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Athens: Metropolitan Blockade - Real Democracy

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Metropolitan blockade is when urban space turns against itself, blocks the movements and the connections that sustain it, only to mobilise space as a direct means for political action. Metropolitan blockades are today the chinks in the wall of established politics through which we can get a glimpse of the future. It was the blockade of Syntagma square in Athens in 2011, which gave birth to a new frame of time and space in Greek politics, where future was again at stake, where future took place instantly in the discourses and practices in people's assemblies. The area of Syntagma square became a zone outside of representational political power and oligarchic democracy. From the perspective of established political power this turn of urban space against itself is conceived as process that creates (political) monsters. But from the perspective of those who have no part in a given order of political representation it introduces an ecology of real, militant democracy. And this happened in Syntagma during the months of the occupation. The practice of reclaiming urban space introduced a new temporality, a new feeling of persistence, a different zone of time which could then be filled with the invention of new practices of cooperation. In a situation where the collapse of the system

could happen any moment, where long-term plans were almost impossible, where urgency prevailed and each day threatened to be the upcoming apocalypse, many people in Greece ceased to feel fear. Instead they started to act in ways that produced fear. The people didn't seem to hold onto the promise of being saved by the Greek-European austerity prophets. 'We don't sell anything, we don't own anything, we don't pay' was one of the main slogans in Syntagma. They yearned for a breakdown of time that could set the clock back to zero in order to build up the new institutions of the people. It is the financial markets and the creditors who started to fear the masses reclaiming metropolitan space and remaking political institutions from below. Urban Panic.

Urban panic: when the fear of the metropolitan masses comes to inhabit the elites. As Jackie Orr reminds us panic from the perspective of social and political power was a destructive collective social phenomenon that had to become de-socialised and individualised. Biopower becomes psychopower. The metropolitan blockade reclaims panic as a genuine articulation of the masses. People disidentify themselves from the atomised panicking individual to become an urban monster that devours space. When panic is de-individualised and re-socialised it becomes the nightmare of the elites. In the new time and space of Syntagma the people not only became monsters because they threatened political power; they also became monsters because they underwent a process of transformation within themselves. They transformed through their own invention of a political dialogue that they called 'direct democracy'. The new mode of debate, decision making and the cooperative organisation of life in the square was a surprise even to themselves, it started producing a dangerous class. And beyond this, the processes in Syntagma didn't seem to have a clear target – they kept opening questions instead of trying to answer

them and bring the process of mobilisation to a closure. The desire for a new constituent power was not answered by defining a definite set of demands but by constantly seeking new forms of articulation. People knew that the reinvention of the future can only happen through patient collective work. To put it in the words of an activist in the square: 'we are patient, we are not talking about weeks, we are preparing for a struggle that will last years.'

In Athens on the 28th and 29th June 2011 the face of the monster was the cockroach. It was during the general strike just before a crucial vote of the Greek parliament to pass a drastic bill of new austerity measures brought by the PASOK government headed by Georgios Papandreou and Evangelos Venizelos. The main trade unions were forced to call the 48 hours general strike because of the pressure from Syntagma and some of their local branches, rather than because their central leadership was supporting this general strike. This was the square's general strike. It is indicative that the underground workers volunteered to break the general strike in order to run the trains and secure access to Syntagma. The aim was that masses of people surround the parliament – not just only for some hours during the rally but for two days through continuous actions. At the end, the parliament could only convene because riot police used massive tear gassing and hand grenades to disperse the crowds. The brutal police repression was encountered with equal determination: the people that had occupied the square over many weeks were equipped with gas masks, mouth protection, diving goggles, Maalox. They chanted 'We won't go before they go!' The police used an excessive amount of tear gas. As if they were cockroaches that they were trying to exterminate with insecticides. This was how the people described themselves: as cockroaches. Nelli Kambouri says that the more people were tear

gassed the more determined they were to block the metropolis. Cockroaches become resistant to insecticides. And that's how the people survived the contamination of the air, by becoming cockroaches, by changing their tactics and retreating from the main squares only to reappear again after minutes. Back and forth and constantly in new formations. This is the formula of metropolitan blockade. No social subjects as we know them, no political subjects of existing political representation. Cockroaches, just post-subjective actors in a constant metamorphosis of being-together. They then found themselves after two days again in the square, in one of the biggest assemblies in weeks, having shared the deep experience of the teargas and their own metamorphosis. They shared the small smiles of a new collective stubbornness: 'we have been beaten, we will go on, no matter what'. No demoralisation, no disappointment. It is when the logic of defeat or victory is replaced by resilience and patience. Cockroaches prevail and go on.

