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Nothing, Silence, Multiplicity. A Molecular Revolution in Serbia

Gerald Raunig

Nutopian International Anthem. At the end of the first side of *Mind Games*, John Lennon's 1973 LP, there is a track that is only four seconds long. It is not possible to say exactly whether Nutopian International Anthem consists of nothing or of an infinite number of inaudible particles, a brief multiplicity of silence. In any case, *N-utopian* implies, on the one hand, the negation of utopia, insofar as utopia expresses nothing more than the wait for a better future, a perpetual postponement without something ever really happening. Instead of postponing the revolution to never-never day and to nowhere-place, the nutopian is about fulfilling the promises of past resistance, about our secret appointment with struggles from a suppressed past, and, above all, about their actualization in the here and now. Here, assembling, we wait for what was, in extended present time. At the same time, Nu-topia also means the topos, the place, the space of the Nu. Nu is the small gate in which all future is disenchanted and plunges into the past, and this present is much more than just a point, it is an expansion of the joint, a becoming space of the moment. And from this perspective John Lennon’s Anthem is a hymn to the extended present time and to the event space of the Nu.

These days, a pop musical reference to the Nutopian International Anthem seems to be resounding, when an entire album entitled “Is This What We Want?” was released end of February, 2025, whose 12 tracks consist of recordings of empty studios and performance spaces. It is a declaration of protest by 1,000 British musicians, including Kate Bush, Annie Lennox and Cat Stevens, against changes in the legal regulations on the use of their music for the training of artificial intelligence models. But instead of appreciating these various silences and the multiplicity of nothingness, captured on tape, and instead of listening more closely in/to the silent spaces, the initiative only projects the creative void that would arise if AI were not put within due legal limits.

A far more radical retake of the Nutopian International Anthem has been taking place and repeating itself since November in Novi Sad, as the socio-poetic component of a molecular revolution in Serbia, whose protests have spread to 200 Serbian cities and towns over the past three months, mobilizing millions of people. The trigger event was the tragic death of fifteen people when the 300-ton canopy of the pompously reopened Novi Sad train station collapsed on November 1st last year. Starting three weeks later, on November 22nd, the number of events in which people have come together en masse, remaining in silence for fifteen minutes, has been constantly increasing. Initially, it was the students in Novi Sad and Belgrade who tried out this assembly of silence, then also other population groups such as farmers, taxi drivers, pensioners, bikers, lawyers, nurses, artists and many more declared their solidarity with the students, and slowly the 15 minutes became an everyday ritual throughout Serbia. The protesters block the entrances to universities, schools and other institutions, streets, intersections, and bridges over the Danube. Standing still, keeping still, holding still, they bring traffic to a standstill, initially every

Friday from 11:52 to 12:07, fifteen minutes for the fifteen dead, and later repeatedly at the start of blockades that sometimes lasted for days. Silence as a sign of respect for the victims, but also most appropriately expressing the multiplicity of the protest. Neither the unity of a monophonic choir, nor the oneness of an individual leader's voice, the choir of silence has the power of multiplicity, of many silent voices, of condividuality.

Fifteen minutes of blockade, silence, suspension, these are means of announcing the fifteen dead as exemplary victims of rampant state corruption, but they are also means of a molecular revolution that is not directed at or against specific rulers, but wants to change the world in a more fundamental way, namely - and in the words of the protesters' central slogan - in such a way that the "institutions do their job." To adapt a phrase by Walter Benjamin: the protesters have no interest in taking over the state apparatus or simply replacing its actors with others, they want to completely reshape the state apparatus, change its foundations, make it function in a radically different way.

Depoliticization

I would like to refer to two texts that have recently described and interpreted this new movement in Serbia in more detail, to then add some reflections on the nutopian silence as a multiplicity of the molecular revolution.

The first voice comes directly from Novi Sad, and it is interesting not for reasons of authenticity, but because it is a situated and yet somewhat distant voice. Branka Ćurčić, activist and member of the *Grupa za konceptualnu politiku* (Group for Conceptual Politics), writes in her essay on the "Student Protests and Changes Without

Politics," that the protesters are, above all, "widely rejecting politics or, at the very least, refusing to recognize their actions as politics." This is the common thread of Branka Ćurčić's questioning, the recurring leitmotif of the movement to proceed without politics, to reject politics, to refuse politics, even to depoliticize.

