06 2014

Presentist Democracy

Exodus and Tiger’s Leap

Isabell Lorey

Translated by Aileen Derieg

The Actuality of Presentist Democracy

The representation- and identity-critical movements of occupying squares since 2011 have been inventing new forms of democracy for which I have proposed the term ‘presentist’. Presentist democracy does not mean simply the negation or the other side of political representation. The presentist is not in a dichotomous relation to re-presentation, but rather it emerges through a break with identitarian confrontations between ‘us’ and ‘them’, through an exodus from dualisms between refusal and engagement or consensus and conflict. In the midst of the presentist, such an exodus opens up a breach for transversal constituent processes.

It is the representation-*critical* movements that fundamentally question the way in which we are governed. Here, critique means rejecting in the present the historically evolved relations and developing new modes of subjectivations in this movement, in which critique becomes an attitude. The presentist concatenates this critical actuality with the becoming of democracy and the now-time of struggles.

In the limited context of the discourses of liberal democracy we encounter the perpetually same decision: *either* political representation and organisation *or* unpolitical presence as aesthetic and social immediacy, as the spontaneism of the movement resistant to sustainable organisation. Exodus from this old way of thinking means two breaks in the dramaturgy of time: first the break with chrono-political stages of development, which channel political action in the direction of traditional political representation. For this chrono-politics, following the tradition of Hegel, has little regard for the present, in order to maintain the promise of the coming democracy; secondly, the break with linear and continuing narratives of time (as called for by post-colonial theories), in order to practice an untimely and unpostponed non-Eurocentric becoming of democracy in the now-time. This becoming of new forms of democracy unfolds in a constituent process, which is directed less to a concrete goal within a foreseeable period of time, but rather far more fundamentally to the emergence of new political subjectivations. The central question is: How can we fundamentally change the existing political, social, and economic conditions, and at the same time try out forms of democratic self-government that were previously unimaginable?

The Perpetual Promise of a Coming Democracy

The current crises of representative democracy are part of the tradition of the bourgeois form of democracy and the aporias constituting it. One of these aporias arises from the constitutive separation between the state on one side and (civil) society on the other. Representative democracy is not to be separated from statehood and is regarded in this sense as 'political democracy', which is severed from society, from *all* who are supposed to be

represented – which Marx already criticized Hegel for. From the separation between the political and the social, which is considered a necessary political division of labour in bourgeois liberal democracy, the indispensable fact of political representation arises. Bourgeois democracy is thus trapped in a further aporia: representation is always exclusive, the aspiration to equality cannot be reached with this instrument, inequality is constitutive. Comprehensive participation is only to be understood as a future telos, as a principally endless expansion of participation rights that have to be fought for. The unfulfillable promise of coming democracy, of democratisation endlessly postponed until the future is the basis for this political democracy separated from the social.

The reverse side of this conception of the political, which is marked as unpolitical, applies to the particulary, situated presence that, reduced to authentism and immediacy, is shifted into the realm of the social and the aesthetic and is frozen in the present. In this kind of understanding of immediacy and presence as a negation of (political) representation, Hegel's handwriting is clearly evident, as he had decidedly little regard for the present. For him it is a moment that cannot be captured in our thinking, feeling, and acting, that is fleeting and ultimately without history.

Having little regard for the present is the foundation of a 'western' understanding of democracy, according to which the creative self-government of the indeterminate and heterogeneous *demos* must be warded off. For Marx, the actuality of the Paris Commune breaks with this logic, as it pursues no ideals oriented to the future. The self-government of the Commune releases elements of the new society in the present, elements that had already developed in the crisis of bourgeois domination. It is the social revolution that develops out of the bourgeois teleology of history and breaks with it, leaves it behind.

The Now-Time of Struggles

In his text 'On the Concept of History' Walter Benjamin describes bourgeois historiography as a historiography of the victors, which must be interrupted in its linear narrative of time that secures domination. The idea of history as a continuum primarily serves to reproduce domination relations, for which the precondition is that the present does not count. It is in revolutionary movements starting from the present that the break in this continuum first emerges – which Benjamin called a 'tiger's leap'. This tiger's leap is evident in the (class) struggles over material things as well as in the 'fine and spiritual things', such as courage, humour, and cunning, which emerge at the same time. These affects and affections continually call the victories of the rulers, the temporal continuity of historism into question and 'brush history against the grain'.

The struggles take place in the 'now-time' ('Jetztzeit'), but that does not mean they are untouched by the past. The now-time is specifically not a temporality that remains self-identical in itself, as an immediate presence, as an authenticity of body and affect, or as a pure emotional state. It is constructive temporality, in which the slivers of history are newly composed, in which history persistently emerges. The now-time is the creative midpoint, not a transition of the past into the future.