There was not an identifiable social subject in Syntagma square. Rather it was the square that became the actor. People carried placards claiming 'we are nobody' – the masses identified with the imagination of 'nobody', one who magically is everywhere and nowhere. The people, coming and going, dispersed, uncoordinated, the tents, the food, the kitchen, the drums, the PA system, the dogs, the burned trees, the heat, everything that was there and cooperated became part of this occasion. This configuration of the occasion was generated through the immediate process of living together and instituting together in the square. Traditional left organisational habits became irrelevant. The left was overhauled by the unfolding events, they were temporarily confused and were at the end forced to exit or rethink their practices. Traditional forms of representation started to break down.

The ruins of representation. One could see all these banners attached to every possible post on the square that speak a different language than the language one is used to. Parties and flags of big organisations and the main trade unions were forbidden. The usual codes of representative organisation were re-ordered and alternative ways were created in order to block the intrusive and at times toxic political establishment. The semantic interfaces of the square were sometimes poetic, sometimes declarative, sometimes threatening. Five gallows were set up to face the parliament. Two big helicopter figures referred to the circulating story of the flight of the then Argentinean president Fernando de la Rúa in 2001. Papandreou and Venizelos should go. And many more. *¡Que se vayan todos!* All of them must go!

Every politician must go. What is described as a wild and non-political turn of a whole generation signified exactly the opposite. That politics happen outside of its established institutions. A banner on Syntagma reads 'Now they fear us'. Urban panic: the transfer of fear from the de-individualised and de-subjectified masses to the political elites. 'The days of plenty are over'. 'Your days are numbered'. Since the beginning of the economic crisis parliamentarians in Greece avoid going public, they fear verbal and sometimes even physical abuse by passers-by. The people in Syntagma did not propose a dialogue; they didn't invite politicians to negotiate. There were no claims for reforms. State institutions were not addressed. Representation broke down as the square became alive and changed its shapes and scale. The dialogue was refused because there was nobody worth addressing in the political system – belief in the power of the parliament and the established parties to contribute to a commune bonum had died. Politics happened outside of the established institutions, they were reinvented beyond representation and reborn in parallel

organisational structures. Thus political discourse of Syntagma circumvented addressing directly power – the squatters preferred to talk among themselves.

Rescaling the square. Metropolitan blockade is not so much about dissecting, separating and cutting off access to urban space but about multiplying space, reconnecting different parts of the city to each other, creating layers of rest and action. The organisation of the area in front of the parliament was divided into the 'upper square' and the 'lower square'. The upper square consisted of the forecourt of the parliament building and the main street passing in front of it. This street was blocked for more than two months. The lower part, which is also physically lower than the forecourt and the road, is the actual Syntagma square. Although the people floated between the two parts of this area, there was a distinction between the affect and practices which took place in the upper and the lower square. The upper, the one closer to the parliament, was where people confronted power, rallied, threatened the existing political system and parliamentarians. The lower square was the space of the makeshift camp, the space of the assemblies, the space where the infrastructure of the popular uprising was maintained. The lower square was the space of organisation, the upper square was the space of direct confrontation.

Syntagma and in particular the upper part was a passage. People come and go, perform the direct assault of the politics of established political parties. Some say that more than three million people found themselves there during the two months of these events. Direct confrontation takes the shape of anger: verbal abuse of democracy, of the police and the politicians. What they shout is profoundly vulgar, often very sexist, sometimes nationalist. Pensioners, people forced to poverty, high school students, unemployed, precarious workers, people unhappy with the political

system of the country. As Maro Kouri says, Syntagma became the place where people went for their Sunday promenade, they walk with their kids and grand children gesticulate angrily against the parliament and the police, swear, eat ice cream, pass by, come back. All this is a glimpse of reclaiming freedom from a political system that failed to represent anything meaningful to them. This is a new form of participation in action, the space where those who have no part block metropolitan space and the mainstream political language in order to reappear on the political scene. The language of those who have no part sounds incompatible to mainstream politics and our own political aesthetic, but it is the language which extends the space of action and magnifies the space of possibility as it becomes less and less an articulation of anger and more and more a performance of freedom, of real democracy.

The lower square was the area of the camp. And it was also where the assemblies took place; it was called the 'lower parliament', the other to the official parliament. The lower square was the point that connected Greece to the powerful experiences of the 2011 Arab revolutions. The lower parliament connects Syntagma to this cycle of metropolitan struggles along the common Mediterranean space. In the same way as in the Puerta del Sol the metropolitan blockade of Athens and the occupation of Syntagma was related to the emergence of new forms of experimenting with democracy. The lower parliament was a non-representational assembly. It refused to elect representatives and used the imperceptibility of direct decision making as a new political tactic against the media and the political system that always tries to find a representative, a spokesperson or a coherent political programme. And most importantly it refused to develop a system of permanent spokespersons leaving established political power and media

perplexed and helpless in addressing the monster in the square. Organisation matters.

