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Squares in Movement

Legitimacy Crisis and the Role of Contemporary Communication Practices

Governing elites seemed to believe not long ago that they had at last reached the absolute capitalist utopia: money begets money without any interference from often disobedient and unpredictable real people as well as always problematic production procedures. This euphoric optimism of the governing elites is, however, fading quickly as the supposedly flawless machine of profit got stuck in the mud of a socioeconomic crisis much more severe than the periodical ones. Those real people who necessarily make this machine work are again visible: the crisis of loans has to do with real populations, their behavior, collective and individual, and it directly affects economic processes, disturbing plans and falsifying future projections. In a period of a supposedly absolute predominance of the market laws, in a period when politics has been replaced by management, problems of governability arise: “those below” have to be reintegrated to a system that, caught in its own paroxysmal utopia, thought it could do without them. As so many social eruptions and statistics show, people are losing their faith in a system that presents itself as a mechanism of potential wealth distribution to which they expect to have access.

It is certainly too early to say that dominant policies have entered into a crisis of no return, but we can observe in various parts of the world two interconnected series of phenomena that deeply affect what we could diagnose as a crisis of legitimacy: The first includes phenomena that have to do with the role of information and communication in destabilizing collective...
faith in the system. From the Latin American movements and uprisings (as the Argentinazo, or the people’s anticoup mobilizations in Venezuela) to the Arab revolutions (especially those in Tunisia and Egypt), including the “indignant” square occupations in European cities, communication and information exchanges through social media and interactive communication devices have played a key role in molding collective action. The second series includes phenomena that have to do with community-oriented or community-inspired actions that, often quite distinct from neocommunitarian neoconservative ideologies, create or even reinvent communities in the making. These are often unstable but always expandable communities in movement.

Both series of phenomena converge in practices of redefining and reappropriating public space. Let us first examine practices primarily connected to new forms of communication. These practices create, use, and disseminate information through new and old communicative media, but they are not practices of information exchange only. These practices “mark” the city through the information exchange they make possible. It is a process of marking out specific places through inscriptions that not only disseminate information (as in the case of wall writings or graffiti) but also connect places and create shared points of reference for specific emerging collectivities that recognize them. This happened, for example, during the December 2008 youth uprising in Athens, when a “migrational” stencil art spread all over the city center and condensed the uprising’s messages into emblematic images. Some of these markings of the city’s body were short-lived, while others survive—inscriptions over other inscriptions, messages and traces in combat with other traces.

Another important characteristic of those new urban practices of public space appropriation and collective dissent is that they use information exchanges with the aim of potentially coordinating those who participate in the exchanges. Information is not a flow, in this context, but it is directed toward recipients and returned as a promise of mutual involvement.

The call for the first meeting in Athens’s Syntagma Square, which borders the Parliament House, was issued in Facebook on May 20. Two or three young men had an idea for a rally that would give people the opportunity to express their indignation about the economic crisis. There would be no political parties, no organized initiatives, no pre-agreed demands, no planning—it was just a call. After it was circulated through social media, it had an amazing effect: thirty thousand people gathered on May 25, 2011, in Syntagma Square. Everyone was simply astonished, including the Left

and the anarchist movement. This movement was called the aganaktismeni movement by those who made the initial call as well as by the media.4

The call, of course, did not come out of nowhere. The Tunisian revolution had already ignited unexpectedly. People saw on television and in the newspapers images of common people in revolt. And then came the Tahrir Square occupation in Cairo. Suddenly the Arab world exploded into a stage of public expression with no apparent expression, with no recognizable ideological characteristics, with no leaders. Inventive, self-organized, and determined people took it to the streets.

The Spanish were the first to incorporate this message in their own social context. Indignados occupied major city squares and demanded their lives back. Calls to action made via social media managed to bypass formal opposition parties and trade unions, producing events that gave everyone the means to express their increasing anger against neoliberal austerity policies.

The Spanish indignados and the Greek aganaktismeni exchanged solidarity messages and loosely coordinated their protests on certain mobilization days. Messages were transmitted through the Internet and were projected on outdoor screens in Syntagma. Tunisian and Egyptian activists were invited to speak in large assemblies, and they were welcomed with great enthusiasm. A loose network of self-organized, communicating, and yet differentiated initiatives developed from this exchange among the squares. And, of course, alternative information media, including the active multimedia team at the Syntagma occupation, contributed to a feeling that things happening around the world have common characteristics, express common attitudes and dreams, and share a common demand for real, direct democracy.

