disappearing (Katsambekis 2015: 155).

5. Spatial dimensions of the mobilization in Syntagma Square

Several researchers highlight the spatial division between “upper” and “lower” square, with the steps serving as an informal borderline between the two different types of mobilization. The “upper square” was full of Greek flags, banners referring to the “glorious” past of the nation, slogans against the Members of the Hellenic Parliament –accusing them of treason– creating an overall atmosphere favourable to a far-right political rhetoric. A “frame analysis” (Neveu 2010: 210-212) could highlight that in the “lower square” the diagnostic framing is not only referred to the corrupted political status quo or the loss of sovereignty but also to the systemic crisis of the globalized capitalism in general, whereas the prognostic framing was not just limited to punishing the guilty but sought organizational models that could bring social justice back to the public agenda. Whereas in the “upper square” the motivational framing was linked to a moral legitimization drawing on emotions of “indignation” and national pride, in the “lower square” what emphasized was the potential and perspectives of collective action in terms of solidarity and direct democracy, within the context of the general assembly and the thematic workshops (Roussos 2014; Simiti 2016).

Nevertheless, the steps between the “two squares” should not be regarded as an inaccessible border between two utterly different worlds. Many subjects were moving from the one square to the other, participating –quite often– in the activities of both, while in moments of repression bonds of solidarity were created and common action was developed (Roussos 2014).

6. Political dimensions of the mobilization in Syntagma Square

Participation in such collective projects seems to rupture the neoliberal norm of individualization, as well as to challenge the idea of a homogeneous community defined by the necessary exclusion of “the other”. This is how the “multitude” appears to be a par excellence potential of inclusion and heterogeneity (Kallianos 2012).

According to Douzinas (2011), what the mobilization in Syntagma Square signifies is the end of the post-civil war schism between the victorious Right and the defeated Left, a schism which maintained the power correlations for almost sixty years. According to Papapavlou (2015), this spirit of connection and co-existence of the unbridgeable ideological differences is also reflected to some lyrics, sung in Syntagma Square according to which anarchists, neo-Nazis and riot policemen seem to co-exist.

Nevertheless, these optimistic approaches of the heterogeneous, although smooth, co-existence in the “multitude” context, do not seem to correspond to the real events that, from the very beginning, designate emphatically the inevitable outburst of the “political”, meaning the various conflicts and antagonisms that come up reasonably in every day social life, as defined by Mouffe (2005) and Schmitt (2007).

Hence, despite the songs describing “anarchists and neo-Nazis” to co-exist harmoniously, during the first days of the Syntagma square mobilization the far-right groups that tried to place their own banners at the “upper square” were ousted by antifascist protesters, closing the door –this way– to an official far-right presence (Simiti 2016).

In addition, even the unofficial far-right presence within the “multitude” was considered hostile resulting in the violent repulse of such individuals or small groups, as in the case of the 15th of June protest (Roussos 2014).

In such events an inescapable objection to these approaches that emphasize the importance of the “multitude’s” heterogeneity rises: How is it possible for identities with so conflicting interests and objectives –like anarchists and fascists, immigrants and racists, workers and bosses, homosexuals and homophobes, women and sexists– to co-exist smoothly? Focusing on the clash between the 99% and the elitist 1%, the discussion on “multitude” reduces collective action to economy ignoring the conflicting class and political interests within this 99%. At the same time, variables like those of sex, race, sexual orientation and others are treated as if they were secondary, despite the wide tradition of the identity movements and the whole discussion about intersectionality.

Putting on the table the issue of the reproduction of various contradictions and conflicts on the basis of the social web, several thinkers discuss the problem of the potential synergy of heterogeneous agents towards a common goal. Douzinas (2011), for example, refers to the project of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (1985) concerning the necessity of the creation of a hegemonic front where the demands of different subjects who project radical democracy will be articulated. He acknowledges the fact that the alternative proposal of such a hegemonic bloc rejects political ontology and that social space is created by hegemonic politics: An antagonism which goes through social space, dividing it, brings together all different groups, classes and interests. Therefore, taking into consideration the multiform fractures and antagonisms, hegemonic politics choose a central contradiction, a deep rapture in the social space, trying to promote it in a way that a coalition will be created around it.