The organisation of the assemblies was the core of the life of the lower parliament in Syntagma. The assembly took always place at 9pm every day. The assembly was the only constitutive space. There is no other collective instance that decisions about the occupation were made. The agenda of the general assembly included only these topics and issues which had been decided in previous assemblies. All proposals for including specific issues in the agenda that were discussed during an assembly and in addition all propositions which were submitted during the day in written form to the administrative office of the assembly were sent to the thematic working groups before they reached the assembly. These working groups compiled all propositions and returned them to the assembly in the form of resolutions for debate and decision. The final resolutions were put for approval or rejection to the assembly the latest at midnight so that everybody could be included (many people worked or had to travel far to return to their homes). Everybody had the right to speak and once the resolutions had been presented to the participants everyone who wanted to speak could draw a lot and wait for her turn to talk. Usually there were 80-100 presenters every evening until the vote of the resolutions and the participants every day were more than 2000 people. Although there were important drawbacks to this procedure, it has been decided that this is the most appropriate organisational form since this would preclude any attempts to change the agenda and reduce the danger of interventions of parties or other structured groups. It could be also much more effective than consensus decision making which has dominated radical forms of political organisation and proved ineffective during the events in Syntagma. After the vote in midnight the assembly continued as an open

discussion forum. The organisation of the assembly drew upon the extensive support of people outside of it. The main assembly was the visible peak of real democracy but real democracy was happening far beyond the assembly itself in the fusion of space and people though the metropolitan blockade: a new ecology of metropolitan existence.

The ecology of metropolitical struggles and the experimentation with 'direct democracy' was maintained through a series of working groups that were responsible for dealing with practical issues. There were thousands of people registered in each working group. These people were mobilised according to the needs of each specific task of each working group. The only possible contribution to this ecology was through active participation. The assembly and the square did not have a cashier and monetary contributions were not allowed because it was decided that there are more effective ways for support and because the camp could maintain its existence by establishing its own cooperative forms of exchange. Any contributions to the camp could be only material, from food to medicaments to pencils to PA systems. Among the many working groups maintaining the ecology of real democracy were: technical support, resource management, culture, cleaning, administrative support, food provision, translation services, respect and protection, communications, multimedia, legal team, health, neighbourhood work, bank for exchanges of services, transport and postal services, self-control group etc. All groups met every day at 6pm following an open assembly and the transport and postal services group was responsible for distributing the proposition of each working group to the other groups and to the general assembly. Besides these working groups there were a series of thematic sub-assemblies that discussed crucial social and political issues such as economy and crisis, work and unemployment,

education and universities, health and insurance, environment, technology, solidarity, disability, justice and legal issues, analysis of debt etc. These sub-assemblies met every day 7pm-9pm and in some of them hundreds of people used to participate. All assemblies and working groups were open to everybody, the only restriction was that nobody had the right to represent a working group and speak in its name.

The virtual politics of the metropolitan blockade is self-organised and digitized. The square decided to block the entry of mainstream media into the camp and the procedures of the lower parliament. The assembly and the camp could only be filmed by the camp's communications working group and its media team which had up to 38 members during the moments of intense action and during the police siege in the days of the general strike. The main decisions of the assembly were communicated through the media team and on the website of the camp www.real-democracy.gr. Central role in the organisation of actions and mobilisation of participants played the social media – the blockade of Syntagma in May 25th was circulated through facebook and twitter; life-streams covered every general assembly for those who could not attend in person; an online-radio spread news and the resolutions of the square. The organisation of the square and its actions was collective, a-subjective, digitized. In Syntagma, the escape from representation met the use of socio-technical means in order to create possibilities for alternative forms of self-organisation. As somebody in the square said: 'the system is nearing its end – let's download the future here and now.' What was common to all these different forms of organisation – the direct democracy of the main assembly, the working groups, the self-organised non-representational mediatisation of the lower parliament – was the belief that the urgency of the country's situation needed to be

encountered with some form of hesitation or resilience and patience; with a careful and deliberate pace, very different to the pace of imposed urgency and unavoidability that has been used by the PASOK government to legitimise its sweeping economic and social reforms.