Rumors and gossip used to be forms of information exchange, which, in traditional societies, participated in the reproduction or refashioning of existing social and personal relations. But these communities were neither challenged by those “media” nor created by them. In contemporary societies, however, interactive technologies mediate the creation of communities of collective action that are not necessarily communities of people sharing a common identity or common values. Those are communities in movement, communities developed through common action and the sharing of public space.5

Opportunities are not created by interactive media. Instead shared information and meeting points bind people. In a curious reversal, the reterritorialization of politics happens through the active mediation of deterriori-
alizing communication technologies. Communities become located in urban space and develop by redefining and reappropriating their surroundings.

"Common Space" as Threshold Space

Communities in movement form their own space. This is not the public space as we know it, space given from a certain authority to the public under specific conditions that ultimately affirm the authority's legitimacy. Nor is it private space, if by this we mean space controlled and used by a limited group of people excluding all others. Communities create "common space," space used under conditions decided on by communities and open to anyone. The use, maintenance, and creation of common space does not simply mirror the community. The community is formed, developed, and reproduced through practices focused on common space. To generalize this principle: the community is developed through commoning, through acts and forms of organization oriented toward the production of the common.

During the occupation, Syntagma Square developed into a network of connected microsquares, each with a distinct character and spatial arrangement, all contained or, rather, territorialized in the area of what was known to be the main public space in Athens. Each microsquare had its own group of people who lived there for some days, in their tents, people who focused their actions and their microurban environment to a specific task: a children's playground, a free reading and meditation area, a homeless campaign meeting point, a "time bank" (a place where services are exchanged, eliminating money and profit), a "we don't pay" campaign meeting point (focused on organizing an active boycott of transportation fees and road tolls), a first-aid center, a multimedia group, a translation group stand, and so on. There were various levels on which these microcommunities were connected, and of course, all had to follow the General Assembly's rules and decisions. However, differences in space arrangement choices and in expression media (with the use of banners, placards, stickers, images, "works of art," etc.) were more than apparent. Although they shared a common cause and a common target (the Hellenic Parliament), each microsquare established different routines and aesthetics and organized different microevents during the occupation.

The organizing structures of the Syntagma Square occupation were developed according to a decentralization–recentralization dialectics. The central assembly, as with most of the assemblies characterizing the Occupy movements, remained an open-to-all discussion area, but decisions were made in common by vote (every participant could vote). Every effort was made for decisions to be as widely accepted as possible. This process would have been absolutely pointless without the preparation work done in various commissions. Those were open too and were created so as to focus on certain issues on which the General Assembly would have to think and decide.

The dispersion of initiatives and the decentralization of acts and discussions did not thus result in a loss of the common cause and a weakening of solidarity. Questions were sometimes hotly debated. But no one and no group was allowed to dominate, and nobody was silenced. Interestingly, the procedure of assembly discussions also reflected the decentralization–recentralization dialectics. Many wanted to speak, and so those who actually spoke were chosen by lot in each specific phase of the discussion. Decisions, however, concerned everybody, so proposals were collected by a secretary (which changed every day) in order to put them to vote.

Space commoning in the reappropriated square involved the production and use of in-between spaces. Common spaces emerge as threshold spaces, spaces not demarcated by a defining perimeter. Whereas public space bears the mark of a prevailing authority that defines it, common space is open space, space in a process of opening toward "newcomers." Common spaces are porous, spaces in movement, space passages.

Threshold spaces neither define people who use them nor are defined by them. Rather, they mediate negotiations between people about the meaning and use of space. Such spaces thus correspond to a process of identity opening "forming ... intermediary zones of doubt, ambivalence, hybridity, zones of negotiable values." Syntagma could be considered a miniature city, a "city of thresholds" in which encounters and dispersed initiatives build spaces where people explore a public culture based on solidarity and mutual respect.

Community in movement in Syntagma was not created through organizational schemes that presupposed a center of decisions or through the absolute predominance of a central space. Spaces and decisions were decentralized and recentralized, and so was the process of creating those social bonds that created a community in constant remaking.
Reinventing Community

Commoning procedures leave room for differentiated initiatives and individual improvisations. Not everybody came to Syntagma to participate in the assembly. Many came only to shout and express their anger and disapproval. On Sundays some brought their children along, simply to enjoy the air of a public space that was “different.”