According to this view, the members of this coalition must agree upon the fact that this clash is far more important than their corporatist and local interests.

It is obvious that the above central antagonism, appearing as the necessary and sufficient condition for the creation of a powerful hegemonic front, refers to the new dividing line of “memorandum/anti-memorandum”. Moreover, urging the members of the coalition to accept that this confrontation is much more important than the rest of their interests seems to have been heard, given the successive election results that followed the end of the squares mobilization (2012, 2014, 2015).

7. From the square to the Parliament: Prefiguring the contradictoriness of the “multitude”

Despite the declarations of overcoming political and partisan identities and of excluding politicians and party officials, the practice of the “squares movement” illustrated the opposite. Whilst there was the exclusion of the Communist Marxist Leninist Party (KKE M-L) whose members wanted to enter the square maintaining their banners and distinctive political discourse, there was at the same time an invitation to some expert speakers –on the 7/6/2011 economy panel and the 17/6/2011 direct democracy panel– who, although did not participate as politicians or party representatives, they would very soon become members of the future cabinet and parliament.

On the one hand, this development is connected to SYRIZA’s tactical change over social movements and its potential allies for seizing power. On the other hand, there was an emphasis on the role of the experts who gained a symbolic surplus value by participating in the Squares’ processes which took place before the Parliament, a symbol of the system the movement wished to overcome through the prefiguration of

direct democracy. This inexplicit spatial heteronomy would, in retrospect, seem pivotal since the aforementioned panel speakers did, very soon, take on ministerial responsibilities, relevant to their specialization, marking out –this way– the contradictory politics of this massive mobilization.

The inability to exceed the logic of representative democracy led the movement to political representation which was not just the outcome of a repression from the top, a collateral deflection or the “weakness to influence the decision-making centers” (Kavoulakos and Gritzas, 2015: 344), but a natural consequence of a contradictory prefiguration being prepared in the “square movement” processes.

Taking into consideration the immanently temporary, heterogeneous and contradictory character of the “multitude” as well as its concomitant inability to constitute a uniform and cohesive collectivity, the eventual representation by anti-memorandum parliamentary parties –despite its opposite ideological orientation– seems to happen rather easily. Hence, the suggestions for “strategical intelligence” and “tactical flexibility depending on the circumstances” in order to accomplish a conjunction of representation and autonomy, agonism and “multitude”, hegemonic and non-hegemonic politics, seems to become tangible in the massive square demonstrations for supporting the government’s negotiations with the European partners, during the first semester of 2015, and then lead to a dead-end with the permanent weakness of the governing coalition to support in practice the result of the referendum held on the 5th of July of that year.

8. Conclusions

The formation of new political subjects, the increasingly unpredictable electoral behaviour as well as the disruption of the bipartisan system, as observed in the era of

crisis, should not just be interpreted as simple, reflective reactions to the rapid developments taking place in the economic sphere, but also as the products of long-term movement elaborations gradually contributing to social delegitimization of the traditional parliamentary model, and the emergence of a new political approach, schematically coded as “prefigurative politics”.

The case of the “square movement”, with an effort to realize structures of direct democracy, is quite typical since it was argued that consensual forms of horizontal organization can confront the dominant political system “prefiguring” different types of coexistence and management of the common affairs.

Nevertheless, this very massive mobilization, taking place at an early stage of the Greek economic crisis, proved to be so broad that quite often the multiple political, class and social divisions lying under its “multitude”, and thus the variety and contradictions of its potential perspectives, were neglected.

Therefore, both the two-month coexistence of the “two squares” –with their obviously different ideological backgrounds– and the weakness to exceed the traditional politics that promote the role of the experts, were consequently linked to the final “cooptation” of the movement dynamics in the electoral field and the subsequent emergence of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition, given the strategic shift of SYRIZA from the invocation of the left radical struggles to that of a broader anti-memorandum front.

Such cases of collective action, like that of the “squares movement”, seem to be of great theoretical interest since, despite their expressed attempt to define their political traits in opposition to the dominant institutional framework, they interact with the latter drastically, provoking critical political and institutional transformations. In this context, something that could be further investigated is the importance of spatial

heteronomy in relation to political authority, as far as those objectives of collective agents that often remain unutterable and untold are concerned.

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