The Benjaminian now-time flees from humanist and idealistic notions of progress that draw from the idea of a civilisational development and colonizing temporality. This kind of projection into the future does not adhere to reality and, in Benjamin's view, weakens the present revolutionary strength. Rather than being fixed on progress, the now-time of struggles actualizes halted constellations of emancipation and does not continue on the paved

roads of oppression and violence: the present becomes political. A tiger's leap has the capacity to scent what is actual in a part of the past. It breaks with the continuity of history through a present leap into the past that tracks down what is actual there. If it is revolutionary, then it is a leap that starts under the conditions of the ruling class, breaks with its command, and goes beyond it.

A Constituent Process for Europe

Against this background of theories of democracy and the philosophy of history, the presentist in the context of current democracy movements signifies an exodus from the historism of liberal democracy as well as from chrono-political development paradigms, in which political institutionalisation always represents only a necessary *next* step for a movement. The new democratic practices emerge in the midst of a recurrent and climactic crisis of representative democracy that has turned itself into a neoliberal governing through precarisation and indebtedness. For the precarious, the connection with the past has been broken off in manifold ways, and the future cannot be planned. In the midst of this temporality broken open, there emerges a break with the notion that political action must be tied to representation, and at the same time a revolutionary desire for a new form of democracy that does not offer an empty promise of a permanently postponed future, but one that is already being experimented in the now-time.

From the perspective of a theory of presentist democracy, the current representation-critical democracy movements develop untimely transversal constellations. They pose no demands to governments for a further democratisation, but instead practice a new form of democracy in the now-time of struggles. The identity-

and representation-critical attitude of the movements of the precarious is not a passing mood, not a misunderstanding, not politically naïve. The heterogeneous precarious cannot be unified or organised according to the logic of identity. Because of the heterogeneity of the socio-economic modes of existence, negotiation processes and decision-making structures are needed, which channel the multiplicity of positions, but do not bring them to a standstill in the dual logic of inclusion and exclusion. The point is not so much to assemble '*all* individually', but rather that the many mutually inter-related singularities partake specifically not as separated individuals.

Affective relatedness and practices of solidarity – the fine and spiritual things that Benjamin speaks of – have constituted the democracy movements since the occupations of squares in 2011. From the beginning, social reproduction was newly organised, which plays an increasingly important role in the solidarity networks developing from the occupations in the fields of health, education, and housing. Feminist considerations on a reorganisation of the division of labour and reproduction take on a new actuality here, for instance those of the Madrid collective *Precarias a la deriva* on *cuidadanía*, a sociality based on care.

Unlike the bourgeois-capitalist tradition, being connected with others is not devalued here. More and more social fields are arranged through open assemblies, through modes of participation as egalitarian as possible, and through radical inclusion. With these instruments shared concerns in the communes or in educational and health institutions are self-organised and privatisations – also of common goods like water – are prevented. Solidarity networks form through and with those who are dropped from health insurance in the course of austerity policies, such as the social clinics in Greece or the network *Yo Sí, Sanidad Universal* in Spain,

which supports migrants. The successful and influential Spanish platform for those harmed by mortgages (PAH) and all the initiatives that collect food for the indigent do not see themselves simply as social aid services for those in need either, but rather as political practices for developing a new democratic way of living together.

New forms of political action are poised in the desire for a completely different democracy for a leap, for a tiger's leap, and they open up a breach for the concatenation of failed, halted, and successful revolutionary practices from the past: the procedure of drawing lots from ancient Greek democracy, in which equality is not regarded as a postponed normative aspiration, but rather as the actualisation of the equality of those who take part; the councils of the Paris Commune of 1871; the strategies of the Zapatistas from the 1990s; the instrument of horizontality from the Argentinian Revolution of 2001; identity critique from the (queer) feminist movements; the occupations of squares in Tunis and Cairo.

All of these components of the presentist becoming of democracy unfold in a constituent process. Through the exodus out of chrono-political and historical patterns of thinking, the democratic constituent process is no longer simply opposed to the established constituted power; it constitutes itself not simply as a counter-power, but rather as a new composition of space and time. Thus the instrument of horizontality does not signify the affirmation of the other side of vertical, hierarchical structures. Instead, horizontality presents itself, for instance in the complexity of the Argentinian revolutionary practice, as a starting point for experimenting the transversal concatenation with representation-critical practices, dependent mandates and delegations all the way to new political parties that are committed to horizontal assemblies. It is a matter of a heterogeneous and broad

experimentation with simultaneously occurring different constellations from new and past practices, which are constantly changing and newly composed, in order to impel the constituent process.

This constituent process does not emerge solely in the composition of heterogeneous practices and discontinuous rhythms of time, however. Presentist democracy is not primarily a question of participatory procedures. It depends to a crucial degree on how it newly unfolds as an attitude in the subjectivations – as a critical attitude of singularities that have always already been relational and social. In this attitude, differentness is no longer a reason for anxiety and devaluation, but rather a guarantee for transversal relationships and new democratic forms of subjectivation and self-government.

These kind of constituent processes can be observed in all the countries where the democracy movements have spread out with their solidarity networks into the respective societies. They will hopefully increasingly infect the areas of Europe that are not threatened by austerity policies to the same degree as southern Europe, but which must take a stand for a different Europe in the constituent process of a presentist democracy.