The experimentation with speed during everyday action and decision making is crucial for the success of a metropolitan blockade. In the general conditions in which Syntagma took place slowness and carefulness were regarded as the necessary temporal mode that could allow the reclaiming of established politics. Many saw in the long procedures and the lengthy and often tiring debates during the assemblies – especially after the destruction of the camp by the police and the city council of Athens – an obstacle to the efficacy of the camp. Many thought that this paralysed the agility of the camp and made it unable to act. But the opposite is the case. Real democracy was practised not as another form of parliamentarian representation operating in the same temporal coordinates as the official 'upper parliament'; rather real democracy happened in Athens in 2011 when the metropolitan space was actually used in alternative ways that escaped organised political power to allow for staying in the heart of the unfolding events and simultaneously allow for a space that one can think and imagine these events differently. What the camps and the metropolitan blockades that erupted in Greece and in many other countries in 2011 did, was to create the very possibility of cultivating alternative ways of being and alternative practices of politics rather than to set up quickly assembled forums for delivering solutions to existing problems. These camps revealed a potential: the possibility to perceive and act differently in the current conditions. Their main effect was less a political one and more of an ontological nature: the metropolitan blockades in 2011 trained – literally – our social

and political senses anew. They had a quasi radical pedagogical purpose rather than a direct political function of becoming the space to articulate fixed sets of political demands. It is, in the words of Bourdieu, this 'still pedagogy' which the camps as such exercised in 2011 that could be considered as the most crucial element of these heterotopic social movements.

The lower parliament was the example par excellence of a heterotopic constitution of metropolitan space. These blocked and reclaimed spaces had a different temporality which undercut the possibility for becoming colonised by violence and homogenisation. For example, fascists tried many times to intervene in the assemblies, but it was the very procedures itself, the slowness, the speaking by drawing a lot, the transversality of topics that was undercutting their presence. It was less a decision based on the consensus of the assembly itself to block them from participating as 'fascists' and more the very organisational structure, its variable paces and its apparent slowness in relation to mainstream political processes that deterred people who wanted to participate in the assembly with fully preconceived ideas about its outcomes. It is characteristic that despite the attempts from fascists and nationalists to exclude migrants for the lower square this did never happen. Unlike the 15M movement in Spain, migrant street vendors were permanent inhabitants of the camp. Even more than that, many of them were staying in the camp because it was a relatively safe place for them and because also they profited from selling their goods in the most central and crowded part of Athens. Real democracy in the square was not just a different space, it had also a different temporality that made inhabiting a new terrain and co-habiting the square possible in non-normative and predefined ways.

Something similar happened during the December 2008 insurrection in Athens. What connects the 2008 events and the metropolitan blockade in 2011 is urban panic on the side of the established political class, the moment, as we said earlier, that panic is de-subjectified, re-socialised and returns back to the elites. December 2008 was probably the first occasion in Greece for many decades that brought back the practice of the metropolitan blockade as a way to remake society and politics. The December insurrection destabilised the typical transfer of power from the subject to the transcendent power of the state and its main political institutions. It re-inscribed into the social imaginary and political practice the idea that blocking the city – if it is a collective and a-subjective affair – can have a deep impact on how politics is exercised. It can even create a completely new stage on which politics can be thought anew. Probably the most crucial influence that the December 2008 events had, was to educate a new generation of activists to the meaning and practice of the metropolitan blockade. It is as if the December events were aiming to prepare a new generation of people for encountering austerity and political oppression that followed few years later. The a-subjective collectivity that destroyed shops, cars and banks in 2008 returned back in 2011 with a much greater experience of how to organise the metropolitan blockade in the new conditions of the crisis and the destructive austerity measures. In the dark and eroding conditions of everyday life in 2011 the practices of destruction of the 2008 events weren't enough for encountering the crisis. They transformed into practices of organising new institutions, most importantly Syntagma. The protagonists of real democracy came mainly from the unorganised world of precarious people, and the metropolitan blockade became the way to establish a different ecology of existence. Despite the fact that the austerity bills were finally passed by the Greek parliament and that the last

tents were cleared by police soon after that, the metropolitan blockade of Syntagma remains a popular embodied experience of many people in Greece. We don't know if, when and how it will resurface but what we know is that the metropolitan blockades of the camps in 2011 and occupy movement is not about defeat and victory: 'From a military point of view, we could take the parliament' said one militant activist in the square, 'but no one among us has a use for this building'. For everyone that expected the movement of the 2011 metropolitan blockades to articulate clear demands and solutions to the crisis we could say that for decades now we have lost the capacity and the space in which such solutions and demands can be produced. The metropolitan blockades did just that, they allowed for people to act and think and connect to each other and practice again politics. The precarious of Syntagma didn't have a use for their parliament: they were looking for something else, much more difficult to grasp, they were preparing for a long process of inventing new radical democratic forms of life.