The most obvious level of this rejection of politics is shown in the students' brusque refusal to see the incumbent politicians as the target group of their demands: "The students refuse to compromise with the authorities, rejecting every invitation to dialogue." The protesters show no interest in the moves and reactions of political actors, especially President Aleksandar Vučić, whether they are threatening or accommodating or even embracing. What is more, they do not see him as a contact person at all, because they deny him any competence in jurisdiction and institutional change.

The protesters also show no interest in the opposition parties, which have proved increasingly incapable of countering the authoritarianism of the government over the past decade. The idea that the opposition could represent social protests is, therefore, not only conceptually but also practically impossible.

And this critical position on representation is also cultivated internally: “The students reject the idea of representatives or spokespersons, viewing this both as a demonstration of their unity and equality and as a measure to protect individuals from being singled out and potentially targeted in the public. The consequence of this is that students speak little in public and do not care to make an effort to articulate their statements.”

Branka Ćurčić interprets this non-representationist attitude of the students as a distancing from all types of organizations. She writes:

“This rejection of politics largely reflects an effort to distance themselves from political parties, and increasingly, from non-governmental and activist organizations as well, i.e. from any organization. What is new, however, is that students are now even distancing themselves from one another over concerns about the ‘influence of politics,’ demanding from themselves a depoliticization of the protest.” Affirming depoliticization is ambiguous, and not only for the author, when a different "depoliticization" seems to have become the mainstream of capitalist societies, when the demand for the rule of law takes on a reductive-legalistic form, when the adoption of national symbols threatens to become nationalistic, and yet it is worth enduring the ambiguities: instead of accusing the protesters of political naivety, we should recognize their conceptual radicalness, which sometimes goes hand in hand with tactical cleverness, but is never limited to it.

That is why all possible situated forms of solidarity with the protests are important, as advocated by Branka Ćurčić, "from our standpoint as former activists whose work with people ended with the disappearance of *our* mass political situations," and this raises the question for "us," too: What is "our" relationship, what is the relationship of other struggles, other generations, previous movements and other geopolitical situations to and in the current protests and blockades? In the worst case, a paternalistic relationship that understands depoliticization and problematization of the political in all possible forms as a mere precursor to politics, which necessarily implies growing up and arriving in the molar politics and economy of machinic capitalism. In the best case, we are, in Branka Ćurčić’s formulation, “friends of the student protests,” and can then affirm the struggles as practices of a permanent immaturity, in the sense of non-agreement with

patriarchal normality, as never arriving in molar politics, as a permanent assembly of multiplicities and micro-socialities, on all scales.

A New Politics

The second voice I would like to quote comes from the not too distant Ljubljana, with the authoritative sound of the universal intellectual, but with a political-theoretical intuition that goes in the right direction. While Branka Ćurčić seems to implicitly point to a problem or an ambiguity of the term "depoliticization," the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes that “the protesters’ ‘apolitical’ stance creates the conditions for a new politics, rather than for another version of the same old game. To achieve law and order, the tables must be cleared.” Radical rejection of politics as a basis for a new politics, and all of that to arrive at transparency and sound institutions? In his text, Žižek lists the students' harmless demands: “To that end, they are insisting, narrowly, on transparency about the Novi Sad train station’s renovation; access to all documents on the accident; a dismissal of charges against those arrested during the first anti-government protest in November; and criminal prosecution of those who attacked student protesters in Belgrade.” Not only do these demands sound harmless, they are not really radical either, they seem to distract from what is happening at the molecular level. Thus, they undermine the often recurring media cliché of youth protests not knowing what they want and, when they finally make concrete demands, falling into the trap of representation, with all the aspects of personalization, narcissism and media spectacle.

In reality, however, the shift is not taking place at the level of demands and proposals, but rather at the level of actions, especially

their forms of assembly, which aim at a far more radical re-functioning of the institutions. Žižek writes: “They are refusing to play politics by the existing (mostly unwritten) rules. They are pursuing fundamental changes to how basic institutions work.” The “apoliticism” of the students is therefore not aimed at a kind of reformism that bypasses those in power and turns to an autonomous sphere of pure institutions. It wants to transform the institutions from their foundations, on the basis of the students’ own experiences with plenums and assemblies.

Žižek also brings into play the similarity with two current modes of subjectivation in China, both of which express passive resignation, under the slogan *tang ping*, "lying flat" in the face of the psychological and physical demands of working life, and under the slogan *bai lan*, "letting rot" this very life and world. Both are movements away from blindly carrying on, towards a conscious move into nothingness. Becoming nothing, nihilism and nothingness make sense as forms of resistance in extremely extractivist forms of capitalism and authoritarianism, but Bartlebyian formulas of resignation and withdrawal tend to let the subjectivations slide into radical individualism. The difference here is, on the one hand, that the Serbian protests are all about collective forms of resistance, but also that their specific nihilism means that nothingness is not understood as emptiness, but rather as the fullness of multiplicity. The blockades, the letting politics run into the void, the refusal of representation are all expressions of this condividual nihilism.