To search desperately for a locatable common identity that could include those people was a serious mistake. Sometimes it made participating activists of the Left misunderstand completely the motives, practices, and expressions of all those who participated more or less regularly. Were those, for example, holding “their” national flags (in Syntagma, in Tunis, in Barcelona, and elsewhere) simply nationalists? Was this therefore a potentially dangerous community resurfacing in a period of crisis? If we simply judge using a well-established repertoire of political forms of expression, obviously this is the case. But in the squares people used national symbols in various ways. In Athens a person “wore” the flag as a kind of shield against those who “sell the country” (literally, indeed). Another participant used flag waving to appeal to an injured collective dignity: “rise up,” “wake up,” “we are here, as the Spaniards are in their squares, as should be the Italians, the French, and others.”

One way to judge the long discussions about real or direct democracy (in assemblies but also in smaller commissions or groups), which were predominant throughout the European squares experience, was to analyze the words and thoughts used. Then one could say that this or that kind of discourse was depoliticized, utopian, ineffective, and so on. Another way was to compare words, acts, and forms of expression. “Real” or direct democracy was performed in various ways in the squares. No matter what observers would say, women’s participation in Tahrir Square is a de facto practicing of common space as democratic space. And people in the squares devised ways to make decisions and to defend themselves against police aggression, which established new forms of direct equalitarian democracy. Just after one such incident—a brutal police charge in which the people had been chased, hit, and tear-gassed—the square of Syntagma was peacefully reoccupied: people formed long human chains that transported, from hand to hand, small bottles of water to clean the square from the poisonous tear gas remains. Collective inventiveness (in order to meet the lack of sufficient water) created a democratic equalitarian solidarity. Those human chains, improvised to face a pressing situation, emblematize a community in movement that reinvents “real” democracy in action. Sometimes those human chains took the form of circle dancing, either to celebrate a victory (as in Tahrir after the announcement of Hosni Mubarak’s fall) or to exercise fear (in Syntagma people danced in the square as the police were “bombing” the area with suffocating gas grenades).

Discourses, practices, and forms of expression can and should be interpreted as acts in movement. Their correspondences are sometimes strengthened, but one should not deduce a preexisting pattern that maps their common ground. Discrepancies, ambiguities, and contradictions are necessary ingredients of a potential community in action, a community of different people who remain different but recognize themselves as coproducers of a common space in the making.

“We”?

A peculiar “we” surfaces in the squares, an ambiguous “we” condenses but can also evaporate in the current uprisings. Is this the “we” that marks the emergence of new political subjects, the emergence of those who did not count before but demand to take part, as Jacques Rancière understands the process of political subjectivation?10

Here are some examples from writings in the squares. In Barcelona: “We are ordinary people. We are like you, people who get up every morning to study, to work or find a job, people who have families and friends. People who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us.”11 From Patras, Greece: “We call everybody, working people, jobless people, young people, we call society to fill St. George’s Square in Patras. Let’s reclaim our lives.” Finally, from Syntagma: “For a long time decisions have been made for us, without us. We are workers, unemployed, retirees, youth, who have come to Syntagma Square to fight and struggle for our lives and our future. We are here because we know that the solutions to our problems can come only from us,” and “We are nobody.”12

This is a “we” of common people, an inclusive “we” that demands life and justice. This is a “we” that does not name, differentiate, or erect barriers. Most important, perhaps, is a “we” that is formed in complete opposition to the national or cosmopolitan “we” that the governing elites and the mainstream media attempt to impose. “We are not responsible, you are.” “We don’t have to pay your debts.” “We don’t have to fight your wars.” “We are not you.” Opposed to a recognizable outside, the outside that contains all those who destroy the future, there is a multifaceted “we,” a kalei-
dososcopic "we" full of refractions and always open to new arrangements of differences.

Is it the "we" of the multitude? Perhaps, if the multitude is characterized by heterogeneous multiplicity. But the reasoning behind using multitude to describe the crowd in the current phase of capitalism is based on the idea that the multitude emerges as the productive human force in the period of biopolitical production. The multitude, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "is a multiplicity of singularities that produce and are produced in the biopolitical field of the common."^{13}

However, in the squares and in the recent uprisings, the multitude does not present itself as a productive force, even if we allow the term production to contain almost every form of human activity, as Hardt and Negri do. True, capitalism attempts to distill out of every human activity its productive power on which the production of value and profit necessarily are based. People in the squares, however, are creating rather than producing.^{14} Forms of sharing and forms of encounter in public are created while being performed. Cannot these forms potentially be manipulated by dominant institutions and appropriated by the market by being turned into mechanisms of exploitation? Yes, but one should not judge only in terms of possibilities. What we know about the present shows us instead that forms of commoning are directly opposed to the main targets of the dominant politics and to the hegemonic project of governing the crisis as presented at the beginning of this essay.

What the theory of the multitude can offer us, along with other attempts (including Giorgio Agamben's and Jacques Rancière's) to rethink the political, is that politics is necessarily linked to processes of collective subjectivation. What these theories attempt to rethink is not simply about changes in the definition of the political subject but, rather, about the processes of collective subjects' constitution. Agamben uses "whatever singularities" to describe the subjectivities of a coming community,^{15} and Rancière speaks of the "democratic practice as the inscription of the part of those who have no part—which does not mean the 'excluded' but anybody whoever."^{16} Clearly distinguished from the "people" and the "masses," the multitude is for Hardt and Negri an "active social subject" that "although it remains multiple and internally different is able to act in common and thus rule itself."^{17}

Political subjectivation, thus, can be considered as a process that does not move toward the construction of collective identities and unified social bodies but toward new forms of coordination and interaction based on commoning practices that create open communities of commoners. Probably these theorizations can only hint toward the possibility of a different society, developing ideas about forms of collective action that can indeed prefigure egalitarian and emancipating social relations. Is this enough today? Probably not, and so it is urgently necessary to understand contemporary movements and learn from their actions, discourses, and forms of organization.

One thing we know already is that these events had the power to overthrow governments even in societies with histories of absolutist regimes. And we also know that these events mark the return of people to collective action. There is no obvious common economic or social definition that can include them, though. A crisis of power legitimation unites them, along with a shared feeling of a total absence of justice. Everyone draws experiences from his or her own life, which verify this prevailing injustice. In the Tunisia uprising, this feeling was expressed in a revolt against a corrupt family that ruled the country for many years. In the December 2008 Athens uprising, this feeling was everywhere in young people's actions, because the killing of a young boy by a policeman condensed into a single act all dominant measures, politics, and ideologies that imprison youth in a predetermined future of antagonisms and disappointments. And in the squares, this feeling took the form of a collectively recognized economic injustice (imposed or, rather, accelerated through austerity measures). It seems likely that this feeling was also behind the 2011 UK riots.

All these events indicate societies in movement, and this movement goes beyond any agglomeration of particular demands that are expressed by different social groups in pursuit of their interests. In practices of collective improvisation and collective inventiveness, common spaces are created in which people not only express their anger and needs but also develop forms of life in common. True, those forms are fragile, precarious, often ephemeral, and sometimes contradictory in terms of ideological premises or values. But this collective and de facto production of common spaces renews dissident politics and gives new form to practices that overstep the boundaries of dominant social roles.

Sharing and solidarity are not introduced as values or ideologically sanctioned imperatives but are experienced in practice, in solving practical problems, and in collectively organizing actions of protest. In such a context, there is no difference between the solidarity that supports the organizing of defense against state aggression and the solidarity expressed in the collection of garbage in the occupied squares. Solidarity is not simply
a force that sustains people in clashes with state forces. Solidarity has become and becomes a creative force.

The solidarity developed in practice gave people the means to confront violence in ways that reformulated dilemmas about oppositional action. There is no doubt that the Syntagma Square occupation declared itself from the beginning as a peaceful but determined gathering of angry people, and certain anarchist activists and groups accused the Syntagma indignados of being pacifists and nonviolent petit bourgeois ideologues. That said, although there were many proposals to denounce violent attacks to police, banks, and public buildings that came before the General Assembly, they were not accepted. Many have criticized the acts of violence that were exemplary of a self-proclaimed movement’s avant-garde, and many tried to limit the results of such acts, while protecting the people from brutal police “responses.” But, again, police aggression was so great that sometimes the limits between expressly chosen violent “black bloc” action and spontaneous stone throwing became blurred. If one wants to understand the Syntagma occupation’s attitude to oppositional violence, one has to consider all those ambiguous and perhaps contradictory aspects of this collective experience.