The condividual choir of silence

Above all, however, these practices correspond to the return of the choir of silence, following John Cage’s ‘4:33’ from 1952, John

Lennon's 'Nutopian International Anthem' from 1973 and also the ten minutes of silence that Yoko Ono had held as a vigil after John Lennon's death on December 13, 1980 in many places around the world. On New Year's Eve 2024, the students held a silent vigil at midnight, in Belgrade, raising their phone lights to the sky in memory of the victims. This New Year's protest, which even the fireworks of the Belgrade Waterfront could not really disrupt, was organized under the slogan "There is No New Year, you still owe us the Old One."

Such a form of assembly in silence and multitudinal abundance is neither to be understood as a depoliticizing threat to democracy nor as a basis for a future "new politics." It is a condensation of multiplicity, and at the same time its spread as molecular revolution, in meetings, joint actions, relays and demonstrations. As Branka Ćurčić writes: "Change is occurring on a different level —outside the realm of government and power—effectively sidelining the issue of elections, which has dominated political discourse for years. In other words, what seems to be happening is a gradual and unspoken taking over of the power (of the state?) through the erosion of its legitimacy." "Change outside the realm of government and power" is the molecular aspect of this revolution - a social movement that is not interested in the molar aspects of power, that does not fall into the trap of representation, that does not believe in the necessity of homogenization into a unity.

While the movement strives for inclusive terminology in its rare communiqués and statements, consciously avoiding overly creative linguistic invention, there is nevertheless a term in its written statements that refers to the molecular. In their communiqué of March 10, the students call on the entire population of Serbia to transition from their massive solidarity to an imitative movement

of self-organization in all places. In this appeal, they take up a term that already played a certain role in Yugoslav self-management: *neposredna demokratija*, often misleadingly translated as direct democracy, in reality it means insisting on democratization without deferral. Democracy now, *democracia real ya*, democratic practice right in this moment, an immediate democratization that tolerates no deferral, undeferred and undeferable. "Everything we students have achieved so far is thanks to self-organization based on the principles of immediate democracy and the plenary session." This is the current practice of the students in their assemblies and other forms of action, but it was also a central concept for Yugoslav self-management in the form of assemblies of workers and tenants, housing and workers' councils, local communities, and delegate systems, and it has even seeped into today's Serbian legislation: In their communiqué, the students emphasize that "Article 67 of the Law on Local Self-Government stipulates exactly what the forms of immediate participation of citizens in the implementation of local self-government are." And in this spirit, the communiqué ends with an invitation to the entire population "to turn to local self-governments and organize themselves independently according to the model of immediate democracy – through the legally established body of the Citizens' Assembly."

What is negated here, in all the subtle affirmation, reference, and consideration of the concrete legal situation, is *sredina*, the middle, the mean, the mediation, and this also means the political party as mediator, and its leaders and bureaucrats as mediators, advocates, representatives. *Neposredan*, *ne-po-sredan* is precisely that which is realized without mediation, immediately, without delay. The territory that emerges here is the space of the undeferable. It takes its time, expanding in a Nu and in the long time of the assembly.

In view of the advance of “illiberal democracy,” in view of authoritarian-autocratic floods, in view of fascistization on a global level, this molecular revolution is more than just a vague hope. It is a bundling of flight lines that can be taken up in other places, in all their massiveness and multiplicity. May the 15 minutes of silence spread further, may multiplicity condense in many places, may nutopia actually become international. Just as in German, the word "Nu" corresponds to the instant, the moment and the event, for us, who are humming a Nutopian International Anthem again today and thereby composing a Nutopian International, it is not about waiting for a better future. What we are waiting for in a Nu is the articulation of today's resistance with what was, in those minor struggles that were always swept away by the victors' historiography. We stand still in a Nu, in remembrance and in resistance. We shut down in a Nu, in remembrance and in resistance. We extend the Nu to the blockade, be it for a long 15 minutes or even much longer. In the extended now-time of Nu and in the event-space of nu-topos, revolutionary patience becomes revolutionary impatience, nothing is multiplicity, every choir of silence expresses the condividuality of protest.

Branka Ćurčić, “Student Protests and Changes Without Politics”, https://transversal.at/transversal/0325/curcic/en

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