The most urgent and promising task, which can oppose the dominant governance model, is the reinvention of common spaces. The realm of the common emerges in a constant confrontation with state-controlled “authorized” public space. This is an emergence full of contradictions, perhaps, quite difficult to predict but nevertheless necessary. Behind a multifarious demand for justice and dignity, new roads to collective emancipation are tested and invented. And, as the Zapatistas say, we can create these roads only while walking. But we have to listen, to observe, and to feel the walking movement. Together.

Notes


2 One of the early examples of such practices was the “pasalo” mobilizations in Barcelona and Madrid on March 13, 2004. During the “night of the short messages,” people exchanged messages that would overthrow a government. “Liars murderers. Your war our dead. Pasalo [Pass it on]”; this message was circulated the day before general elections and accused the government of systematically hiding from the people the reasons behind the 2004 Madrid bombings. Huge demonstrations occupied the central squares in Barcelona and Madrid, as these were defined by the messages of protesters as meeting points. In this process, information (“they are not telling us the truth”) addressed people as potential actors. Information thus acquired a power to mobilize people through sharing and participation. See Manuel Castells, Jack Linczuan Qiu, Mireia Fernández-Ardévol, and Arusta Sey, Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).


4 Agonaktismenos comes from the ancient Greek verb agonako, to become angry because of injustice, and is similar to the Spanish indignados (the outraged). In everyday use, the term connotes an attitude of being fed up (comparable to “ya basta”), but it was used in the past by the Left to describe aggressive law-abiding citizens with racist or even fascist attitudes. This has caused an understandable unease with the term’s current use.


6 “Common space,” according to Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong, “admits no criteria; it is open to all in the same way. It is not owned or controlled. . . . all can go there to extract from it what is there.” Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong, Public Space and Democracy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4. This is more or less an understanding of common space as preexisting its social uses (including its potential enclosure), whereas here common space is primarily and necessarily considered as a social artifact created through practices of space commoning. See also Gigi Roggero, “Five Theses on the Common,” Rethinking Marxism 22, no. 3 (2010): 357–73. 361–63. For a discussion that compares public and common space, see M. De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides, “Beyond Markets or States: Commoning as Collective Practice [a public interview],” An Architektur, no. 23 (2010): 4–27, esp. 12; www.e-flux.com/journal/view/150.


8 Stavros Stavrides, Towards the City of Thresholds (Trento: Professional dreamers, 2010), 18.

9 Ibid.

10 Rancière, Dissensus, 32–33.


12 Patras Real Democracy (blog), patras-democracy.blogspot.com/search/label/%CE%A3%CF%85%CE%BD%CE%AD%CE%BB%CE%83%CF%85%CF%83%CE%87 (accessed February 5, 2012). Patras city agonaktismeni posted their General Assembly decisions and discussions at the site. For Syntagma Square General Assembly resolutions, see Real Democracy (blog), real-democracy.gr/content/poioi-eimaste-1 (accessed February 9, 2012).


14 Hardt and Negri clearly insist that today “labor cannot be limited to waged labor but must refer to human creative capacities in all their generality.” Michael Hardt and


16 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 60, emphasis added.


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Heather Gautney

**Occupy x: Repossession by Occupation**

**We Are the 99 Percent**

*Occupy Wall Street* (OWS) is part of a global movement calling for radical change and an end to systemic corruption. Influenced by the wave of uprising in the spring of 2011, the Occupy movement speaks to those who feel disenfranchised and are facing foreclosure, unemployment, and runaway debt. Americans across the political spectrum feel that institutional channels for political expression are inadequate, and they are seeking other means. Whereas the Tea Party began as a protest movement but has now shifted its focus to influencing Republican leaders, OWS has attracted much larger numbers with its leaderless, egalitarian appeal. “The one thing we all have in common is that we are the 99 percent that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%”—a reference to the well-known statistic that the top 1 percent of households in the United States own more than 40 percent of all privately held wealth.

OWS has brought issues of inequality and corporate greed to the forefront. Mentions of “income inequality” in news media have increased more than 500 percent since September 2011, and *Time* reported disturbing trends in downward mobility, signaling “the death of the American dream.” Even before the start of the 2008 recession, income inequality had reached an extreme level. In 2007, the average annual incomes of the top 1 percent in the United States were 42 times greater than those of the bottom 90 percent, and for the top 0.1 percent, incomes were 220 times greater. Between 1979 and 2007, incomes of the top 1 percent grew by 224 percent, and incomes of the very top 0.1 percent grew 390 percent, while